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ARTICLE

# (Re)wilding London: Fabric, politics, and aesthetics

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**Abstract**

Rewilding has become established as a new mode of nature conservation. There is a growing body of science, ambitious landscape-scale plans, and increasing political will. But until recently, cities and the urban were neglected; the idea of urban rewilding seen as oxymoronic. Of late, however, there has been a shift, with growing enthusiasm amongst metropolitan authorities, civil society, and citizens in major cities like London, New York, Toronto, and Melbourne, as well as smaller cities around the world. Noting a dearth of research on urban rewilding, this paper proffers an agenda for future geographical research into this emerging mode of urban nature conservation. The paper deploys the spatial-optical metaphor of diffraction, which originates in feminist science studies, to explore how rewilding as a socioecological practice developed in rural areas is changed when it encounters the urban, drawing on recent work in urban theory to trace how the urban might inform a new model of rewilding better equipped for the novel ecosystems and political configurations of the increasingly urban Anthropocene. It begins by defining how the sociomaterial urban fabric diffracts rewilding's practices and principles. It then examines how the distinct political economy of cities shapes the power dynamics of urban rewilding. The aesthetic dimensions of urban rewilding are then highlighted as important factors shaping how this emerging mode of urban nature recovery unfolds. In conclusion, we note how the nascency of urban rewilding presents opportunities for geographers to prefigure a progressive mode of Anthropocene conservation, and we advocate an affirmative style of critique that allies with practitioners and policy-makers. We establish future priorities for research into urban rewilding, including exploring minoritarian cultures of nature, comparative analysis of diverse cases, and examination of rural–urban linkages.

KEYWORDS

aesthetics, diffraction, London, political ecology, rewilding, urban

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION: ‘REWILDING PEOPLE; REWILDING PLACES’

*Rewilding people; Rewilding places* is the title of the final report from the London Rewilding Taskforce, a group of fourteen environmental experts gathered in 2021 by Sadiq Khan, the Mayor of London, to explore how rewilding could ‘support nature recovery and enhance biodiversity, while bringing benefits to Londoners’ (Mayor of London, 2023, n.p.). The taskforce inspired the Greater London Authority (GLA) to establish the London Rewilding Action Group to deliver a range of new urban rewilding initiatives, funded by their Rewild London Fund. Beavers, water voles, and harvest mice have been reintroduced to the capital with other reintroductions planned, including white storks. Councils are developing local nature recovery plans and are earmarking landscapes and public parks to be managed according to rewilding principles. Stepping stones have been mapped, which will weave nature through the fabric of the city and facilitate connectivity. And private gardeners are increasingly incorporating rewilding practices at home. Rewilding is firmly on the political agenda in London, as in other cities, including New York (Gandy, 2013) and Rio de Janeiro (Pettorelli et al., 2022).

Geographers and others have situated rewilding within distinct political, cultural, and historical contexts (Lorimer & Driessen, 2016). They have mapped varied meanings of rewilding (Gammon, 2018; Jørgensen, 2015), showing that it is not a singular, neutral, asocial conservation technology. This work suggests that rewilding is a new approach to nature conservation developed by conservation biologists to address the biodiversity crisis of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Blythe & Jepson, 2020; Pettorelli et al., 2019). It changes the focus of mainstream conservation from preserving the composition of existing species and the habitats they comprise, to advocating for the restoration of ecological processes at scale. This involves protecting core areas, connecting them to other habitats, and reintroducing keystone species (like wolves, beaver, or large herbivores). Rewilding's ultimate aim is to allow ecosystems to regenerate and evolve with minimal human intervention. In practice, this initially requires high levels of ecological repair and then ongoing maintenance.

As a political project, rewilding involves a strong commitment to resetting publics' experiences of ‘the wild’ and forging new modes of environmental citizenship, recognising that the wild has ‘a socially constructed and socially designated meaning that depends on its spatial context’ (Arts et al., 2016, p. 29). Existing research shows how rewilding is contested within the scientific and conservation communities by those concerned with animal welfare (Klaver et al., 2002), and most prominently by those whose livelihoods and cultural values are understood to be threatened by the new modes of land management that rewilders advocate (Fry, 2023; Schwartz, 2005). This work helps understand how and why rewilding can be deeply unpopular amongst farmers, foresters, hunters, fishers, and other traditional land-use communities.

Rewilding developed in rural (Europe) and ‘wilderness’ (North American) settings (Lorimer et al., 2015) and until recently rewilders had very little to say about urban areas. In this paper, we explore how an encounter with the distinct cultural, political, and ecological characteristics of the urban changes the nature of rewilding. Our analysis builds from and develops established literatures on urban nature in geography, drawing out some wider implications for urban and environmental geographers concerned with the political ecology of conservation in the Anthropocene. Three important, overlapping strands of geographical work on urban nature inform our research agenda.[1]

First, geographers have ecologised the urban, ontologically reworking cities as lively assemblages of human and nonhuman beings and processes. There are now mature research agendas exploring urban plant (Lawrence, 2022) and animal geographies (e.g., Buller, 2014; Hovorka, 2017), which describe ‘lively cities’ (Barua, 2023; Barua & Sinha, 2023) inhabited by organisms living in the interstices or against the grain of humanist urban design (Hinchliffe et al., 2005; Van Patter, 2023). Second, geographers have explored the epistemological tensions at the heart of ecological knowledge production in the urban arena (Gandy, 2022a, 2024). This work demonstrates that the character and the value of urban natures is well recognised in the established, yet variegated, scientific field of urban ecology (Forman, 2014). And third, a rich history of scholarship explores the intersections between urban greening and varied urban social processes, including the intersections between ecological restoration and gentrification, austerity, and neoliberal property speculation (Angelo, 2019; Kocisky, 2022). In turn (and combined), these three strands offer ontological, epistemological, and political analytic tools that we renovate for examining urban rewilding as a distinct and emerging mode of urban nature conservation.

