Ignacio Castillo Ulloa, David Joshua Schröder und Ilse Helbrecht

Subject(ified) strategies for spatial(ised) ontological security in refigured Modernity
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1 This paper is the result of a collaboration (cross-sectional group “Power, Security, Control”) between different subprojects (A01, B02 and A02) based at the Collaborative Research Centre 1265 “Re-Figuration of Spaces”.

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Abstract

In this working paper, we elaborate on the concept of ontological security (Laing 1990 [1959]; Giddens 1990, 1991) through a spatial lens and building on the research findings of three subprojects (A01, B02 and A02) of the CRC 1265 “Re-Figuration of Spaces.” By and large, passages from lower to higher thresholds of ontological security in times of a refigured modernity (Knoblauch/Löw 2020) are, as the three cases reviewed show, noticeably dependent on the ability to devise and enact subjectified strategies. To that end, as expounded in Case A, three vital elements ideally become entangled with one another, thereby enabling the imagining and implementing of ontological security: (a) geopolitical imaginations, (b) contact with natural settings and (c) homeness-making practices. Cases B and C address such strategies through particular examples of new geopolitical imaginations – be it as a subjectified personalisation of the urban living-environment (case B) or as the possibility for subjects to make the ‘here’ converge with the ‘elsewhere’ (case C). All in all, the empirical circumstances examined suggest that there are more than a handful of hurdles placed along the way towards ontological security, which, in one way or another, comes down to the issue of self-agency. By the same token, we are currently confronted with exceptionally unsettled and unsettling times that curtail our self-agency, which begs a number of questions, such as: how controllable and thus reassuring can the future actually be, when, to paraphrase Paul Valéry, it is no longer what it used to be?

Keywords: Ontological Security, Refigured Modernity, Spatial Refiguration, Self-agency, Geographical Imaginations, Urban Planning, Social Control, Homeness-making.
1. Introduction: The quest for ontological security

The fact that societal restructurings caused by network technologies, globalism and cosmopolitanism give rise to new subjective uncertainties, which in turn trigger an anxiety-driven desire for a new identity, is arguably one of the most widespread assumptions about the current socio-political situation – not only within academic debates but also in media discourses. Since the 1990s, the thesis that global space is rapidly opposing the logic of local attachment, leading to identity challenges, has been formulated in a variety of ways by a large number of authors (see, for example, Giddens 1991; Lasch 1991; Sennet 2003; Reckwitz 2019). While it has been amply stated that spatial tensions, concomitant to continuous changes unfolding worldwide, can be held responsible for the ensuing refiguration of the social order, an empirical foundation of subjective uncertainty that focuses on its new ‘spatial shape’ has yet to be achieved. The refiguration of space confronts societies with the challenge of having to create new sources of ‘stable’ subjectivities that do not remain enclosed within old patterns of nation-state foundations, cultural-religious homogeneity and territorial fortification. This is precisely the starting point of our working paper, which aims to show that a decidedly spatial exploration of subject(ifying) strategies to ensure identitarian certainty can provide illuminating insights into current processes of spatial and social refiguration.

In order to conceptualise such a pursuit of ‘certainty’ in refigured modernity, we draw on the concept of ontological security, first coined by psychiatrist Ronald D. Laing (1990 [1959]) and further elaborated by Anthony Giddens (1990, 1991). In our view, ontological security captures the many expressions of subjective ‘uncertainty’ and, at the same time, allows us to sharpen them theoretically. Moreover, we have placed ontological security into a spatial lens to not only boost its analytical potential but also to cast new light on the multidimensional process of the refiguration of spaces (Helbrecht et al. 2021). To that end, we have brought together three different sub-projects of the Collaborative Research Centre 1265 Refiguration of Spaces, which explore this topic from the vantage point of different disciplines and empirical cases studies. Before presenting the three cases that comprise the main section of this working paper in more detail, we will outline the notion of ontological security\(^2\). After the discussion of the cases, in which the ‘dormant’ spatial dimension of ontological security is, to varying degrees, brought to the fore, we reflect on points of intersection (i.e. nuances and uncanny familiarities) between the cases and explore the potential analytical implications of our findings.

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\(^2\) By way of clarification, in each of the cases, ontological security is (re)introduced, though in a somewhat more specific manner, which is intended to respond to the singularities of the respective case.
‘Continuous plenitude’: Ontological security at a glance

The concept of ontological security was first developed by the humanist psychiatrist Ronald D. Laing in order to describe what it takes to be(come) and/or stay mentally healthy.3 Having observed and clinically treated mentally ill people, he claimed that ontological security is the condition that differentiates a non-schizophrenic from a schizophrenic person. Laing (1990 [1959], 39) maintained that

“[a] man [sic] may have a sense of his presence in the world as a real, alive, whole, and, in a temporal sense, continuous person. As such, he can live out into the world and meet others: a world and others experienced as equally real, alive, whole, and continuous. Such a basically ontologically secure person will encounter all the hazards of life, social, ethical, spiritual, biological, from a centrally firm sense of his own and other people’s reality and identity.”

Using the schizophrenic as counterpoint, Laing carved out a quintessential characteristic of mental health: an existential and, thus, ontological stance, where individuals feel secure about their own identity, the role of other persons as counterparts in life and the existence of a continuous environment, a (material) world around them. Hence, it is the very being-in-the-world of the subject in a “real, alive, whole, and continuous” way that the concept of ontological security conveys. Without it, mental instability or even madness lurks around the corner. As such, ontological security is a “basic need” (Mitzen 2006a).

Anthony Giddens (1990, 1991), building on Laing’s clinical conceptualization of ontological security, points out that, in our current state of late modernity, a heightened need for self-reflexivity and identity formation has arisen, due to the disorienting dynamics of what geographer David Harvey has termed “time-space compression” (Harvey 1989, 4ff.) and Giddens (1991) calls “time-space distanciation”. More specifically, Giddens (1991, 32) contends that “[t]ransformations in self-identity and globalization […] are the two poles of the dialectic of the local and the global in conditions of high modernity. […] [Accordingly,] the level of time-space distanciation introduced by high modernity is so extensive that, for the first time in human history, ‘self’ and ‘society’ are interrelated in a global milieu.”

This ‘global milieu’ through which the self and society now navigate their ways confronts the individual – and, as other authors in both political geography and international relations have argued, also the state (Huysmans 1998; Mitzen 2006a, 2006b; Hyndman/Giles 2016) - with the pressing task of (re)considering, (re)inventing, (re)building and (re)affirming feelings and notions of ontological

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3 The concept of ontological security plays a central role in the project A01 on “Geographical Imaginations of Security and Insecurity”. Hence, parts of the thoughts presented here are also elaborated in further detail in Helbrecht et al. forthcoming.
security. For Giddens (1991, 37), this implies providing answers to existential “questions about ourselves, others, and the object-world”. Subjects can no longer move ‘intuitively’ in a singular place, but are fatefully linked to complex, globalized contexts over which they have little, if any, control. Ergo, without ontological security, no agency is possible. To the degree that we know who we are and in which world we live, we can know and decide what to do – and why. The threat of meaninglessness has to be dealt with and countered with the construction of a reassuring identity. “Armed with ontological security, the individual will know how to act and therefore how to be herself.” (Mitzen 2006a: 345)

Given that the question of being ontologically secure, as it has been briefly sketched above, is now posed under conditions of spatial refiguration, we argue that a spatial approach to the subject(ified) strategies that are employed to achieve ontological security is well-placed. Moreover, since being accountable to future society is, in and of itself, an important task for the humanities and social sciences, we consider the understanding of the personal and societal quest for ontological security in a globalised world to be a substantive contribution. Hence, we ask the question: how can ontological security be achieved in a globalised world? It is here, we argue, that a spatialised, intrinsically geographic perspective on ontological security can deeply enhance and complement the existing psychological reflections on the self as well as sociological reflections on the refigured modernity.

2. Research cases: A stepping stone

This working paper is an attempt to test the far-reaching potentialities of such a proposal. In the following three sections, case A and C will focus on subjective perspectives, whereas case B looks into processes of subjectification. Likewise, while case A and C demonstrate the enormous potentiality a spatial approach holds, case B pays closer attention to processes of spatialisation. Furthermore, case A opens the debate because it provides a framework for the other two cases whose purviews are not as expansive (see figure 3.1).

