

# Rethinking Sister Cities for the Anthropocene: Cape Town and Reykjavík — A Reflective Dialogue

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**Design Dialogue**Reception: *July 15, 2025*Acceptance: *December 19, 2025*[🔗 Traducción al español aquí](#)

This design dialogue offers a glimpse into a collaborative environmental design project: *Sister Cities for the Anthropocene (SCA)*. The core idea of *SCA* is to reactivate and reimagine the *Sister Cities International* program of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century for the existential crises of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the introductory section of this dialogue, the environmental anthropologists who conceived *Sister Cities for the Anthropocene* detail the key principles of the concept as well as its scientific basis. The conversation then turns toward engagement with colleagues in Cape Town and Reykjavík, with expertise in issues of climate adaptation, environmental justice, and ecological systems in their respective cities. This dialogue exemplifies the first phase of the *SCA* design process: a series of brainstorming sessions among experts on what the optimal goals and forms that a *Sister Cities for the Anthropocene* relationship might take.

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**Keywords**


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# Rethinking Sister Cities for the Anthropocene: Cape Town and Reykjavík — A Reflective Dialogue

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Responding to this special issue's prompt to engage design more directly in the struggle for planetary habitability and coexistence, we offer a glimpse into a collaborative environmental design project in-the-making: Sister Cities for the Anthropocene (Howe & Boyer, 2024). The core idea of Sister Cities for the Anthropocene is to reactivate and reimagine the Sister Cities International program of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century for the existential crises of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the introductory section of this dialogue, the environmental anthropologists who conceived Sister Cities for the Anthropocene—Cymene Howe and Dominic Boyer—detail the key principles of the concept as well as its scientific basis. We then turn to a conversation with colleagues in Cape Town and Reykjavík with expertise in issues of climate adaptation, environmental justice, and ecological systems in their respective cities. This exempli-

fies the first phase of the design process: a series of brainstorming sessions among experts on what the optimal goals and forms that a Sister Cities for the Anthropocene relationship might take.

As two researchers based in Houston, Texas, we are keenly aware that we live and work in a petropolitical metropolis that is driving global warming: the oil and gas industry situated in the greater Houston region is responsible for melting Icelandic ice and worsening the conditions of sea-level rise in cities like Cape Town. In this design exercise, we are drawn toward these kinds of paradoxes, since surfacing the often-unseen *connectivities* of climatological disruption is the key goal of Sister Cities for the Anthropocene. In that spirit, we are looking for a way to make the shared connections of the Anthropocene—climate change, species extinction, extractivism, toxicity and pollution, resource crises, and environmental inequality—more visible to people so that its causes and consequences can be identified, mobilized around, and eventually reversed (Wood, 2022).

The original design of Sister Cities International (“People to People” as it was first known) was a Cold War initiative to foment citizen diplomacy and international cultural understanding and cooperation. In U.S. President Eisenhower’s words, it was meant to “help build the road to an enduring peace” (Sister Cities International, 2006, p. 98). In practice, Sister Cities was mostly focused on economic cooperation, educational experiences, and travel. Sister Cities for the Anthropocene would align with the peace and cooperation goals of its namesake. But it would also refocus on how the impact of the Anthropocene stress is destabilizing political and social order across the world. Like the military threats of the Cold War, the Anthropocene era demands urgent and collective action, not just by governments, but by communities across the world.

There are different ways of imagining a Sister Cities for the Anthropocene relationship. Many cities are experiencing, for example, similar forms of catastrophic drought, storms, and flooding, and their resilience activities could serve as plausible basis for collaboration. But we have decided here to explore a less obvious kind of Anthropocene entanglement between Reykjavík, Iceland, and Cape Town, South Africa.

Because of anthropogenic warming, Iceland nowadays loses 11 billion tons of glacial ice each year to the world ocean. NASA-JPL’s Gradient Fingerprint Map—a modeling tool that determines where melted ice contributes to sea-level rise—reveals that, of all the coastal cities in the world, no city is more impacted by the melt of Iceland’s glaciers than Cape Town (Howe & Boyer, 2024). Cape Town, meanwhile, faces its own Anthropocene challenges in the form of drought and rising sea levels, which intensify historical legacies of exclusion and inequality. Iceland’s capital and only large city, Reyk-

javík, is no stranger to climate change, but Cape Town and Reykjavík otherwise seem to be an odd Sister Cities pairing: they are culturally and geographically distinct in many respects. There is no substantial shared colonial, linguistic, or economic history that ties them together. But they are now connected, invisibly, by the deterioration of the cryosphere and the warming expanse of the world ocean.