Urban rewilding is distinct from, but related to urban greening. The literature on urban greening tends to classify, and sometimes generalise from, an expansive diversity of projects and initiatives that involve redesigning urban techno-ecological infrastructures to deliver sustainable outcomes, sometimes known as ‘nature-based solutions’ (see Ernwein & Palmer, 2024; Xie & Bulkeley, 2020). Urban greening includes ‘parks, municipal or community gardens, greenbelts and greenways, rain gardens and bioswales, green roofs and walls, green streets and alleys, or restored waterways’ (Anguelovski et al., 2020, p. 1744). In its broadest sense urban rewilding *could* be considered a form of urban greening, but we identify clear qualitative distinctions that warrant a degree of differentiation regarding its ecological aims, spatialities, and particular aesthetics. Two points are worth highlighting here. First, urban rewilding is an actors' category, emergent through a community of organisations, authorities, and individuals who actively refer to their practices as such. Whereas urban greening is a catch-all term for an aggregate of particular technological interventions and land uses, we detail below how urban rewilding is a nascent and distinctive sociopolitical project. Urban rewilding is doing new cultural and political work, with new communities of practice, forms of citizenship, and modes of governance emerging in response.

Second, urban rewilding projects have specific socioecological characteristics. They aim to influence ecological processes at scale, whether through species reintroductions, habitat creation, or other distinctively conservation-oriented interventions, to provide for a degree of ecological autonomy that is categorised as wild. Its practices are often entirely distinct from urban greening initiatives, informed more by conservation principles than by urban design. Such practices include species reintroductions, habitat creation in already-green areas like parks, the creation and promotion of typically unaesthetic ecological processes like rot and decay, and attempts to actively shape wild urban subjects through citizenship programmes. We build from the urban greening literature, but, as we outline in more detail below, such characteristics warrant an attention to the specificities of how urban rewilding reworks the urban fabric, its emergent political character, and its distinct aesthetics.

To date there has been very little geographical (or other social scientific) research explicitly examining urban rewilding as the active, deliberate construction of new functional urban natures and novel modes of environmental governance.[2] This paper addresses this gap by examining how urban conservationists and citizens are developing a distinct mode of rewilding fitted to the social and ecological characteristics of cities. We are interested in how rewilding is being *diffracted* by the urban fabric and its attendant cultural and political economies. In physics, diffraction describes how waves spread out or bend as they pass through an aperture or around objects, or when wave patterns overlap and interfere with each other. For feminist science studies scholars like Haraway (1997) and Barad (2007), diffraction is helpful as an analytical metaphor as it is not about mirroring original forms, but instead about capturing social and ecological patterns that 'record the history of interaction, interference, reinforcement, [and] difference' (Barla, 2021, p. 452). Diffraction helps us understand how rewilding as a social and ecological practice is changed by the already-ongoing processes of urbanisation, rather than mirroring or being in opposition to rewilding in rural areas. We prefer diffraction as opposed to comparison, for instance, as it does not reify rural rewilding as the 'proper' form of rewilding that urban rewilding is a derivative of. Rather, diffraction shows us how rewilding writ large is interfered with and reconfigured through its encounter with the urban, such that both processes—rewilding and urbanisation—become anew. Empirically, this allows for reflections on rewilding to move both ways—from rural to urban and back again—which is salient given that many key rewilding actors are involved in both rural and urban projects.

Hence, we examine how rewilding is diffracted by three salient dimensions of the urban: the naturecultures of the urban fabric, the distinct character of urban politics, and the contested dimensions of urban rewilding aesthetics. We aim to understand how, as city administrations and urbanites embrace rewilding as a strategy for urban sustainability and resilience, the social, political, and economic dimensions of rewilding morph, giving rise to new conservation cultures, politics, and economies. In conclusion, we draw out the wider insights of this urban interrogation for rewilding in the Anthropocene, exploring the potential for urban areas to pioneer new approaches to conservation better equipped for the 'novel ecosystems' (Hobbs et al., 2013) and 'peopled landscapes' (Atchison et al., 2024) of the contemporary world.

We focus our analysis on London, a city at the forefront of urban rewilding, where rewilding has widespread political and popular support. In producing a research agenda, we draw lightly from ongoing long-term fieldwork in London, including: interviews with members of the London Rewilding Taskforce, influential (urban) rewilding practitioners and organisations in the UK, and urban nature conservationists; ethnographic work across several London rewilding sites; visits to industry expos involved in urban nature conservation; and discourse analysis of key urban rewilding documents and online media. We highlight a broad range of case studies to capture urban rewilding's emergent diversity and to signal avenues for future critical geographical enquiry. While the discourse of urban rewilding has predominantly taken root in cities of the so-called Global North, we acknowledge that our focus on London risks entrenching hegemonic global northern urban imaginaries and modes of urban development and environmental governance. We highlight the need for future empirical research on urban rewilding across cities and along their interconnections.

Before we begin, a brief note on terminology. As architect and creative director of the proposed Re:Wild Royal Docks project, Usman Haque writes, '[a]n urbanised version of [rewilding] should probably instead be referred to as "wilding" since there is no archetypal city-based natural landscape to return to through re-wilding' (Haque, 2020, n.p.). Throughout the paper we use the terms wilding and rewilding based on context, and use (re)wilding when there is ambiguity or to signal the use of both terms simultaneously.

## 2 | URBAN FABRIC

While acknowledging the importance of capacious understandings of the urban as complex, unbounded, unstable, and emergent (Amin & Thrift, 2017; Brenner & Schmid, 2014), there are some common distinguishing social and ecological features of urban space that play a key role in diffracting rewilding, meaning the city remains a key site of material and symbolic analysis (Braun, 2005; Gandy, 2022a). We capture these features via the term 'urban fabric', a spatial metaphor that was used by both the ecologists and the policy-makers we interviewed to describe the sociomaterial composition of cities. Here fabric describes a relational ontology of entanglement, depicting a dynamic 'meshwork' (Ingold, 2007) of interwoven threads or lines. The urban fabric is woven by humans, plants, animals, and biogeochemical processes. It emerges over time, has holes and frays, and is materialised in infrastructure. As an ontology, fabric resonates with more-than-human geography (Lorimer & Hodgetts, 2024) as well as novel non-dualistic approaches advocated by prominent ecologists (Díaz, 2022). We focus on three salient socioecological aspects of the urban fabric that illustrate how cities diffract rewilding, which we term density, fragmentation, and flux.