Case A argues that there are particular geographical imaginations with which people get a hold of, and thereby gain, ontological security in a globalised world, without necessarily having to take recourse to an orthodox, exclusionary sentiment of

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4 Not only time plays a crucial role in this process but also space. This fact is already evident in Giddens’ theoretical definition of ontological security. Giddens considers the provision of a stable socio-material environment during early infancy as an essential basis for the ongoing cultivation of ontological security, using the notion of “potential space”, i.e. the perception of space not as empty but as pervaded by manageable and stimulating events (Giddens 1991, 38–43). It is this secure, routinised and “calculable environment of action” that allows for a development of “basic trust” in the continuity of one’s own self-identity and self-integrity, eventually offering a “protective cocoon” against all odds (ibid, 167).
nationalism. By way of three ‘strategic pillars’, as the case attests to, people may enter and remain within a high threshold of ontological security, all the while avoiding the latent risks of jingoism and/or religious fundamentalism.

Case B examines images and advertising videos from the urban smartification movement in order to highlight the imaginations of spatial control cleverly employed in them. These imaginations, it is argued, embrace an ideal of a ‘sensorised’ space that directly connects the lifeworlds of citizens to urban infrastructures and promises them ontological security as well as a new political agency – while, at the same time, undermining their self-agency.

Finally, case C moves the discussion to the case of Colombian youngsters in Bogota, who struggle to settle in a housing complex for economic migrants and families displaced by the armed conflict. Given that their geographical imagination links the notion of ‘homeness’ with other distant spatial settings, the material arrangement of the housing project’s ‘protective solution’ turns out to be at odds with home(less)-making insofar as it hinders the (imaginary-symbolic) structure of their subjectivity – resulting in a low threshold of ontological security and an overtly diminished self-agency latitude.

2.1. Case A: Globalisation as a challenge to ontological security

Economic globalisation and ontological (in)security are closely interrelated. Globalisation not only unsettles national identities but also calls the geographical imaginations and positionings of the subject into question. In the CRC’s project A01, we argue that it is in fact a very personal and deeply emotional level that is strongly affected by globalisation processes due to increasing rates of exchange and interaction on a global scale. It is the basic trust of people in the continuity of their identity, the continuity of their life, and the continuity of their environment – in one word: their ontological security (Laing 1990; Giddens 1991) – that is highly at risk through globalisation.

Moreover, if ontological security is not achieved by an individual, then – as Laing argues from a psychological perspective and Giddens from a sociological standpoint – anxieties are sure to arise. These anxieties are existential, because they concern the very relationship between self and world. And they are ontological, because they are rooted in the mode of being in the world. In contrast to fear or angst, anxiety is “free floating: lacking a specific object” (Giddens 1991, 44). Hence, it is the very amorphous character of globalisation processes, their disvers, fluid, and abstract dynamics, that make them prone to stir anxiety.
Consequently, we have come to understand that anxieties arising from globalisation processes are strongly linked to ontological insecurity. In 2004, long before Brexit and similar nationalist identity movements occurred, Catarina Kinvall was already arguing that globalisation destabilises and even threatens self-identities and, as a consequence, nationalism and religious orthodoxies become “simple answers” (Kinvall 2004, 742). She claims that people who are “uprooted from their original social milieu” and feel overwhelmingly confronted with the uncertainties of a globalised world can tend “to ‘de-modernize’”, by which she means essentialising their own national or religious identity and even “[g]oing back to an imagined past” (Kinvall 2004, 744). Such a backward oriented, essentialising securitisation of subject identities is as powerful as it is costly for those constructed as the inferior ‘Other’. “Increasing ontological security for one person or group by means of nationalist or religious myths and traumas is thus likely to decrease security for those not included in the nationalist and/or religious discourse” (Kinvall 2004, 763).

2.1.1. How to achieve ontological security in a globalised world?  
A spatialised approach

Based on our empirical research in the collaborative research centre CRC 1265 “Re-Figuration of Spaces”, we suggest three ways in which individuals can attain ontological security by geographical means. Between the years 2018 and 2020, the research team of the CRC’s project A01\(^5\) conducted 60 qualitative interviews in Berlin, applying the method of photo-elicitation. In these interviews, subjective notions of ontological security were scrutinised on various scales, from the body to the global (Dobrusskin et al. 2021). In order to capture a variety of perspectives on globalisation, we made sure that our sample of interviewees had a balanced composition encompassing people from different age groups (15-70 years), social statuses (marginalised and elites), and gender identities.

Which strategies and practices that help sustain ontological security have already been identified in the literature? And how can a geographic reading – based on insights from our interviews – enrich these established arguments? In our research, we found that three spatial strategies are deployed.

\(^5\) We are very grateful to Henning Füller who contributed to the first stages of the CRC’s A01 project. And we are indebted to Miro Born, Yannick Ecker, Ylva Kürtén who conducted a good deal of the Berlin interviews. For debates on the interpretation of the interview material and theoretical discussions we are indebted to Janina Dobrusskin, Carolin Genz, Lucas Pohl and Carl-Jan Dihlmann.
Subject(ified) strategies for spatial(ised) ontological security in refigured Modernity

A. Geopolitical imagination

A fundamental task that has to be surmounted in order to establish ontological security is the design and development of a subjective understanding of the world the individual is living in. The individual has to situate herself in the world. And for this purpose, a conception of the social order she is living in is necessary. Moreover, an understanding of the world in the broader sense of a *Weltbild* helps to situate, locate, position and, thus, anchor a person in her life. In the literature, the significance of developing a notion of a social order is often stressed, referring to a general idea about the normative and symbolic order of the society she is living in, which helps the individual to remain ontologically secure (Huysmans 1998, 242). Yet, we would argue that this rather non-spatial conception of social order fails to fully address the distinctly spatial character of identity challenges posed by globalisation – to the individual as much as to the state.

As the return of nationalist movements, for instance, clearly shows, it is the very spatial dimension of our positionality and being in the world that requires reinterpretation. Particularly, the identity question has returned in its most spatial sense. A new “geographical imagination” – a term coined by David Harvey in 1973 – is required to achieve ontological security in the face of globalisation processes of the 21st century. Harvey’s notion of the geographical imagination is most helpful to understand what is truly at stake:

The geographical imagination “enables the individual to recognize the role of space and place in his (sic) own biography, to relate to the spaces he sees around him, and to recognize how transactions between individuals and between organizations are affected by the space that separates them. It allows him to recognize the relationship which exists between him and his neighborhood, his territory, or, to use the language of the street gangs, his ‘turf.’ It allows him to judge the relevance of events in other places (on other peoples’ ‘turf’) — to judge whether the march of communism in Vietnam, Thailand and Laos is or is not relevant to him wherever he is now. It allows him also to fashion and use space creatively and to appreciate the meaning of the spatial forms created by others.” (Harvey 1973 cited in Harvey 2005, 212)

This ability to “judge the events in other places” and relate them “to the spaces he sees around him” is a constant topic running through the interviews we conducted in Berlin. We encountered many narratives of geographical imaginations – for example, Ukraine and the Russian occupation of the Krim, the Syrian war and its consequences for the situation of refugees in Germany – where Berlin citizens of all age groups and class backgrounds tried to make sense of the new world order, Berlin’s situation and their own place therein. In the photo-elicitation interviews, in which representations of various spatial settings were provided as visual stimuli for narration and interpretation, it became abundantly clear how much people exerted
themselves in trying to make sense of major geopolitical shifts in order to achieve ontological security in their everyday lives.

In one of our interviews, a 50-year-old man who lives in a small apartment on the outskirts of Berlin provided us with his account of the ‘Berlin truck attack’, which occurred in the year 2016 when a truck driver deliberately drove into a Christmas market in Berlin, leaving 12 people dead and 56 injured. This assault was hotly debated in the German media, primarily in the context of rising Islamist terrorism in Europe and the United States. Our interviewee expressed his concerns in the form of a geopolitical reading and positioning of the event.¹⁶

“Uncertainty, ambiguous, it’s both […] I am just saying how much has happened since the attack here [in Berlin] last year or two years ago, the Christmas market. You can understand other countries that are handling these issues differently, of course, where that doesn’t happen, but as I said, we haven’t had a war since 1945. […] And I don’t want to experience one either, but we […] don’t know where we are heading, and there is this political uncertainty. And that was also a reason why I wanted to stay here in Germany“ (Interview B5, 143).