What we are aspiring toward is not, at least initially, a policy framework. Sister Cities, historically, emphasized building person-to-person connections between faraway places as a means of fostering cooperation and peace. This idea intersects with the terrestrial turn in design (e.g., Tironi, 2023). As Arturo Escobar argues, a pluriversal and ontological approach to design can help address the “deeper civilizational crisis” manifesting in the Anthropocene trajectory (2018, p. 5). He further suggests that “the rethinking of community or, perhaps more appropriately, the communal” (2018, p. 5) is a critical feature of this approach. Sister Cities for the Anthropocene, we hope, is a contribution to this cause.

Our guiding design problem is: How can the largely invisible Anthropocene connections between Cape Town and Reykjavík be made more public and catalytic? In our best-case scenario for this design exercise, Sister Cities for the Anthropocene could provide a platform for future forms of partnership and alliance between the two cities, and Iceland and South Africa more generally. At the outset, we are deliberating design strategies to generate compelling sparks.

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**How are Cape Town and Reykjavík responding to the Anthropocene thus far? Are there new Anthropocene-related initiatives—cultural, political, or otherwise—taking place at a city level? Are Anthropocene vectors like climate change matters of significant public concern?**

**Nikiwe:** In Cape Town, we have climate change-related initiatives in the political arena, civil society, and grassroots communities, as well as in business and academia, and all have different priorities and concerns. Sometimes they are at loggerheads, even when well-intentioned. Cape Town’s Climate Change Action Plan<sup>1</sup> has ten focus areas, ranging from water, fire, air pollution, landscape management, biodiversity, and infrastructure projects, each with its own action plan. I am most familiar with the strategies around water, many of which were an outcome of the 2017–2018 drought, which almost led to Cape Town’s water supply being completely shut off. Along with other academics

<sup>1</sup> See [https://resource.capetown.gov.za/documentcentre/Documents/City%20strategies%2C%20plans%20and%20frameworks/CCT\\_Climate\\_Change\\_Action\\_Plan.pdf](https://resource.capetown.gov.za/documentcentre/Documents/City%20strategies%2C%20plans%20and%20frameworks/CCT_Climate_Change_Action_Plan.pdf)

and government officials, I was part of an initial critique of the strategies that prioritized a neoliberal focus on economic growth.

We were able to mount challenges and ask: What does that mean for people who have experienced South Africa's history of apartheid? What does that mean for ecologies if we think only in terms of economic advantages or GDP outputs? When the water strategy was released, it was a bit more inclusive in its approach to justice because academics and government were involved, and in direct conversation with grassroots communities and civil society.

Cape Town faces different Anthropocene challenges depending on the season. From January to March, we have significant wind, and it is our driest season. This leads to major fires, especially in the township areas. They are essentially a tinderbox because of the materials used to build informal structures. This is exacerbated by the heating effect of the city. One study portrays the unequal distribution of heat in Cape Town: high-income areas or air-conditioned spaces experience maximum temperatures between 20 and 25 degrees Celsius. In lower-income communities and informal settlements, residents sometimes experience temperatures of 40 degrees Celsius within their spaces. This heat variation, just within one city, means different lived experiences, different health outcomes, requiring policies to be informed by how heat operates unequally in the city.

And then most of the rain that we get in Cape Town comes during our winter season, from May to September, when we also get flooding. Again, poor infrastructure in informal settlements exacerbates the problem. The construction rate in Cape Town is also an issue because more surfaces are being covered with impermeable materials, reducing water absorption into the aquifer. And again, these phenomena affect different communities in very unequal ways.

So, in sum, we are dealing with multiple urban metabolisms that are being disrupted. But people have also come together to try to address these issues: from creating co-ops to working with researchers. A group of students even designed a fire-retardant paint, and we have seen the implementation of innovative alarm systems for fires, for example.

**Cymene:** I appreciate how you took us through the cycle of the year. This is one way in which design also comes into play: the seasons are different, and their impacts are quite distinct. We have flooding versus fire. If we approach responses in terms of a design project, we are encouraged to calibrate initiatives over time, and in a cyclical manner. Anthropocene responses, even in one single city, must be heterogeneous, agile, and, importantly, able to account for variation over the short and long term—the annual cycle is one temporal

bracket, but the longer spans of 20, 50, 100 -year horizons also push us to take time seriously.