### 2.1 | Density

Cities like London are characterised by higher levels of population density than their rural hinterlands. Although this density is unevenly distributed and comes in different spatial forms (McFarlane, 2016), it serves to make cities archetypal peopled landscapes in which diverse and differentially empowered social groups interact with the non-human environment. Due to ongoing urbanisation, relatively dense urban environments are where most people now live. Urban density shapes urban morphology, climate, and metabolic cycles, creating novel ecologies that necessitate new approaches to rewilding. High land values drive construction upwards and downwards, creating novel vertical landscapes of high-rise buildings and basements, opening ecological niches for certain species, like peregrine falcons (Adams et al., 2023; Searle et al., 2023). Urban heating and cooling as well as low albedo surfaces raise urban temperatures and shift wind and rainfall patterns. Cities have different acoustic, olfactory, and luminous atmospheres, being noisier, smellier, and brighter than many rural areas. And cities are also central nodes in human metabolic networks leading to concentrations of food waste, sewerage, and other novel biochemical outputs. While human density frequently leads to the displacement of wildlife, it has also generated novel ecosystems in which wildlife can flourish (Francis & Chadwick, 2013).

Urban density diffracts the ecological management practices of wilding. It first shifts the spatial scale at which wilding is understood to take place. Wilding in rural areas focuses on the stitching together of large (considered >100 ha in the UK, according to *Rewilding Britain*), contiguous areas of relatively unpopulated habitat. In London (outside of the Green Belt) the focus is less on hectares of territory. For Elliot Newton, the non-executive director of the urban rewilding organisation Citizen Zoo, wilding can take place at any scale: '[y]ou can rewild your window sill'. He hopes that 'if we scale those micro actions up to a macro level, imagine the change that we'd see if the nine million people in London just did one small thing each, how that would be systemic change across how we embrace nature in London'.[3] Here wilding is refigured as an immanent outcome of many small shifts in the intensities of social-ecological interactions within the dense urban fabric (cf. Hinchliffe et al., 2013), not necessarily driven by or requiring human absence.

However, the ecological intensities of urban density also create novel challenges for rewilders, as some of the organisms that flourish at high density may threaten biodiversity and ecosystem function. For example, the vertical, heated microclimates and resource rich waste-scapes of urban metabolism create rich habitat for synurbic organisms like cats, foxes, and rats, which may affect the ability of reintroduced, wilded species (like beaver, adder, or ground nesting birds) to comfortably inhabit the city, or restrict the emergence of plant assemblages (Francis & Chadwick, 2012). Meanwhile the dense and networked biogeography of urban areas creates hotspots for diseases that can cross between domestic, feral, and wild organisms (Gandy, 2022b). These challenges are accentuated in warmer, tropical cities, in which rewilding risks creating habitat for the animal vectors of zoonotic disease (like ticks and mosquitoes). Addressing these challenges requires tight regimes of biopolitical control, choreographing the presence, evolution, and mobilities of different organisms through intensive regimes of repair and maintenance.

(Anti-)urbanists have long been concerned that dense urban living in the absence of greenspace alienates people from nature (Gandy, 2022a). But for urban (re)wilders, in post-industrial, sanitary cities like London, urban population density instead offers significant potential for engaging publics and forging new environmental citizens. An urban nature reserve is much more accessible to urban residents than those located in the rural hinterlands, especially for those without access to transport or with little cultural affinity with the idea of the pastoral rural idyll. London rewilders (including the

Mayor Sadiq Khan) present inner city rewilding interventions, like the introduction of beaver to an enclosure in Ealing in West London, as acts of 'social justice' because they bring the wild to politically and economically marginal urban publics. They flag how engaging local publics with the maintenance and repair required for urban rewilding offers ample opportunity for education and community participation (under different political models that we explore below). And they link urban rewilding to public programmes to harness the physical and mental health benefits of access to urban greenspace (Mueller et al., 2023).

## 2.2 | Fragmentation

The biogeography of urban environments is characterised by a high degree of habitat fragmentation. In London, long histories of enclosure and industrial and residential development have created urban ecologies characterised by 'highly heterogeneous fine-scale spatial mosaics of diverse patch types' (Pettorelli et al., 2022, p. 12). These include 'refugia' of ancient habitats (like woodlands or graveyards; see Gandy, 2019), public parks and sites of recreation, brownfield land left by industrial decline, as well as varied private gardens and sites of community agriculture. Many of these patches are enclosed by walls and fences to secure differential human access and control, which also (in/advertently) restricts the movements of plants and animals. And they are bisected by railways, roads, subterranean pipes and tunnels, wires, and other elements of the high density of infrastructure that characterises the urban environment. In London, this heterogeneity delivers high levels of local biodiversity, but it also makes these sites isolated and ill equipped to enable ecological processes that function at the landscape scale. It suggests an urban fabric with holes, whose weave is frayed, that is coming apart at the seams.

Landscape connectivity is an essential property of functioning ecologies and is a central tenet of rewilding. It describes 'the extent to which a landscape facilitates the flow of ecological processes such as organism movement' (Kumar et al., 2022, p. 2465). In rural areas, rewilding through connectivity involves arts of reweaving the lines of non-human movement by creating corridors; that is, unbroken tracts of land between two core areas (Lawton, 2010). In fragmented cities, however, the high density of permanent human dwellings and infrastructure make unbroken corridors all-but-impossible. Instead, urban wilders in London tweak management intensities and reimagine and repurpose existing urban infrastructure to facilitate connectivity. For example, they note how '[c]ities' railway networks often comprise extensive green space, including railway verges, unused tracks and other lineside landholdings, which, if rewilded, could help boost urban biodiversity in multiple ways' (Pettorelli et al., 2022, p. 25). They propose novel 'reconciliation infrastructures' (Barua, 2021), like green bridges and living roofs, shifting the spatial principles of urban nature conservation from the enclosure and confinement of urban wilds to the modulation of animals' mobilities and flows through cities.