The perceived uncertainties and ambiguity of the new geopolitical order become visible in the interviewee’s wish to attain ontological security by geographical means, for instance in his geo-political positioning: his desire to “stay here in Germany”. As the interview quote illustrates once again, it is the very spatial dimension of our positionality and being in the world that requires reinterpretation. Particularly, the identity question has returned in its most spatial sense.

Anthony Giddens posited that ontological security is primarily based on conceptions of the social order that are part of the unconscious and practical consciousness, and enlivened in routines. Based on our research, we claim that the opposite holds true, too: people also struggle consciously and cognitively to make sense of the complex shifts in our contemporary geopolitical situation. Thus, as feminist geopolitics have argued all along, it is – in these uncertain and confusing times all the more – important to attend to the embodied geopolitics of the everyday, and therefore to scrutinize and understand the struggles and perceptions of ordinary people as part of the geopolitical (Hyndman 2004, 2019). Ontological security can only be attained if individuals achieve a trustworthy and reliable geographical imagination that supports it. Thus, there is a striking need for more feminist geopolitical research to engage with this issue.

¹⁶ Carolin Genz, Lucas Pohl, Janina Dobruesskin and Ilse Helbrecht have elaborated a profound analysis of the narratives of selfhood engendered by geopolitics in an upcoming paper titled “Geopolitical Caesuras as Time-Space-Anchors of Ontological Security: The case of the Fall of the Berlin Wall”.

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B. Home making

Making yourself at home is yet another highly important spatial practice that is strongly linked with procuring ontological security. In our interviews, deep, subjective, and emotional meanings of ‘home’ were often brought up by the interviewees as a necessary precondition for their ontological security. In fact, it was often mentioned as the first place that came to mind when thinking about their well-being and feelings of security. Of course, there are many different factors that enable the home to be a builder of ontological security. And what makes for a home has been widely discussed in the literature on housing studies and geographies of home (Behring/Helbrecht 2002). The following main characteristics recur in various studies: having a private space free of surveillance; having space to live one’s identity and establish it on a daily basis through recurring routines; decorating and creating one’s own space so that it reflects one’s sense of belonging and identity (Dupuis/Thorn 1998, 33; Blunt/Dowling 2005). Furthermore, this all strongly depends on the individual, on age, social status, gender, and cultural background. Yet, the fundamental need for a home in order to feel secure was echoed throughout all our interviews was. For most people, a profound sense of security is associated with being at home. Particularly in times of crisis, the home becomes a haven to retreat to and nurture one’s subjective sense of identity. In urban studies, the home has long been considered a space of individualization and intimate personal development (Bahrdt 1961). Thus, it is not surprising that the home plays also a major role in shaping ontological security. Interestingly enough though, the form of tenure is not a determining factor at all. Homeowners are not more inclined to be ontologically secure (Hiscock et al. 2001; Elsvinga et al. 2007). While the ideology of homeowner-societies suggests that homeowners should feel more secure in their lives, this does not hold true when tested empirically.

It was Ronald D. Laing who observed early on, “When there is uncertainty of identity in time, there is a tendency to rely on spatial means of identifying oneself” (Laing 1990, 109). Since then, numerous studies involving homeowners, social renters and even homeless people have found that “housing can provide a fundamental building block for ontological security” (Padgett 2007, 1937). Hence, ontological security is “strongly linked to the material environment” (Dupuis/Thorn 1998, 30) and the material practices of building oneself a home – a critical source of ontological security, which tends to be overlooked in most sociological or political discussions. An embodied way of being in the world is of great importance (Giddens 1991, 53ff.). For this embodiment to take place, it is crucial to insist that no material environment can “in-itself” bring about ontological security. What it requires is a subject who feels emotionally attached to their environment— the subject has to “occupy” this place both physically and mentally (Pohl et al in press).
“If we narrow our home down to only one place, then there should be free space and room for oneself. Space in which you are not so restricted and can simply let your thoughts flow freely, for example. […], but otherwise, it is also connected strongly with feelings and people. The feeling that, if you are in this room with your best friends or your boyfriend, it can feel like home.” (Interview B20, 39)

Therefore, home is not limited to “the physical structure of a house”; rather it relates to the moment “when such spaces are inscribed with meaning” (Easthope 2004, 135). Hence, home always involves the subjective labour and process of home-making in order to create a sense of ontological security through being at home.

C. Being in nature

Giddens already foresaw the special role nature would come to play in the formation of ontological security today. In spaces of nature, he claimed, people could feel at ease (Dupuis/Thorn 1998, 28). Indeed, our interviewees in Berlin confirmed this assumption. People from various age groups and social backgrounds reported that it is in spaces of nature – be it in the woods, on a lake, in the mountains or wherever personal preferences take them –, where they root, regain, and recharge their ontological security. Our empirical study is designed as a comparative study, in which we compare our Berlin findings with interviews conducted in Singapore and Vancouver (Canada). When comparing geographical imaginations of nature and their particular role for the projection of ontological security in different geographic settings, it becomes clear that nature always plays a very special part in the enactment of ontological security. People establish the routine of visiting certain places that help reassure them of where they are, who they are, and what they want to do – and these places are often in nature (Pohl et al. 2020). This regular spatial practice of frequenting certain places in nature correlates with the fact that routines are per se a common denominator for the production of ontological security (Mintzen 2006a, 2006b, 349; Kinvall 2004). Through the establishment of (daily) routines, frightening questions and fundamental doubts about ontological insecurity are kept at bay. In the literature, it is disputed whether these routines are rather unconscious practices, which in Giddens’ terminology are enlivened as part of the practical consciousness (Giddens 1991), or whether people consciously try to establish routines in order to tackle ontological insecurity (Dupuis/Thorn 1998, 30). Familiarity is created over time. And it is this trust in one’s own routines and habits in particular that can act as a buffer: “In the unstable world of endless change characterized by the trust deficit, the trust in habit offers a very powerful proposition on how to

7 We are grateful to Janina Dobrusskin, who conducted the interviews in Singapore, and Miro Born, who conducted the interviews in Vancouver.
manage the discontinuity, how to enhance the predictability of surroundings through compressing action and how to train for embracing progression and change.” (Misztal 2019, 57) We would add to this that familiarity with certain spaces in nature is part of the personal arsenal individuals employ to foster their ontological security. “It is calm and also alive. I love green. And I love nature anyway. I feel very connected, I can relax. So, I can thaw there.” (Interview B13, 41) It is reasonable to assume that places in nature function as counterspaces to the highly engineered, urbanised and fast-moving environment most of our interviewees experience in their globalised everyday lives. The possibility to see, smell and feel utterly emerged in “pristine nature” becomes a rare opportunity against the backdrop of global urbanisation. Especially in the Anthropocene, where it becomes increasingly difficult (if not impossible) to view nature as being separated from humanity, a new quest for nature and natural habitats might begin (Pohl et al. 2020).

2.2. Case B: Ontological Security as leitmotif of refigured spatial control in advertising and image videos of Smart Cities

Usually, the concept of ontological security is not associated with processes of change; on the contrary, the concept is understood as a consequence of a persistence of social certainties. But it is also clear that imaginations of change, for example in the form of futuristic utopias, have the power to generate ontological security, which they already unfold in the ‘here and now’ by virtue of their orientation-giving character. Seen in this way, utopian visions always carry promises of being ontologically secure. Ontological security, however, should not be read as a conservative persistence alone, but rather refers to the mental awareness of being in a familiar, reliable space, in which one is given freedom of development and certainty of being oneself. The spatiality of ontological security thus corresponds quite closely to what is called ‘Heimat’. The aim of case B is to show that ‘Heimat’ does not necessarily mean tradition but can also be the image of a not yet explored world, arrived at after a difficult journey. This contribution will also follow Giddens’ (1991) diagnosis of a crisis of ontological security in late modernity, as it has already been described above. As is to be shown below, such current ontological insecurities are directly connected to a specific programmatic orientation of imaginary urban control, where urban infrastructure is rendered as a new promising terrain of political agency that has become insecure. This programmatic reorientation manifests itself in a subjectification of urban infrastructural control focusing more on the living conditions of citizens than on mere functionality.