**Magnús:** For Reykjavík, we cannot paint as holistic a picture, but it would be interesting to think in terms of the annual weather cycle. Iceland has typically seen itself as an environmental exemplar with its abundant renewable energy production since the 1960s-1970s. That goes for Reykjavík as well, and we definitely fit the narrative of cities being at the forefront of climate response. From a policy perspective, Reykjavík is about 10 years ahead of the country as a whole.

In 2012, Reykjavík approved its first climate action plan, which included both adaptation and mitigation measures. It was quite ambitious at the time, and the national government has always looked to Reykjavík for climate policy. In terms of responding to the Anthropocene, the City of Reykjavík is probably the most visible government entity in the country.

Sea-level rise is an issue most citizens are aware of in relation to climate change, regarding Iceland specifically and on a global scale. Sustainable water management is increasingly a topic in Iceland, with intensified precipitation being one of the major concerns associated with global warming.

Sea-level rise has a class dynamic here, too. In many places, the most expensive properties are by the seaside. Any decisions to either protect that property or to have the state buy out properties require assessments of costly real estate. There are indications that these kinds of properties may become prioritized in adaptation policy, effectively creating adaptation privilege and furthering the inequalities already present in climate change impacts (Marino, 2018).

Biodiversity in the wetlands connected to our small central lake is likely the most visible ecological adaptation measure in the city. This initiative is incorporated into educational projects for the public, specifically for kids and bird enthusiasts.

**Sólveig:** As Nikiwe was saying, there is often a discrepancy between what policies are in place and being enacted and the public's awareness of them, which leads to frustration. But we are trying not to be too pessimistic. In terms of the visibility of the Anthropocene in Reykjavík's public spaces, we have, for example, a beloved outdoor sculpture, the now-extinct Geirfugl (great auk) (Pálsson, 2024) by artist Ólöf Nordal, that sits in the ocean close to the shore and is covered by the tides coming in, illustrating this anthropogenically-induced reality.

In Reykjavík art spaces, it is very common to find Anthropocene commentary or language regarding climate change, and in the educational sector, it is at least visible, if not always a top priority.

**If you were to imagine a Sister Cities for the Anthropocene (SCA) program or series of initiatives for Cape Town and Reykjavík, what could those look like, and who would we want to bring together? Which local Anthropocene concerns could and should be effectively addressed through an SCA program? Let us consider this as a blue-sky exercise for the moment, and not worry so much about logistics, finances, and so on.**

**Cymene:** Cape Town and Reykjavík, as we know from the physical modeling tool (the Gradient Fingerprint Map), are having their watery connection through the world ocean deepened: as Iceland melts, Cape Town's coast receives that water. On the one hand, we have this traceable, physical connectivity—what the science shows us. But just as importantly, I think, is the relative overall *lack* of social, linguistic, and historical ties between these two places. That is not to say there is none, of course, but in general, we do not have significant histories of extraction or colonial abuse between these cities, or between these two countries. I wonder if that creates an opportunity. The relative absence of long historic ties—especially troubled ones—may help us design more innovative Anthropocene interconnections that are not freighted with past deeds or economic dependencies. Colloquially, these two places are relatively “baggage-free” with each other, meaning that this could be a good time for great first impressions.

**Nikiwe:** Looking at how materialities are moving between these spaces is key. But I would like to ask: What are we trying to do here in a broader sense? What can we do that is not already being done by an organization like C40 Cities? And, what is unique about this pairing between Iceland and South Africa that foments a different language or set of tools? Off the top of my head, I work with water. Thinking about the currency of the current, how does the current move, and what are the currencies in play that connect these different spaces?

In Cape Town, sea-level rise adaptation strategies center on building more infrastructure: building walls. While they are constructing sea walls, they are also mining our sand dunes and depleting our natural barriers to sea-level rise.

The city has two major bays. Table Bay has the more expensive properties, and insurance comes into play quite a bit. For insurers, sea-level rise is considered a value risk and increased risk exposure, which means customers pay higher premiums. On the False Bay side, we have extensive sand dune mining. This is also where the largest informal settlement in Cape Town, Khayelitsha, is located. Residents such as those in Khayelitsha will be

<sup>2</sup> A Ramsar site is a wetland of international importance under the Ramsar Convention, known as the International Convention on Wetlands.

the most vulnerable to sea-level rise. There is no proper infrastructure, and wastewater treatment plants are also sited there. It is a disaster waiting to happen (see, e.g., Green et al., 2025). With sea-level rise, there will be contamination of local rivers and the aquifer, which is just underneath Khayelitsha. These multiple, overlapping dynamics require a full suite of tools and people who can account for the bigger picture.