This fragmentation is also mirrored in the legal geography of the city, which is characterised by less concentrated and more heterogeneous models of land ownership than those common in rural areas of Britain. Many more people own or lease land in cities like London, conferring tenure and property rights that enable (and sometimes require) active land management. Public parks are owned in common and are subject to the interests of many urban citizens. This fragmented geography differs markedly from the flagship rewilding projects of rural Britain, in which a single landowner or half-a-dozen neighbouring estates determine management decisions. Rewilding under such regimes of fragmented land ownership in a densely populated city requires approaches to planning and deliberate methods for land management decision-making that can cater to heterogeneous interests (see next section).

Fragments, as both an ecological and a socio-legal unit, provide a useful analytic for attending to the spaces and practices of urban rewilding. For McFarlane (2021), fragments are verbs, not nouns. They 'animate people and things', 'are generative of politics', and 'forge relations' (Arican, 2022, n.p.). Urban connectivity is constructed as a patchwork and meshwork of rewoven fragments. Fragments of habitat must be stitched together, requiring diverse kinds of practical and sociopolitical labour; from maintaining ecological fragments as suitable habitat for biodiverse wildlife; to the maintenance of social relationships that allow connective fragments to persist amidst competing political and economic pressures. The flux of the urban fabric (see below) makes connectivity, and thus urban rewilding, a precarious achievement.

In the splintered or fragmented city, the rural rewilding territorial imaginary of cores and corridors is diffracted into a topology of meshworked infrastructure and 'stepping stones' (or, we prefer, 'connective fragments'): habitable sites linked through an imaginary of non-human mobilities (Figure 1). These connective fragments are socioecological 'patches' (Tsing et al., 2024) where wilding can take place at a scale that, on its own, would not constitute a functioning ecosystem. But based on a spatial ontology of human–wildlife reconciliation, the cultivation of such patches aims for the spatial extension of discontinuous yet connected fragments through the spontaneously meshworked urban fabric. For example,

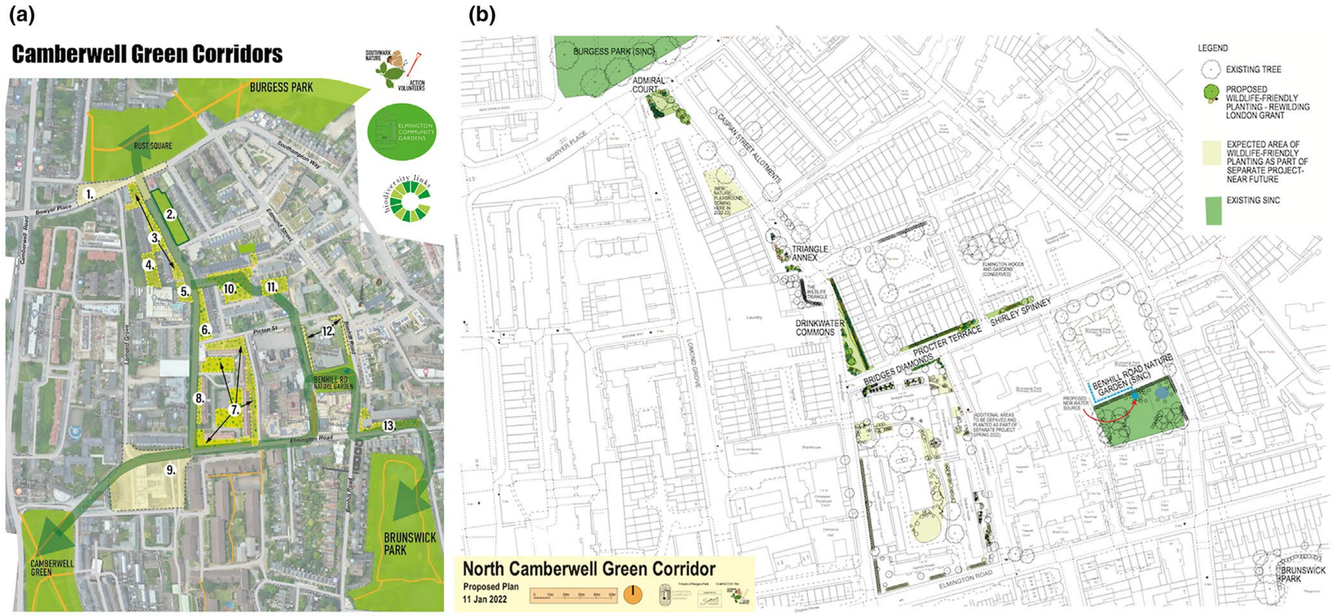
(a)
Camberwell Green Corridors
BURGESS PARK
RUST SQUARE
BRUNSWICK PARK
CAMBERWELL GREEN
BENHILL RD NATURE GARDEN
1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.
8.
9.
10.
11.
12.
13.
(b)
BURGESS PARK (SINC)
ADMIRAL COURT
TRIANGLE ANNEX
DRINKWATER COMMONS
PROCTER TERRACE
SHIRLEY SPINNEY
BRIDGES DIAMONDS
BENHILL ROAD NATURE GARDEN (SINC)
ELMINGTON ROAD
BRUNSWICK PARK
LEGEND
EXISTING TREE
PROPOSED WILDLIFE-FRIENDLY PLANTING - REWILDING LONDON GRANT
EXPECTED AREA OF WILDLIFE-FRIENDLY PLANTING AS PART OF SEPARATE PROJECT - NEAR FUTURE
EXISTING SINC
North Camberwell Green Corridor
Proposed Plan
11 Jan 2022

FIGURE 1 (a) Map showing connectivity between 'stepping stones' in the Camberwell Green Corridors project, funded by the Rewild London Fund. Source: Southwark Nature Action Volunteers. (b) Map showing 'stepping stones' in the North Camberwell Green Corridor, funded by the Rewild London Fund. Source: Southwark Nature Action Volunteers.

urban wildlife NGOs like Buglife and the People's Trust for Endangered Species advocate for 'B-lines' (for bees)[4] and 'Hedgehog Highways' in which small-scale tenant and private landowners plant suitable pollinator habitat in their gardens or make their boundary infrastructure permeable to enable animals' mobilities. Others advocate for green roofs and deadwood piles. These interventions 'prefigure' ecological connectivity, through the bottom-up, crowdsourced shifts in management intensities discussed above. There is no masterplan. Just a hope that a sufficient quantity of shifts in the urban fabric will aggregate to permit new hotspots and routes to emerge. Build it, and they will come.