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8 We would like to thank Hubert Knoblauch, Arne Janz and Elisabeth Schmidt for comments and ideas that have been taken up in this text.
2.2.1. Smartification of Control Centres: From Safety to ontological Security

In the following, we turn to a spatial format that was initially rarely associated with ontological security, namely control centres. Control centres are rooms or arrangements of rooms, usually equipped with the latest media technology and a formation of workstations to monitor and control an outside area that is represented inside. They control public infrastructures, such as railway tracks, power grids or emergency vehicles. In the following, we will show how these places are increasingly oriented towards ontological security over the course of their current refiguration. They seemingly try to take up the complex entanglement of subjects moving through various spatial references with the help of their ‘polycontexturality’ (Knoblauch/Janz/Schröder, forthcoming). In doing this, they no longer control different functional subsystems of urban space separately, but try to combine them in a holistic picture in such a way that the subject’s lifeworld and their everyday concerns come into focus. This process is driven by an extensive ‘integration’ of formerly isolated control centres from various sectors, which is particularly evident in the context of Smart City initiatives. Such initiatives aim at a comprehensive integration of control centres of different sectors of a city. The integration process is accompanied by significant publicity focused on such ‘smartified’ centres, including apps and information services directly addressing citizens or the installation of press areas adjoining control centres. Irrespective of the actual realisation of these integration efforts, it should be clearly stated that this ‘smartification’ leads to a programmatic reorientation: While conventional control rooms gain their legitimacy by maintaining and securing the functionality of a specific infrastructure, integrated control centres increasingly refer to a ‘successful life’ – and thus to the ontological security of subjects which is to be created by a reconfiguration of spatial control. Therefore, the special feature of this programmatic shift is not only the way ontological security is already generated by the centres in the here and now through substantial references to future perspectives, but, above all, the fact that the ontological security of the subject itself is the new focal point of their agenda.

In comparison to the image videos of monosectoral control centres (assigned to only one ‘sub-system’ of urban space), which primarily refer to the safety and efficiency of their system in its current state and report from within such centres, here we find statements from the controlled outside area with a clearly subjective reference, sketching out a perspective of a viable future and underlining the certainty of an innovative approach that makes life better. Thus, while a general shift towards the subjects’ lifeworld is evident when looking at the videos, we are here not concerned with a closer look at their Recipient Design, but rather with the ways in which the public that is brought to speak is portrayed in these videos. By looking at these modes
of addressing subjectified life-worlds, we also gain insights into the various legitimisation strategies of smartified control centres.

2.2.2. Visions of refigured infrastructural control: Comfortable, predictable and conserving resources

In the following, advertising or image videos of three smartified cities, i.e. cities characterised by sectoral integration, are taken up as examples: Rio de Janeiro, Santander and Glasgow. The advertising videos of Rio de Janeiro and Santander were produced by the companies IBM and NEC, the image video of Glasgow by a city initiative called ‘Future City Glasgow’, without an explicit entrepreneurial sponsor. Each of the three videos places a different accent on the orchestration of public urban space, which is intended to represent the three leitmotifs of spatial visions reconstructed from the video corpus: (1) comfort, (2) predictability and (3) resource conservation. These three leitmotifs of spatial designs for controlled public space, as further explained below, contribute in different ways to the conveyance of ontological security.

Let us first look at the government-funded ‘Future City Glasgow’ initiative, launched by the UK Innovation Agency. The image video “Future City Glasgow: A Day in The Life” is prominently placed on the initiative’s main website and is intended to convey the initiative’s vision. The plot of the video – a journey into the future, depicting diversified contemporary life models, all benefiting from digital platforms – already expresses the significance of the lifeworld that is attributed to this refiguration of space. In short, this refiguration entails the constant use of digital platforms by citizens to navigate and shape their neighbourhood, supported by the Glasgow Operations Centre, which is portrayed as flexible, receptive to needs and, above all, responsive to events. Figure 2.1 shows screenshots of the image video.
Figure 2.1. Screenshots of an image video of the Future City Glasgow initiative (Future City Glasgow 2020).

The video stands paradigmatically for one leitmotif of spatial refiguration that has emerged from the data corpus, which we would like to call comfort. The spatial environment supports the natural-intuitive development of identity and thus creates harmonised space with a high quality of life. It nestles without resistance to the routines of everyday life and identities. In doing so, the emphasis is not so much on the polycontextuality of the control centre as on that of the subjects themselves, who can shape the space according to their wishes with the help of their smartphones. The space becomes soft and comfortable through the bridging of obstacles and resistance so that everyday actions are smoothened and no longer encounter a rigid, hard environment. What is striking here, however, is the sharp distinction the video draws between sociality and media interaction: there is no automatic, pervasive, creeping ‘actification’ (Knoblauch 2017, 379–380); instead, media technology is actively used in order to exercise an intensified, ‘pure’ sociality. Sociality is therefore usually not penetrated by technology but surrounded by it.

A further, somewhat differently positioned, leitmotif of spatial refiguration is presented in advertising videos by IBM. IBM was commissioned by the Brazilian government to build the ‘Centro de Operacoes’ Rio de Janeiro. In order to advertise their services, IBM published commercial videos of this ambitious showcase project, portraying the control centre and the changes it underwent as groundbreaking for Smart City projects worldwide. Figure 2.2 shows screenshots of the advertising video with audio transcriptions inserted into speech bubbles.
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Figure 2.2. Screenshots of an IBM advertising video for the construction of the Centro de Operacoes in Rio de Janeiro (COR) with audio transcriptions inserted into speech bubbles (Silverfish Media 2020).

In contrast to the leitmotif of comfort, in which space is arranged to suit everyday life, here a spatial refiguration is promoted in which urban areas are captured in fine-grained form and blind spots are made visible. The space is thus, in the first place, not shaped as such, but secured and made tangible, manageable and predictable in a way that we would like to mark as predictability: in the advertising video, for example, the Centro de Operacoes makes it possible to accurately predict floods, warns citizens of disasters, and allows a surfer to check for the height of the waves at a local beach before heading to the site. In contrast to the comfort that is supposed to be engendered intuitively and unnoticed, the citizens are very much aware of the presence of the control centre at hand, which allows them to adjust to existing problems and counteract their powerlessness in the face of a dangerous urban space. Although the space is not outright subjugated, it is at least made predictable and visible. The citizens are supposed to be able to form a comprehensive picture of the urban space. Accordingly, the control centre itself is also designed to provide a visually impressive, perspectively total representation of the overall situation and is equipped with a spacious press gallery.

Finally, we turn to the third Smart City Initiative in Santander, also commissioned by public authorities and driven by various companies. Unlike the case of Glasgow and Rio de Janeiro, the integration of the various sectorally separate control centres is not carried out physically by means of a new control centre set up specifically for this purpose, but via a digital platform providing data for statistical analysis. At the
same time, a more comprehensive sensor system has been installed in the city, which is intended to make interventions in the urban space more efficient. This efficiency is also the focus of a promotional video produced by the company NEC, which promotes Santander’s smartification, that can be found on the company’s website. The video shows a waste management employee explaining that sensors in the bins make the collection routes much more efficient, thereby reducing environmental pollution. Figure 2.3 shows screenshots of the advertising video.

Figure 2.3. Screenshots of a NEC advertising video on the smartification of Santander (NEC 2020).

In addition to the leitmotifs of comfort and predictability, a further leitmotif of spatial refiguration emerges here, which we call resource conservation. By efficiently orchestrating the space, it is made sustainable so that subjects can turn to their environment without feelings of guilt or moral dilemmas. Instead of fixed planning, demand-oriented flexibility is built into the control mechanisms.