**Dominic:** Picking up on Nikiwe’s question, part of the reason we selected Sister Cities was as an alternative to the C4o model. C4o has done great things, but it is thinking and operating at a global scale. Something that we find valuable in the Sister Cities concept is how it seeks to cultivate dyadic and distinct relationships between individual cities. Perhaps the Sister Cities paradigm allows for more bespoke city-to-city relations than a global network design such as C4o’s.

**Nikiwe:** Wetlands could be a key connection point between us because we are categorized as a wetland city. Many of our wetlands are Ramsar sites,<sup>2</sup> including bird protection zones.

**Magnús:** This emphasis on excavating Anthropocene connections is an interesting metaphor, and the model Cymene and Dominic are offering us—the Anthropocene connection through the world ocean—is inherently interesting. The focus on material, physical connections is distinct from the Sister Cities International program, which creates “twin” or “friend” cities.

**Sólveig:** As we have been discussing, the wetlands and birds, such as the Arctic tern, could be key points of connection. People in Reykjavík know about these ecological issues, and they matter to them, which might make them more interested in building a Sister Cities for the Anthropocene relationship.

**Magnús:** I also appreciate that you mention insurance companies, Nikiwe, because when it comes to adaptation, insurance companies are at the forefront due to their risk assessments and attention to profit. They are also very globalized. Looking at supply chain connections between Cape Town and Reykjavík could be interesting too, especially as adaptation policy today considers global and transboundary risks.

And, as Sólveig mentioned, we do have the Arctic tern, which migrates to Antarctica annually and flies through South Africa. So, these cities already exchange birds every year!

**Nikiwe:** I love the connection of the birds because we have a large birding community here in Cape Town, and many of our preserved wetland sites are in some of the most polluted areas of the city. One direction might be to trace contaminant flows from water carried by different vectors. What does ice or melted water carry from Iceland to Cape Town, and how do currents from Cape Town affect Reykjavík?

**Cymene:** Another potential approach could focus on youth, maybe in the form of an educational exchange program. Getting the next generation involved in the conversation will be fundamental, not just for reviving Sister Cities as a concept, but for making it more impactful moving forward.

It strikes me, too, that both of these cities have really strong art scenes, with a real emphasis on the arts and the imaginative work that people are doing. I can see that becoming a lively, creative way of visualizing these connections, or making them audible, or experiential, to create awareness and collaboration across continents and across the ocean through the arts that are already vibrant in both cities.

**Nikiwe:** From the Cape Town side, definitely. One of my projects, after completing my PhD, was to look at a specific river here in Cape Town and connect it from the source to the sea, making associations between communities along the way. Art pieces that could elicit those connections would be brilliant. And youth are integral here because we are thinking about futures. What futures do they imagine, and how do they express them artistically?

**Cymene:** It would be amazing to bring a group of street artists from Reykjavik to Cape Town and a group of artists from Cape Town to Reykjavik to create dual mural projects that center on the connections to the sea. This could foment more awareness of these changing hydrospheric conditions and, ideally, motivate people. It would also be a learning experience for the artists who would travel, engage with an international group of artists, and meet with communities in both places.

**Sólveig:** It goes without saying that these ideas would offer wonderful opportunities for scholars and artists on our end. We have recently seen an increased appreciation for South Africa over the last year, especially following the genocide case brought before the International Court of Justice. Our government has not supported it (yet), but people have been looking to South Africa for guidance in these times.

**Dominic:** I also like the idea of engaging birding communities, in that it is an associative activity people are already quite passionate about. Birders might be people already primed to appreciate the importance of global interconnectedness in the form of migratory birds. In their disregard for nation-state boundaries, birds truly are global citizens of a certain type. This opens up a more-than-human way of thinking about what kinds of exchanges a Sister Cities relationship might recognize and foster. And birding could also serve as a vehicle for talking about other Anthropocene ecological impacts and challenges, such as the salination and pollution of wetlands.

**What challenges could you foresee in developing an sca program between Cape Town and Reykjavík? If anticipated in advance, are there ways these challenges could be minimized?**

**Nikiwe:** I think one of the obvious concerns would be how the contexts and histories differ. And the North/South relationships would have to be navigated quite carefully. For a long time, a lot of knowledge and resources have been extracted from the Global South, and people have become wary of who they work with and how they work. If we are building the framework, it needs to be inclusive from the start. This means not inviting partners late in the process as add-ons because we didn't think about them at the beginning. We need to be careful about the politics of the knowledge economy and who is involved from the beginning of these conversations.