## 2.3 | Flux

Within dominant cultural and ecological imaginaries, the rural is understood as a space of fixity while the urban is understood as a space of flux, imbuing rural and urban natures with distinct identities and temporalities (see Woods, 2010). Meanwhile rural populations are generally considered more politically conservative, culturally homogeneous, and elderly; while urban populations (especially in cities like London) are more cosmopolitan: younger, more ethnically and culturally heterogeneous, and have a more diverse set of social and political values (Kenny & Luca, 2021; Luca et al., 2023). Despite the radical politics of some of its early advocates (Monbiot, 2013), critics suggest that rewilding in rural areas of Britain has tended to develop as an elite project representing the cultural values of the White, male, landowning class (Thomas, 2022). We see the conservative character of rewilding diffracted by the dynamic ecological character and socioecological cosmopolitanism of the urban fabric.

Regarding ecological dynamism, the heterogeneity of urban habitats is a result of the flux of human land use, not all of which is geared towards ecological ends, but which nonetheless delivers a disturbance regime conducive to urban biodiversity. In the absence of predators and large herbivores, urban rewilding involves active and ongoing acts of maintenance and repair (see Graham & Thrift, 2007). It aims to choreograph ecological disturbance regimes through acts of biomimicry or naturalistic management. But urban wild maintenance and repair is qualitatively different from that associated with rural wilding. Cities have a more intense temporality of disturbance where accelerated speculative rounds of investment and abandonment shape the emergence of urban wilds (Lorimer, 2008). For example, wilding the ruderal ecologies of urban brownfields may involve the tacit tolerance or even encouragement of acts of ecological disturbance performed by marginal urban actors, for example people riding bikes or making fires in neglected wastelands that stall vegetation succession (Chipchase & Frith, 2002).

For social scientists, cosmopolitanism describes human populations composed of diverse cultural groups with origins in different parts of the world (see Jeffrey & McFarlane, 2008), while for ecologists it refers to species whose range extends globally across habitat types, often due to human movement and ecological disturbance. The cosmopolitanism of urban space can be characterised along entwined cultural and biogeographical lines (Barua, 2014), which diffract the character of rewilding. This comes to the fore in discussions of species' origins. Rewilding promotes ecosystem function over static species composition. In theory, the focus is on what a species does, rather than where it is from. This has enabled some wilders to push back against the privilege afforded native over non-native (but non-invasive) species (Lundgren et al., 2024), helping them avoid xenophobic and/or racially inflected cultural imaginaries that tie ecological value to national origins (Snaith & Odedun, 2023). The value of this functional model is heightened in cosmopolitan urban spaces, where nativist ideas derived from conservation biology do not sit easily for both ecological and cultural reasons (Allaby, 2020). For example, urban brownfield sites have emerged as biodiversity hotspots driven by the autonomous emergence and mixture of native and non-native flora and fauna. A strict prioritisation of native species would not align well with nature-led functional outcomes.

Work by rural geographers (Agyeman & Spooner, 1997; Tolia-Kelly, 2007) shows how the dominant aesthetics of a wild or pastoral British Nature may be perceived as exclusive, intimidating, and dangerous to minority populations. Cosmopolitan cities, like London, incorporate diverse cultures of nature that value encounters with different aspects of urban ecology, bringing the multiplicity of urban wilds to the fore. For example, Barua (2022) shows how feral rose-ringed parakeets (*Psittacula krameria*) in London are often derided by conservationists as invasive species. In contrast, some members of London's South Asian diaspora community welcome parakeets into a recombinant urban ecology because the sights and sounds of parakeets bring with them a sense of home (see also Uskakovych, 2024). Urban rewilders are aware that to meet their stated aim of social inclusion (C40 Cities and Arup, 2023; Frith, 2023; GLA, 2023; Pettorelli et al., 2022), they must account for such cosmopolitanism by design. As we explore below, this involves complex cultural and political negotiations between diverse groups wherein conflicts inevitably emerge.

## 3 | POLITICS

A critical interrogation understands urban wilds as inseparable from the production of space under urbanisation. Research has demonstrated that in rural settings rewilding cannot be cleaved from the wider politics of rural land futures, in particular the fraught political ecology of shifts from a productivist to a post-productivist countryside (Fry, 2023; Schwartz, 2005). In this section we examine how rewilding is diffracted as it encounters the geometries of power particular to urban environments. It begins by asking how rewilding is diffracted by the paradigmatic theorisation of the modern northern metropolis understood as the 'entrepreneurial city'. We outline the role of wilded green space in processes of spatial valorisation, before considering a more affirmative urban rewilding politics based on resisting enclosure and building an ecological commons.

### 3.1 | Wilding the entrepreneurial city

Angelo and Wachsmuth (2020, p. 2201) suggest that since the 1990s there has been an 'underlying transition in global urban policy and discourse from the city as a sustainability problem to the city as a sustainability solution'. This sustainable city discourse and practice reflects an enduring post-industrial entrepreneurial city ethos, in which enterprising municipal governments and associated coalitions of interest groups, in competition with other cities, seek to boost the economic value of urban space to attract global capital (Harvey, 1989; Lauermann, 2018). As While et al. (2004, p. 565) note, sustainability has become essential to building coherent cross-interest pro-growth coalitions that see 'in positive urban environmentalism opportunities for revalorizing urban space'.