2.2.3. Conclusion: Ideal of a sensorised space as an instrument of new political agency

The three leitmotifs shown here each contribute in their own way to the construction of ontological security: While comfort shapes the space alongside the subjects, predictability makes the space familiar to the subjects; resource conservation, in turn, de-problematises the space for the subjects, addresses fears about the future of the planet and holds out the promise of an innocent drive. All in all, these presentations
no longer focus solely on the functionality of the control centres, but directly address
the identity of subjects identity and thus seek to prove a diffuse serviceability for
society. The abstract, diffuse formulation of this benefit for society is particularly
interesting with regard to the control centres themselves. This is because smartified
control centres have so far only been characterised by the fact that they manage
the complexity of their sectoral composition in a more improvised way, with the help
of dashboards or maps with layers. The integration of different sectors is executed
as a visually contingent juxtaposition instead of making concrete connections.
Similarly, the physical combination of the control centres also follows the model of a
contingent juxtaposition rather than any kind of exact algorithmic or well-structured
compilation (Schröder, forthcoming). The algorithmic linking of data sets of various
functions and sectors has up to now been diffuse and is currently the main focus of
discussions in the field. This search for solutions alone legitimises the current
smartification: as a first ‘archetype’, these head offices constitute an initial effort to
tackle the problem, while the concrete solution to the problem remains secondary
An actual reorientation of control activities in control centres, according to the
complex needs of subjects and beyond the mere internal relevance system of the
infrastructure, is so far only partially detectable: Examples might be patrols that are
no longer driven along fixed routes but rather operate along hot spots
(Kaufmann/Egbert/Leese 2019); trains that are regulated according to regularity
and no longer according to timetables; and car traffic control that not only ensures
an optimal flow but also takes into account the potential impairment of surrounding
road users. Nevertheless, this indicates a shift towards a type of control that we would
like to call relational service: Control activities no longer only take their own relevance
system into account but also the surrounding areas. The networking of the territorial
space, which was previously sharply separated along different functional systems,
thus by no means simply entails a ‘networked space’, but rather results in ‘sensorised’
space, which is intended to assist subjects by technologically capturing their holistic
spatial environment and embedding, thereby relieving them of the task of having to
integrate disparate spatial logics. Formerly sharply separated spatial logics that
acted according to fixed plans are made flexible and compatible with each other to
accelerate the smooth merging of spatial logics. Sensors on smartphones and in
urban space make visible subjective needs for the infrastructural spaces to be
aligned. With this model of sensorised space, control centres also become
transmitters of hopeful visions of urban political agency. In this reading, one could
argue that inaugurations of smartified control centres offer a material perspective
on social aspirations. In order to regain solid ground under one’s feet (which global
entanglements have softened), infrastructural space is being discovered as a new
design space for the realisation of a secure and sustainable life. The contemporary
cybernetic idea of these urban control centres seeks to rebalance the insecure terrain of political agency through a ‘neutral’ retreat into urban infrastructural technosociality, where the management of social order is not entangled in global contexts. In this setting, ontological security is expected to arise as a result of powerful connectivity with urban infrastructure. Analogous to ‘Smart Homes’, the intention here is less to rely on trust generated by experience and memories but rather to draw on personal ‘suitability’ and ‘symbiosis’ with space produced by sensors. Contrary to what many authors emphasise in relation to a “permanent networking” (Steinmaurer 2016) of subjects, the domesticity here does not simply become detached from places but remains fundamentally related to them in a sensorised way. However, smartified control centres are not preparing themselves quietly for this, but try to communicate to the citizens a feeling of ‘control’ over their movement and their environment.

2.2.4. Closing remarks: Innovative continuation of the status quo through ‘imaginary’ control

This alleged ‘control’ that citizens supposedly exert over their environment should not, however, be hastily equated with subject autonomy: Only in the IBM advertising video with the leitmotif of predictability is the autonomy of citizens cultivated by equipping them with information; in the image video of the Future City Glasgow, as well as in the NEC advertising video, on the other hand, one finds rather infantilised representations that equate the subjects’ efforts to gain control with comfortable, resistance-free assertiveness. This is most evident in the image video of Future City Glasgow and the leitmotif of comfort, in which citizens no longer have to face any challenges. This leaves the subjects benignly humiliated, in a passive role and unaware of the background to their control. Although the NEC advertising video avoids this comfort leitmotif, the positioning of the speaker still indicates a ‘pastoral’ (Foucault 1989) attitude: Even Though the citizens, who, in contrast to the other videos, are not themselves speaking, remain in the backdrop, they are nevertheless the ones mainly addressed in the video: “The Smart City concept is actually designed for them […], what we are doing is helping people”. Here, the citizens are released from their responsibilities in order to be able to feel carefree and comfortable. The aim is not just social change, in the sense of a change of identity and possibilities of self-reliant engagement, but to embed the unchanged behaviour of citizens in a new “smart” way, which dissolves personal frictions in favour of ontological security. This is also why Giddens’ (1991, 167) view that ontological security is primarily established through routines does not contradict the visionary innovativeness of the sensorised space that is outlined here. Giddens essentially anchors ontological security in practical consciousness, which serves as an emotional-cognitive starting point for
creative action (ibid., cited in Akremi 2016). However, it needs to be pointed out that the innovativeness shown here is not designed to actually transform identity through creativity, but rather to secure already existing identities. The future-oriented nature of smartified control centres thus serves as a strong reaffirmation of current lifestyles by leaving social transformations to a technically equipped infrastructural control, and pushing identity transformations and deliberation to the margins (cf. Nachtwey/Seidl 2020). The extremely decisive turn to the future which is clearly evident in many advertisement and image videos of smartified control centres, can be understood as a reaction to global entanglements associated with extraterritorial, unpredictable risks and a paralysed present, which is responded to with a predictive risk assessment and a “colonisation of the future” (Giddens 1991, 112).

Certainly, the vehemence of the demand for a smooth, non-reflexive, ‘blind’ routine in these utopian visions remains somewhat suspicious, as it may indicate an attempt to compensate existing insecurity in the sense of a “neurotic compulsion” (ibid., 40), by holding on to an ultra familiar environment in order to ‘escape’ into a simulated frictionlessness. Such a softened provision of a harmonised and flattering space is unlikely to be of great benefit to the empowerment and maturity of subjects to deal creatively with external resistance – something which Giddens (ibid., 41–42) describes as the actual sign of ontological security. Feelings of powerlessness and helplessness, which fuel such utopian visions in the first place, can thus be effectively avoided without channelling them into creative purposes. The image and advertising videos draw a space that provides a feeling of ontological security but does not cultivate it on the part of the subjects: Subjects do not gain the ability to overcome dissonance on their own authority but are technically ‘cared for’ so that dissonance can be avoided. To what extent an imagination of infrastructural control oriented towards emotional needs can actually provide ontological security, or may rather divert attention away from the actual drivers of ontological insecurity (cf. Elias 1990), will certainly have to be answered by time.

2.3. Case C: Living in and dwelling upon a split (im)material world: Between a ‘lived here’ and a ‘yearned for there’

2.3.1. Ontological security, imaginary-symbolic subjectivity and being-in- and with-the-world

Ronald D. Laing (1990 [1959], 39) stated that human beings discern their presence in the world as real, whole and continuous when they are ontologically secured. Following Laing, Anthony Giddens (1990, 92) argued that, through ontological security, both the steadiness of self-identity and the steadfastness of the social and material sphere of action are invested with trust (Giddens 1990, 92). As a result, people
may either experience themselves “as differentiated from the rest of the world in ordinary circumstances so clearly that [...] [their] identiti[es] and autonomi[es] are never in question [...] as spatially coextensive with the body”, or, conversely, “feel more unreal than real [...]; precariously differentiated from” (outer/inner) reality (Laing 1990 [1959], 41–42). Thus, ontological security and insecurity constitute “properties that belong simultaneously to the person and his or her world, to interior experience and external environment, to the world as perceived and reality encountered” Bondi (2014, 337). Although Laing seems to have established two mutually exclusive instances of ontological security and insecurity, the way they are experienced is actually gradual with specific moments in which low or high thresholds are entered (Laing 1990 [1959], 42; Bondi 2014, 337).

In the discussion of this final case C, we argue that the ‘personal’ dimension of ontological (in)security – that of interior experience – is bound to the notion of subjectivity whereby the discernment of the world is structured (see figure 2.4). In order to explore how such interaction operates, we draw on Jacques Lacan’s threefold topological theory of human subjectivity, which comprises the imaginary, the symbolic and the Real registers whose interdependence is denoted by the Borromean knot (Johnston 2018; Evans 2006 [1996], 210ff.). Given that subjects express their anxiety-driven desire for wholeness through the imaginary and the symbolic ‘rings’⁹, they offer a view into the system of signification upon which symbolic identifications of ontological (in)securities are founded (Vieira 2018, 150). The imaginary, loosely speaking, is connected with self-awareness; its basis is located in the formation of the ego during the “mirror stage”¹⁰ and, since “the ego is formed by identifying with the counterpart of specular image, identification is an important aspect” of it (Evans 2006 [1996], 84). As such, this phase of the psychological development of self-identity has “profound implications on the subject’s self-perception and engagement with the world outside his or herself. It is in the imaginary dimension that the anxiety-laden lack is introduced and becomes the subject’s unconscious motivational force in its pursuit of ontological security” (Vieira 2018, 150).