**Sólveig:** It requires some really hard thinking about who you are assembling, and on what grounds.

**Magnús:** It would be wise to learn, too, from the academic critique of the Anthropocene as an unnecessarily homogenizing term (Davis & Todd, 2017). The word itself can lead people to see climate harm as being equally the fault of all humans (the “anthro” of the Anthropocene), when in fact it is northern industrialized countries and particular corporate actors that have produced the crisis we all now collectively face. By the same logic, we would want to be careful to note that the experience of the Anthropocene has distinct qualities in Cape Town and Reykjavík. There may be connections, but each city is facing unique challenges. These two cities and countries have very different histories that have made them very distinct places.

It is very important to keep inclusivity at the core. This ties back to the youth program idea mentioned earlier because it underscores the inter-generational justice aspect within the time horizon of the Anthropocene. The younger generation is also an expert in inclusivity.

**Nikiwe:** The term Anthropocene is still very much restricted to academic spaces in South Africa. It is now being used within government, too, but without the nuance found in academia. And if I were to go to a township like Khayelitsha, they would have no idea what I was talking about with the Anthropocene. We need to think about alternative terms for talking about these issues. That is an obstacle to consider in later stages.

**Sólveig:** There have been concerns raised here in Iceland that we are in a sort of backlash moment with regard to ecological commitments and nature preservation. I know we appreciate nature, but it is also really important for us to support projects that concern the appreciation of worlds beyond nation-states.

**Dominic:** Indeed, you have retrenchment against ecology, and also retrenchment against globalism, by which critics usually mean neoliberal globalization. There are plenty of valid reasons to want to resist further neoliberalization. But that doesn't mean we don't also need alternative ways of thinking about transnational connection and cooperation. Those will be vital for managing the environmental crises that we are all sharing in different ways.

**Nikiwe:** I think the idea of Sister Cities does something else as well, because within an African ethos, there is *Ubuntu* and the idea of accountability to others through kinship. So, I stand strongly for the Sister Cities concept because it suggests relationships that cannot be broken so easily.

**Cymene:** Thank you for making that point, Nikiwe; it is really important. I also like the kinship aspect of the Sister Cities concept because kinship, for better or for worse, creates lifelong bonds of responsibility. The other aspect I like about Sister Cities, to follow the family metaphor, is that those relations also change over time. We behave differently with our siblings when we are six years old versus when we are 60 years old. And that temporal aspect of relationality could be interesting to explore in a Sister Cities context.

**Dominic:** Wonderful! Thank you all for a fascinating conversation. Just to summarize the main ideas, after contextualizing Anthropocene initiatives in Cape Town and Reykjavík, we talked about collaborative art projects, youth exchanges, and possibly even activating birdwatching communities on both sides of multi-species migration. We considered engaging global actors like the insurance industry. A lot emerged from this design brainstorming session, with really stimulating ideas to think with and iterate further.

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Looking ahead, we (Cymene Howe and Dominic Boyer) will continue to organize a series of small group brainstorming sessions with different partners (see Gatt, 2017)—thinkers, artists, and activists from Cape Town and Reykjavík. We intend to expand the conversation and palette of ideas and initiatives that could become elements of an SCA program. As discussed, we prioritize creating a design environment that does not reproduce extractive practices in terms of knowledge, time, effort, and resources. Potential project partners and stakeholders need to be identified early on, and responsibilities must be clearly defined.

That said, many creative ideas are already emerging: from migrating birds to artistic collaborations. Once more ideas are on the table, we will convene a larger stakeholder gathering, likely a conference, to talk

through different elements and pathways toward an sca program, as well as how that program might be funded. From there, we will work toward a collaborative prototype or trial program to see what kind of response and impact an sca relationship could generate. Although many programmatic options exist, all would emphasize the watery materiality that connects these two global cities, even as other aspects of their respective histories might separate them.

Pivotal to any design for the Sister Cities for the Anthropocene program is the recognition that we are living in an era in which modernist promises of human command and control over environments are fracturing under the weight of the sprawl of instruments, infrastructures, and lateral effects characteristic of northern modernity (Thomas, 2022; Tsing et al., 2017). sca recognizes this fracturing as both an existential challenge and a compelling opportunity, which— if approached with creative optimism—could generate novel collaborations across continents that might yield better, more equitable, global futures. □

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