A key reference point for urban wilding is the critical geographical literature on urban greening initiatives. Taking its cue from urban political ecology, this literature seeks to denaturalise technocratic accounts of urban greening that emphasise their instrumental benefits, and instead situate them within exclusionary processes of spatial revalorisation (Angelo, 2019; Kocisky, 2022). As noted above, in this literature 'urban greening' operates as an aggregate term for a wide-ranging diversity of envirotechnical interventions. Such projects have been critically theorised as novel resource frontiers, subject to 'investment, resignification, and value formation' by alliances of state and private actors (Dillon, 2014, p. 1206; Safransky, 2014). In London, urban greening projects, particularly when managed specifically to increase 'wildness', are seen as pivotal in the reinstatement of natural processes in the city (Mayor of London, 2023). London councils and the GLA are strategically re-orienting greening projects to increase ecological connectivity. Although not explicitly aimed at valorisation, these projects broadly adopt discourses that present nature as increasing wellbeing and environmental amenity. This framing can easily fold into metropolitan authorities' wider green-boosterism, which, in competition with each other, leverages green branding as a means to attract investment and to market cities as liveable, environmentally attractive places (Garcia-Lamarca et al., 2021).

However, urban rewilding is informed by diverse knowledges and interests, whose logics and designs cannot be solely explained by an entrepreneurial analytic that privileges the demands of capital. Inspired by advancements in comparative urbanism and its emphasis on theorising from context, we can explore how rewilding is diffracted by particular, localised configurations of actors and processes that entail more multitudinous forms of urban political agency (Robinson, 2022; Schmid et al., 2018). Of particular importance here is the role of the state, not just as a captive of capitalist interests, but as having variegated and diverse agendas. In the UK, there is significant support for rewilding amongst local authorities, with over one in five county councils developing wilding plans (Pettorelli et al., 2022). In London, metropolitan authorities—like the GLA—in partnership with conservation NGOs, are driving forward urban wilding initiatives, at this stage with little involvement from market actors. This agenda, and its principles, has been born from conservation organisations and advocates, and largely positions urban rewilding as a public good deliverable via municipal–civil society cooperation. Tracing how rewilding is diffracted through municipal governance evidences more recent work on entrepreneurial statecraft which argues that 'state interests cannot be caricatured as operating for developer benefit' (Robinson & Attuyer, 2021, p. 305), and that rewilding instead constitutes a 'parallel, diverging, and contradictory political agenda which cannot be described solely through a neoliberal analytic' (Lauermann, 2018, p. 220).

For example, this variegated reading of urban rewilding is evident in how it is developing as a 'mobile policy' determined as much by cooperation as competition. In London, the Mayoralty has sought high-profile promotional opportunities like the beaver reintroduction, ensuring widespread media coverage. However, as McCann (2013) makes clear in his assessment of Vancouver's 'Greenest City' initiative, cities simultaneously compete and share knowledge and best practice in greening initiatives through a cooperative interurban diplomacy. The Mayor of London has teamed with Valérie Plante, the Mayor of Montreal, to promote rewilding amidst the C40 global network of mayors, including sharing research on best practice. As rewilding policy increasingly 'arrives at' the door of urban policy-makers (Robinson, 2015) it will offer insights into how such novel approaches move between cities, shaped 'through a complex sociospatial process of emulation and transmutation' into particular political-economic contexts (McCann, 2013, p. 20). In relation to urban beaver reintroductions in London, networks of non-governmental actors—i.e., NGOs and citizens—are also involved in international cooperation aimed at sharing urban (re)wilding knowledge; in this case, between Munich and London.

The extent to which wilding becomes enmeshed in the extraction of value in cities will be dependent on how it is adopted within the public–private coalitions that oversee many greening interventions. Across London, some large-scale greening projects like the Olympic Park, as well as some high-density property and commercial developments, are integrating not just greening but also more ecologically oriented habitat creation into their design (Mell, 2021; Snaith & Odedun, 2023). These developments are funded, designed, and coordinated by local authorities in partnership with developers and a 'real estate ecology' of private and civil society actors (Henneberry & Parris, 2013). For many, this has had a post-political effect on governance, concentrating power in the hands of networks of developers, investors, and an array of parastate agencies and consultancy firms (MacLeod, 2011; Raco & Brill, 2022).

In London, wilding features in the 'relational work' that goes into property development (Ballard & Butcher, 2020). The London Wildlife Trust, the largest conservation NGO in the city, is prominent in promoting rewilding in London. They already have partnerships with large housing developers who are regenerating public housing (Figure 2a), and have a private consultancy arm employed on major developments, both of which seek to mainstream nature conservation into urban development processes. Rewilding is also beginning to find purchase amongst the network of advisory firms and consultants powerful in shaping urban development. Future research should pay attention to how these firms articulate particular knowledge and practices of rewilding, and how these shape green development (Robin, 2022). For example, the global consultancy firm Arup has been pushing forward rewilding work in London, co-drafting the C40 report, and most notably leading 'Wild West End', which aims to create stepping stone habitats across central London properties.

Wild West End is also emblematic of another mechanism through which rewilding is diffracted by urban space: the processes of 'elite capture' that 'plays a systemic role in 21st century urban political economy' (Lauermann & Mallak, 2023, p. 645). The project is a collaboration between long-established owners of super-prime land in central London, including the British monarchy and aristocratic families. These estates have held their wealth for hundreds of years and are emblematic of what Knowles (2022) calls 'plutocratic London'. The potential for elite networks to diffuse rewilding as