The symbolic order, initially theorised in line with Saussurean structuralism, refers to the ensemble of laws, customs, institutions, mores, norms, and practices of societies and cultures. It is buttressed by both law (in the Lacanian sense of all the fundamental principles that underpin social intercourse) and structure (a system based on the dissimilarities of its constitutive components) and would not be conceivable without

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⁹ This does not imply that the Real does not play any role; on the contrary, it is “the starting point, the basis, the foundation of the process of symbolization [...] which in a sense precedes the symbolic order and is subsequently structured by it when it gets caught in its network” (Žižek (2008 [1989], 191; italics in the original).

¹⁰ Lacan’s formulation of the “mirror stage” is a foundational element of the structure of subjectivity and, rather than simply being a moment in the infant’s life, “[i]t typifies an essential libidinal relationship with the body-image” (Lacan 1953, 14).
the mediation of language (Evans 2006 [1996], 203). For Lacan, the core condition that gives way to a singular subjectivity is the collective symbolic order, for “individual subjects are what they are in and through the mediation of the socio-linguistic arrangements and constellations of the register of the Symbolic” (Johnston 2018). Furthermore, “the imaginary is structured by the symbolic. It is the symbolic order which is determinant of subjectivity” (Evans 2006 [1996], 204). Since the subject, according to Lacanian theory, “is never fully unified into an individual ego at the ‘imaginary’ level, […] the always-illusory achievement of ontological security is dependent upon continuously embracing external identifications at the collective-level symbolic order” (Vieira 2018, 151).

How are these ‘external identifications’ then embraced? We address this question through Martin Heidegger’s (1996 [1953]) concept of Dasein (being-in-the-world) and thereby delve into the ‘outward’ dimension of ontological (in)security – the external environment where reality, traversed by the collective symbolic order, is met (see figure 2.4). For Heidegger (1996 [1953], 196), the reality of the external world is ontologically grounded by dint of Dasein, though the subsistence of the material elements forming it does not hinge on its corporeality. He thus urges that a human being is not to be thought of as wordless, because it is not a “Cartesian subject that is in principle distinct from the world, but is an entity whose being is characterised by its very involvement in the world” (Stepanich 1991, 21). Such involvement is partly influenced by the degree of ontological security humans have that, in turn, is internalised through the ‘reticule of external identifications’ upon which the collective symbolic order rests. Likewise, in Heidegger’s Dasein (being-in-the-world) and Mitsein (being-with-the world: the recognition that humans cannot dispense with others), it becomes apparent that “what defines the sense of being that ontological security scholars emphasise is not understandable without also acknowledging the mutual relations and processes that are core to our daily experiences” (Kirke 2020, 2). One of the pinnacles of our daily experiences, upon which ontological security is also grounded, is precisely the notion of home(ness) – which we will explore as the cornerstone of the basic premise underlying the following empirical discussion.

2.3.2. Home(ness)-making as ‘ontological security builder’

The ‘reality’ of the world of the self, mediated by imaginary-symbolic subjectivity, may take the shape of the home – or better, homeness – to the extent that it ties together a particular built/material environment and a set of poignant meanings that denote consistency and lastingness (Kinvall 2004, 747; Dupuis/Thorns 1998, 30). Here, home(ness) echoes the spatiality Heidegger (1996 [1953], 97) attributes to his Dasein, which “is ‘in’ the world in the sense of a familiar and heedful association with the beings encountered within the world”. This ‘association’ is what makes it possible to
get involved in and with the world, to render stable social and material environments, to wit, to be both in and with the world, at once feeling ontologically secure. As such, the notion of home(ness), we argue, is an ‘ontological security builder’ (cf. case A), because it “is able to provide a site of constancy in the social and material environment. Home, in this sense, constitutes a spatial context in which daily routines of human existence are performed.” (Kinvall 2004, 747) Home is the domain where people feel more in control of their lives and, through daily home-making practices, attempt to render it as private and bespoke as possible. Accordingly, the ‘homeness character’ that a built/material environment could be imbued with mirrors an identity formation process, through which the ‘situatedness’ of the subject in and with the world may be achieved. Moreover, with regards to ontological (in)security, internal experience (the world as perceived through the imaginary and symbolic dimensions of human subjectivity) and external environment (the encounter with reality through being-in and with-the world) coalesce in this situatedness. At the ‘level’ of home(ness), as it were, the resulting amalgam is located in the interplay between the notions of dwelling and building (see figure 2.4).

Heidegger (1971, 143) observes that both dwelling and building stand in relation to each other – it is the nature of this relation which makes the difference. While dwelling is apparently only attainable by dint of building, not everything is built with the explicit aim of dwelling: the built/material environment is awash with edifices that are “in the domain of our dwelling” and “[t]hat domain extends over these buildings and yet is not limited to the dwelling place” (Heidegger 1971, 143). That is why home(ness)-making presupposes the process of carving a ‘dwelling place’ out of the built/material environment, which can either hinder or enable the imaginary-symbolic structure of subjectivity insofar as it appears, respectively, either immutable or adaptable (see figure 2.6). As a result, the relationship between dwelling and building can be mutually constitutive (i.e. the materiality of the surrounding corresponds to what is imagined and perceived as dwelling) or, failing that, constitutes a means-to-an-end schema. Whereas the former instance develops almost organically into home(ness), the latter merely becomes a house – a building that, paradoxically, is meant to be(come) a dwelling but is neither imagined nor perceived as such. Furthermore, as the empirical case introduced below shows, this latter option may well end up causing a chasm in the ‘situatedness of the subject’ that, in turn, projects dwelling onto a distant dwelt upon location (an imagined and

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11 The concept of “situatedness”, by way of clarification, has been developed within psychology studies and is defined as the “theoretical position that posits that the mind is ontologically and functionally intertwined within environmental, social and cultural factors” (Costello 2014, 1757). Thus, the purpose of coupling situatedness with subject implies that ‘being in and with the world’ comprises mind, body and environment.
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yearned for ‘there’) and binds building to an immediate material settings (a lived and resisted ‘here’) (see figure 2.6).

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 2.4.** Schematic portrayal of the initial premise. © Ignacio Castillo Ulloa.

Against this background, we now turn to the notion of ontological (in)security examined through the case of young migrant Colombians whose families moved into a social housing complex in Bogotá (Colombia) called *La Plaza de la Hoja* [the leaf square]. Interviewees evince to have a dual ‘situatedness of the subject’, split by both the encumbrance of having to live where they now are and a persistence in having their sentiment of ‘being-at-home’ anchored to their hometowns.

### 2.3.3. Ignis fatuus – not homes, but houses

Located in the heart of Bogotá, Colombia, the project *La Plaza de la Hoja* is embedded within the larger social housing policy *Vivienda de Interés Prioritario* [high Priority Housing] promoted by the *Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá* [the mayor of Bogota office], and its design and construction were awarded through public tender. The 457 housing units – the project originally encompassed office and retail areas too – were handed over to victims of the long-standing armed conflict in the country\(^{13}\) as well as

\(^{12}\) As part of the CRC’s project A02, we researched a participatory process led by a group of enthusiastic architects known as LunArquicos, who, together with young residents of *La Plaza de la Hoja*, sought to intervene in some of its common areas. To that end, narrative mapping (i.e. a combination of drawing and interviews) and participant observation were deployed to gather empirical data. We are grateful to Fabiola Uribe, Jorge Raedó, Sebastián Fonseca and Sebastián Méndez for helping us to conduct the narrative mapping sessions.

\(^{13}\) The history of Colombia over the last 70 years has been largely shaped by the armed conflict. Since its onset, a markedly unequal system of land distribution coupled with a lack of spaces for substantive political participation has precipitated a resort to violence and armed struggle. Further, an array of actors – traditional political parties, guerrilla movements, revolutionary groups, paramilitaries and drug traffickers – have justified their recourse to
economic migrants, as part of the national government’s program *Vivienda Gratis* [free housing] and the district government’s policy *Centro Ampliado* [extended center].

The location of the project also seeks to break with a deep-rooted tendency to push disenfranchised inhabitants to the outskirts of the city. According to the architect Felipe González-Pacheco, head of the architectural studio *MGP Arquitectura y Urbanismo*, which won the international design competition of *La Plaza de la Hoja*, such an objective defies head-on the segregation by socioeconomic strata that the city of Bogotá has been increasingly undergoing. According to the architect, the fact that interest groups and elites continue to oppose and impede the construction of social and priority housing in both the center and north of Bogotá, arguing that precisely on those areas of the city the wealthiest quintiles are settled, ends up reproducing and entrenching racial and socio-economic stratification (Sainea 2017, 2).

![Figure 2.5. Renderings of the project as conceived by the architectural studio MPG Arquitectura y Urbanismo (pictures above) and the project as it was actually built (pictures below). © MPG Arquitectura y Urbanismo (above pictures/retrieved from ArchDaily) and © Rodrigo Dávila (below pictures/retrieved from ArchDaily).](image)

As laudable and ground-breaking as such intentions were, what was actually built turned out to be quite different. Whereas the design, as it was submitted for competition, encompassed diverse services (a community and cultural center, a

violence as the sole means whereby society could be transformed, preempting any changes advanced by any other actor/party, for they would be deemed as illegitimate.
nursery, commercial premises, an office tower and an intervention in La Plaza de la Hoja itself), the institutions responsible for their implementation were not actively engaged, and, as a consequence, only the nursery and apartments were constructed - albeit not in consonance with the blueprints. Among other discrepancies, and allegedly due to a lack of civility which was rhetorically disguised as ‘security arguments’, the main entrances of the housing complex were closed with bars, thereby preventing the envisioned ‘permeability’, the connection with the plaza and the effectiveness of any commercial spaces (see figure 2.5). Because the project was not successfully inserted into the existing urban fabric of the city, future young residents were welcomed into an isolating container, in which ‘making themselves at home’ has proven nothing but difficult; after all, they arrived in a new house and left their homes behind.

2.3.4. From an ‘unsafe countryside’ to a ‘secure urban cage’

Migrating constitutes a forced detachment, on both a physical as well as an emotional level, from specific socio-spatial coordinates – precisely those in which everyday routines and rhythms are entrenched. Swept along a migratory movement, triggered by both pull and push factors, youngsters living in La Plaza de la Hoja have gone through poignant distress, insofar as “[m]igration is invariably a process that dissociates individuals from their family and friendship networks, as well as from other socially significant referents that have strong emotional connotations” (Skrbiš 2008, 236). Accordingly, it has been burdensome for them to get a grip on their present circumstances and to trigger a home(ness)-making process, as they feel alienated not only within the housing complex, but also in the city as a whole.

Such ‘inward’ disaffection, indicating how their internal experience merges with their ‘new’ encountered reality, was expressed when asked about potential modifications within the housing complex:

“Q: what would you like to change? / A: That they [adults in charge] change it for real, because our word is, when it comes to that square, never heard. I mean, we are never invited to the communal meetings so that we can talk […]. I mean, it is simply what they say and that is what we have to do and comply with […] [and] where we used to play, shrubs have been planted / Q: Where exactly? / A: Out there […] they planted some bushes, and we can no longer play there / Q: What did you guys play there? / A: Futsal. And so, we can’t play there anymore […] / A: Where do you play inside [the housing complex]? / A: Here inside? Well, they have built a small park over there, which we are not even allowed to enter. It is only for little kids […] / Q: But what are you guys
Moreover, youngsters, rather unsurprisingly, feel somewhat estranged from and ambivalent towards the city. During interviews, they were asked how they move around, where they go and which kind of association pops into their heads when they hear the word “Bogotá”:

“Q: Do you orient yourself here in Bogotá? / A: Well, I hardly go anywhere // Q: Where do you usually arrange to meet with friends or relatives? / A: [With friends we meet] at school or at the square [i.e. La Plaza de la Hoja], or at my or her house [...] // Q: We are now going to play a game, in which I am going to say a word to you and you tell me the first thing that comes to mind, are you guys ready? / A: Yes / Q: Bogotá / A: Traffic, trees, pretty places, shopping centers, apartments – that’s it / A: Cold. / A: Pollution.” (Interview excerpts 2019; own translation)

These succinct interview passages reveal not only that young residents of La Plaza de la Hoja have a hard time settling in, but also that a climate of tension has resulted in conflicts over the legitimacy of their (intended and actual) use of certain spaces. In addition, their spatial structures and scope for self-agency are strikingly limited – they essentially go back and forth from the housing complex to school. Spending a significant amount of time within the premises of the housing complex, interviewees are spatially excluded: a phenomenon “that positions [...] the young person as the ‘other’ and contributes to an emerging hierarchy of spatial access and mobility” (Malone/Hasluck 2002, 81). At the same time, they feel ‘trapped’: during participant observations, youths uttered, quite vocally, that the housing complex was a ‘prison’ in which they claimed to be trapped. Such articulations, whereby these youngsters express who (‘prisoners’) and where (‘out of place’) they imagine themselves to be, should not be downplayed as futile and trivial “fictional abstractions”, for they directly influence their everyday reality. Moreover, in their quest for ontological security, they struggle to embrace the set of external identifications that becomes operative at the collective-level, symbolic order of their subjectivities.

Having moved from an ‘unsafe countryside’ to a ‘secure urban cage’, juveniles of La Plaza de la Hoja still seem to be attached to their hometowns. As one interviewee put it, referring to his drawing:

“I am talking about [...] my house in Chocó [department of Colombia] [...] well, we’re not there right now, but rather here in Bogotá. But I mentioned ‘there’, because there is a better environment, the neighbors support you, we all support each other [...] we talked and the rest of it. Here, on the other hand,
let’s say you go out, and a neighbour already makes a face at you. [...] So, I
drew where I feel better.” (Interview excerpt 2019; own translation)

‘There’, for this youth, it may be inferred, is where dwelling and building are mutually
constitutive, where home and house are two sides of the same coin, where external
environment and internal experience situate him in and with the world.

2.3.5. Is home actually where the heart is? A split situatedness of the subject,
a twofold geographical imagination and a low ontological security threshold

As shown in case A, the notion of home(ness) and the ability to actively produce it
constitute ‘ontological security builder’. That being so, the actual condition of the
built/material environment largely determines the ability to move towards a high
threshold of ontological security through home(ness)-making practices. Ontological
security is also interwoven with the concept of “geographical imagination”, which
“affords ways of thinking about space and place, whether conscious or unconscious,
emphasizing how power shapes practices, behaviors, and social structures”
(Gieseking 2017, 2657). Moreover, following Harvey (1973, 24), relations with
surrounding spatial/material conditions are established by way of geographical
imagination – from the neighbourhood to the city to the nation. These relations are,
sure enough, crisscrossed by the imaginary and symbolic registers of human
subjectivity, as they impact both the imaginary identification process and the
symbolic socio-linguistic arrangements (for Harvey [1973, 24], geographical
imagination facilitates the use of local languages, in particular, that of one’s own turf).
Likewise, geographical imaginations may be thought of as articulating how reality is
encountered through the ways in which one arrives at being-in (Dasein) and with-
the-world (Mitsein).

As seen in figure 2.6, the practices of home(ness)-making of the youngsters of La
Plaza de la Hoja are traversed by a twofold geographical imagination that ranges
from an imagined and yearned for ‘there’ (their hometowns) to a lived and a
somewhat resisted ‘here’ (the housing complex). By the same token, their structure
of subjectivity is affected by a similar stretching of their geographical imagination,
inasmuch as their “sense of place” – understood as “the identification with a place
engendered by living in it” (Agnew/Duncan 1989, 2) and, as such, vital to their
situatedness in and with the world – has been ripped in two. To put it differently, to
the extent that the environmental and material conditions turn out to be either
‘adaptable’ or ‘immutable’, the intrinsic spatial character of human subjectivity
becomes either enabled or hindered – along with the chances of ‘chiseling’ a
home(ness). Thus, the youngsters’ structure of subjectivity is, to a considerable
extent, mediated in and through the physicality and materiality of both the housing
complex and youths’ turfs, since they do not merely constitute a context by which certain features of a (longed for/endured) reality are apprehended. Rather, they constitute the very backdrop against which their imaginary identification and symbolic socio-linguistic connections crystallise.