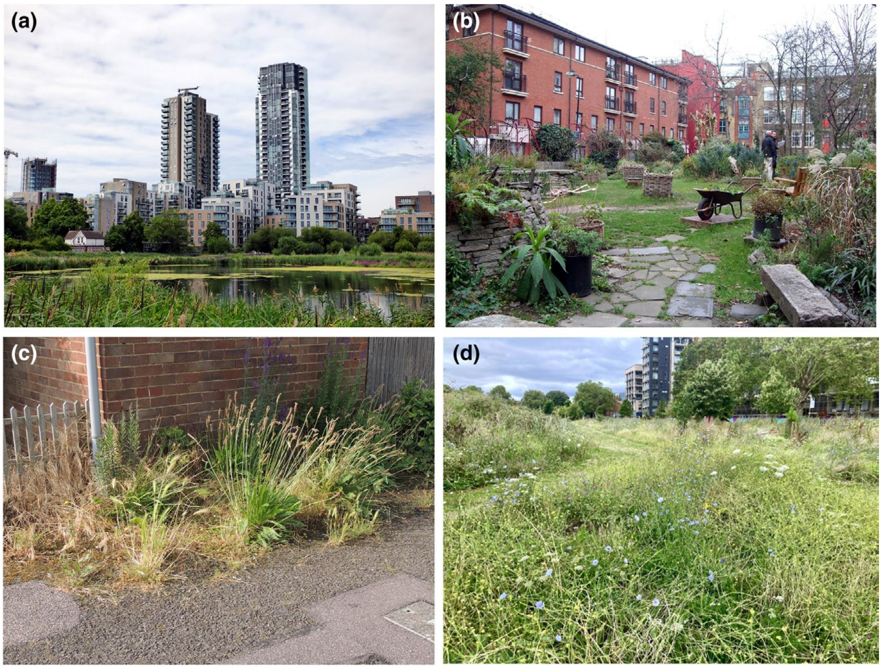

**FIGURE 2** (a) (Top left): London Wildlife Trust's Woodberry Wetlands, developed in collaboration with Hackney Council, Thames Water, and Berkeley Homes, who built the housing in the background. Source: Photo by Peter O'Connor. Licence: CC BY-SA 2.0. (b) (Top right): The Phoenix Garden, managed for wildlife and people, and the last surviving community garden in the highly developed Covent Garden area. Source: Photo by Ewan Munro. Licence: CC BY-SA 2.0. (c) (Bottom left): Weeds grow through cracks in a pavement in Sandy, Bedfordshire. This phenomenon has caused controversy amongst local residents in towns and cities across the UK, notably in Brighton. Source: Orangeaurochs. Licence: CC BY 2.0. (d) (Bottom right): A walkway cut through a rewilded meadow in Burgess Park, London, a public park managed for wildlife. Source: Gregory Smith, Head Gardener, Burgess Park.

a form of urban property valorisation resonates with existing work on nature conservation and philanthrocapitalism in rural areas (Farrell, 2021). Central here is how elites, already so powerful in shaping rewilding in rural areas, envision the aesthetics of rewilded landscapes.

The important relation between these emerging projects and the socioeconomic inequalities that characterise urban space is still to be determined in London. But an expansive literature attests to how urban greening can lead to ‘green gentrification’ through the construction of high-end homes, increasing nearby land and property values, and the socio-political exclusionary effects of newly green areas, which are socially coded for more affluent residents (Anguelovski & Connolly, 2024). These effects are more likely to occur in historically working-class or racial minority areas which have endured long-standing patterns of low-investment (Gould & Lewis, 2016).

## 3.2 | Wilding the urban commons

Urban rewilding may also inform and be shaped by more affirmative political projects that actively work against capitalist logics of urban development. Of particular relevance here is the idea of the urban commons as a form of spatial organisation that can ‘conjure alternative, more equitable, environmentally sustainable, and/or radically democratic futures’ (Eidelman & Safransky, 2021, p. 796). Examples are emerging in London of wilding as urban commoning. First, communities resisting enclosure and development of open land have centred wilding in their campaigns. On Warren Farm, a set of abandoned playing fields in West London, which regenerated into rare grassland habitats, activists accused the local council of planning to ‘de-wild’ their land through development. Following a concerted local campaign, the council has now committed to wilding the entire area and designating it as a nature reserve. Similarly, the East London Waterworks Park in Hackney is a proposal by local community members to take ownership of an ex-industrial area that has been earmarked for development and to transform it into a wilded biodiverse community park. These projects underline the potential for rewilding to become a more grounded, radical reclamation of urban space, founded not through municipal cooperation but in active resistance to processes of spatial valorisation. Such an approach resonates with calls from civil society in Scotland to integrate the land reform and rewilding movements (Raeburn & Cumming, 2024).

Second, across London there has been a significant increase in the number of community gardens (Turns, 2021). Gardening for wildlife has become an established approach across these spaces, and the networks of shared practice and knowledge that inform them (Social Farms and Gardens, 2017). From planting schemes to aid pollinators, the establishment of ponds, or the cultivation of wild patches and edges, many of these spaces adopt a convivial ethos of using space for both community and wildlife. As work on community gardening demonstrates, actually existing commons operate through multiple, and often contradictory, modalities (Eizenberg, 2012). They can be sites of non-market collaboration and practice-oriented solidarity but can also be subsumed into neoliberal austerity logics of community management and self-reliance (Neo & Chua, 2017). The task is to interrogate how rewilding is diffracted through the variegated political ecologies of urban commons. There is evidence that community gardens in London, even if not born from common political intention, build psycho-social wellbeing in ways that can imbue a sense of empowerment and equality for marginalised communities (Guerlain & Campbell, 2016). Rewilding within community gardens in London, even within a wider neoliberal context, can be integrated into a counter-politics that, through the cultivation of a communal public ethic, works against orthodox urban development (Barron, 2017; Figure 2b).

Rewilding practices, and their resulting material compositions, can also inform the emergence of political subjectivities and forms of organising that take seriously the lives of non-humans. As March and Bunce (2023, p. 188) argue, a more-than-human commons can centre 'practices that are directed towards alternative social relations, collective sustenance, and more-than-human flourishing'. Rewilding could help ecologise the urban commons (Metzger, 2015), shifting the predominant anthropocentric calculus of which beings are deserving of resources and political recognition. For Cooke et al. (2020), such a recognition troubles the property-oriented character of urban greening, and cultivates a more socio-ecologically just city, taking us closer to Simone and Nielsen's understanding of urban rewilding as 'finding new possibilities of inhabitation' (Simone & Nielsen, 2022, p. 119). Understanding how the politics of rewilding is diffracted through the urban commons allows for a less deterministic vision of what an urban wild may become. An openness to how the politics of an urban wild is constituted necessitates an openness to what forces compose that politics, to include the agencies of non-humans and the alter-politics of everyday action.

## 4 | AESTHETICS

In this final analytical section, we explore how the urban diffracts the aesthetics of rewilding. Geographers have long noted the powerful role of aesthetics in naturalising cultural landscapes to police who and what belong where (Daniels, 1989). They demonstrate that these landscape aesthetics are mediated (Rose, 2016), that they vary in space and time, and are thus contested and political (Rancière, 2004). There is no single 'natural' environmental aesthetic (Jorgensen, 2011), nor are desired environments necessarily good for biodiversity. Indeed, paradoxically, many people prefer the aesthetics of ecologically degraded habitats (Brady & Prior, 2020). We introduce urban wilding aesthetics in London and explore how they intersect with existing politics of aesthetics of urban greening and green gentrification.