Moreover, as represented at the core of figure 2.6, the situatedness of young residents of La Plaza de la Hoja ends up riven – a condition that seems to be attuned to Freud’s “splitting of the ego”, “as a process, observable in fetishism and psychosis, whereby two contradictory attitudes to reality come to exist side by side in [it]” (Evans 2006 [1996], 195). It is as though their being-in-the-world were anchored in their hometowns, and, simultaneously, they only have the option of being-with-world in the housing complex. Now, rather than implying that these youths are prone to develop a mental disorder, at issue is that the topological structure of their subjectivity is somehow capable of reconciling a past and a still yearned for home(ness) with an encumbering present house. In the midst of this apparent ‘impossibility’, they move along an axis of ontological security that ranges from a low to a high threshold – as Liz Bondi (2014, 334) maintains, ontological security is a “continuum along which we all necessarily move, sometimes with great speed, rather than a binary distinction that locates and fixes each of us within one of two discrete categories [ontologically secure or insecure]”. Thus, on the one hand, hinged on home(ness), where material/built settings allow it, youngsters are remarkably more ontologically secure (for example, in their drawings it was depicted not where they live now, but where they claimed to feel better – their homes). On the other hand, bound to house, a ‘fixed’ built/material environment makes youths to have a lower degree of ontological security (for instance, when they are alienated and socio-spatially displaced within the housing complex). Despite these significant ruptures in the consistency of their social and material surroundings and their split situatedness in and with the world, young residents of La Plaza de la Hoja are resilient enough to preserve confidence in their self-identities. Therefore, their “ontological security has survived, affording some protection to their sense of self-worth and their faith in the possibility of a beneficent environment even as external reality repeatedly lets them down” (Bondi 2014, 333). In time, chances are that these youngsters may devise alternatives through which they may be able to bridge the gap in their geographical imaginations and, progressively, turn their house into a home – as the saying goes, ‘home is where the heart is’.
2.3.6. Rumination: Dwelling as home(ness)-making

In *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Heidegger (1971, 143–144) maintained that, though dwelling could ostensibly only be attained by means of building, not every building, de facto, constitutes a dwelling: “the truck driver is at home on the highway, but does not have his shelter there; the working woman is at home in the spinning mill, but does not have her dwelling place there; the chief engineer is at home in the power station, but does not dwell there”. The youngsters of *La Plaza de la Hoja* are at home in the housing complex, though they do not (fully) dwell there - let alone that they continue to dwell upon their hometowns. Dwelling and building, in their case, appear to be connected through a ‘means-to-an-end’ axis, in which dwelling is the ultimate end that presides over all building, and thus they emerge as two separate activities (this is also the logic buttressing the conception and construction of the housing complex).

Moreover, the alienation youngsters are subjected to even prevents them from having a say concerning potential material/physical modifications which would eventually provide them with some dwelling latitude and self-agency. This cannot but be ill-starred in terms of how dwelling and building can be balanced in residential complexes (and even cities), given that in order to provide “supportive environments
where children and youth can develop and experience a growing sense of self and place [...] it is critical to consider what a youth inclusive space might be like” (Malone/Hasluck 2002, 81). This ‘eventual inclusive space’ should be responsive to home(ness)-making as a fundamental element of ontological security. The challenge in the particular case of the youngsters of La Plaza de la Hoja becomes yet more convoluted, because in a migration context, the social dimensions of space, place and time play a decisive role in the poignant construction of, and identification with, the notion of home(ness). These processes of construction and identification may also be disjointed and intangible, and conflate various localities simultaneously (Ahmed 1999, 330). Hence, if dwelling is to mirror home(ness)-making, not only do material and physical living conditions need to be made susceptible and receptive to youngsters’ needs and wants, but there also, and perhaps more critically, has to be an understanding that they are inhabiting an (im)material world split between a ‘lived here’ and a ‘yearned for there’.

3. Final reflections

In times of a refigured modernity, passages from lower to higher thresholds of ontological security are, as the three cases reviewed show, noticeably dependent on the ability to devise and enact subjectified strategies. At the same time, individuals, entrenched in a global milieu and interpellated as ‘subjects’ (after Althusser) by dominant ideologies, are confronted with enormous challenges to fully develop their agencies – be it because infrastructural scaffoldings control and predict their futures (case B) or immutable material arrangements hinder homeness-making (case C). Accordingly, ontological security is in both instances seen as malleable enough to be (pre)determined - or even prescribed - by way of smart city control centres or policies, programs, and architectural designs of ‘protective’ housing solutions, respectively. In either case, subjects (i.e. residents of smart cities and displaced/migrant youngsters) are prone to develop feelings of uncertainty. Oddly enough, whereas control centres try to ‘smartify’ ontological security through futuristic narratives in an overtly intended manner, the hampering effect that the housing complex’s envisioned architectural design and its eventual diverging implementation exert on youngsters’ ontological security is fairly unintended. Yet, based on the reasoning presented in case A, subjects from different age groups, different social statuses, and different geographical backgrounds (be it in Berlin, Vancouver or Singapore) are all keen to enact deliberate strategies in their everyday lives to achieve and maintain ontological security. Be it in practices of home-making, routine walks in nature or through explicit geopolitical positionings – across all age and status groups, we found subjectified strategies enacted to help tackle the challenges of ontological security in a globalised world. Hence, whereas case A
articulates a message of hope and identifies options for self-agency in a globalised world, cases B and C showcase some of the many ‘snags’ which stir up ontological insecurity and which subjects are (constantly) faced with.

For example, the turn to ‘sensorised’ infrastructural imaginations promoting a technosocial handling of sociality, which is obstructing self-agency and deliberation (case B), and the rather incidental production of an uncanny and displacing living space, where a safe(r) life is allegedly achievable (case C), are likely to reinforce the need for subjective strategies to allow ontologically secure and stable worldviews to develop (case A). To that end, as expounded in case A, three vital elements ideally become entangled with one another, thereby enabling the imaging and implementing of ontological security: (a) geopolitical imaginations, which seek to achieve a safe life through a localisation of the subject within a certain spatial order, (b) contact with natural settings and (c) homeness-making practices. Cases B and C address such strategies through particular examples of new geopolitical imaginations: on the one hand, as a subjectified personalisation of the living-environment (case B) and, on the other, as the possibility for subjects to make the ‘here’ converge with the ‘elsewhere’ (case C). Likewise, while case C addresses the issues linked with homeness-making, case B underscores the threat to ontological security that results from spatial insecurities – space itself is hereby consulted for a potential solution and becomes the bearer of hope for a new orientation.

At the same time, both empirical cases are indicative of how spatial strategies, by diminishing self-agency, ultimately tend to exacerbate the need for ontological security in the long run. Further, the empirical circumstances examined suggest that there are more than a handful of hurdles placed along the way towards ontological security, which, in one way or another, come down to the issue of self-agency. By the same token, we are currently undergoing exceptionally unsettled and unsettling times, in which our self-agency has been significantly – and, literally, physically - restrained worldwide. Though one might think that the source of fear could be easily pinned down, an anxiety-laden sentiment of uncertainty hovers everywhere (particularly in densely urbanised cities and regions). We are therefore on the verge of a remarkably low threshold of ontological security – which begs a number of questions, such as: how susceptible to control and therefore reassuring can the future actually be, when, to paraphrase Paul Valéry, it is no longer what it used to be? Potential answers to this (and other) critical questions represent valuable opportunities to expand the debate on how to further ontological security in a globalised world which has unfurled unprecedented social and spatial refigurations. The challenge is, by all accounts, staggering and, for this very reason, has to be confronted head-on.
Subjectified strategies for spatial(ised) ontological security in refigured Modernity

Initial premises

- Challenge of self-agency in a society entranced in a global milieu.
- Low threshold of ontological security: Feelings of uncertainty
- Ontological (in)security interprets both the individual and organizations.

Implications at issue:

- Ontological security seen as determined by control centers and their urban infrastructures.
- Agenda of control centers is oriented towards the notion of a ‘successful life’.
- Ontological security of the here and now is generated through futuristic narratives.
- Those narratives claim a ‘re-embeddedness’ of citizens, allowing for behavioral conservatism.
- Space is (A) render ‘familiarly’ to meet expectations; (B) ‘readily negotiable’ to resolve personal frictions; and (C) ‘innocently careless’ to relieve feelings of immaturity.
- Social Control is attached to infrastructures ‘sensory’ space promoting a cybernetic and techno-social handling of society.

→ Turn to ‘sensory’ infrastructure imaginations

Ontological security tends to have a low threshold and therewith constraints self-agency latitude

Figure 3.1. Overview of the working paper: summary of, and interactions among the three cases. © The authors.
References


Other sources