### 4.1 | Urban wilding aesthetics

Nascent analyses of the aesthetics of wilding describe an appreciation for autonomous ecological processes, ecological functions, and biological diversity and abundance. The resulting landscapes conflict with common pastoral, agrarian, and picturesque archetypes (Prior & Brady, 2017). The ecological transitions of wilding challenge the neat and orderly geometry that characterises the cultural landscapes of agriculture, forestry, traditional nature reserves, and suburban parks and recreation areas. Wilding generates 'mess': scrambling the rectilinear forms associated with good land management (Egoz et al., 2006) while introducing unpalatable olfactory experiences (Prior, 2023), and producing (for some) affective landscapes of fear, and a loss of control. Wilding displaces the visual cues of human care (Nassauer, 1995) in the landscape and transgresses powerful norms of productive land management, of work and responsibility. In so doing, it may also challenge the propriety and authority of powerful actors whose social values are naturalised in a cultural landscape, though this theme is less well explored in the literature.

This aesthetic politics of mess that characterises wilding is heightened and diffracted in interesting ways by the properties of the urban fabric and the character of urban politics that we outlined above. We can draw on existing work on urban aesthetics to explore how wilding in London interfaces with two established aesthetics of urban nature that are common to temperate, post-industrial cities. The first is the aesthetic of the British suburban garden; semi-private spaces in which more affluent urban residents project 'public portraits of themselves' (Nassauer, 1995, p. 162) through the artistic curation of the 'domestic wild' (Ginn, 2016). While gardening aesthetics are heterogeneous, and may include food production, they commonly value control over nature, and a care for property, productivity, and the demonstration of good citizenship. This political aesthetic is most clearly expressed in the suburban fetishisation of the well-groomed lawn, absent of weeds and bordered by neatly trimmed hedges, fragrant flowers, and shapely shrubbery (Robbins, 2012). This orderly aesthetic extends to the management of urban public spaces dedicated to recreation, where a functional emphasis on accessibility, public safety, and visibility commonly results in orderly 'green' parkland landscapes of mown grass, mature trees, and neatly bounded ponds. It also configures the aesthetic of urban ecological restoration, leading to what some critics describe as the 'greenwashing' of ecologically rich ruderal brownfield sites in London when they are converted into grassy parks for recreation (Chipchase & Frith, 2002).

A very different urban aesthetic characterises responses to the 'passively wilded', ruderal ecologies that emerge in brownfield sites abandoned by industrial decline, suburbanisation, and the speculative logics of urban development. Geographers have explored how these sites have long been pilloried as wastelands, subject to a negative majoritarian aesthetic and understood to be frequented by uncivilised citizens and unsavoury practices. They are taken as evidence of urban decay and economic decline. In the last few decades there has been an ecological and aesthetic revalorisation of these sites (Francis & Chadwick, 2013), amplifying a minoritarian strand of urban wildlife appreciation (Mabey, 1973). In Berlin and London, Gandy (2013) identifies the emergence of an affirmative 'wasteland aesthetic' amongst urban ecologists, naturalists, and artists, who find wonder in the resurgent and recuperative abilities of plants and animals to flourish in the interstices of the city. He notes how naturalists give aesthetic virtue to the ecological surprises that characterise these sites and explains how this aesthetic is often grounded in a leftist politics that accentuates the 'feral' (Barua, 2022) character and cosmopolitan origins of these marginal disturbed ecologies and the citizenry that frequent them. It celebrates some sites (like graveyards) as refugia spared from the industrialisation of the countryside, and others as novel ecologies paradigmatic of the new natures of the Anthropocene. In popular writing about London, this wasteland aesthetic often invokes the ambivalent affects of the weird and the eerie (Fisher, 2017; Turnbull et al., 2022)—where it is the fraught history and disconcerting trajectories of urban ecologies that give them aesthetic force (e.g., Rees, 2013; Sinclair, 2003).

## 4.2 | Wilding vs. gardening

Proactive urban wilding in London threads a line between these two aesthetics and the contrasting urban visions they express. It engenders a distinct urban aesthetic politics that diffracts existing work on the cultural politics of urban greening. On the one hand, urban wilders challenge the orderly aesthetic of control that characterises urban parks, gardens, and streetscapes. Through popular campaigns like 'No Mow May' (run by the NGO Plantlife in which land managers delay grass cutting through the month of May and beyond),[5] efforts to maintain deadwood in the landscape, and the reduction in pavement herbicide spraying, they aim to increase the abundance and diversity of urban wildlife. They want to encourage public tolerance for weeds (as plants out of place) and ease prohibitive regimes of antibiotic urbanism—or what some have termed an 'Obsessive Tidiness Disorder' (Boyes, 2018). In one high-profile example, sympathetic judges at the 2022 Chelsea Flower Show—which sets the norms and distributes cultural capital in the British gardening industry—awarded a prize for 'Best Show Garden' to a 'beaver garden', curated to illustrate the abundant biodiversity enabled by releasing ecological processes.

These changes have been contested by different urban publics, frequently on aesthetic grounds (Wartmann & Lorimer, 2024). One group defends the aesthetics of traditional urban parks, verges, and gardens. Prominent commentators in right-wing media describe the urban mess created by wildlife organisations and sympathetic local councils as evidence of a dangerous combination of laziness, ignorance, and the laxities of 'woke' cultural values (Narain & Cotterill, 2023). For example, Julie Burchill (2023) writing in *The Spectator*, argues that it is 'time to end the rewilding menace' exemplified by the decision of the Green Party-led Brighton Council to stop using herbicide on urban pavements (Figure 2c). Her criticisms echo those tracing how the popularisation of wildlife-friendly urban park management naturalises the cessation of management in the context of widespread municipal austerity (Ernwein, 2020).

Similarly, the celebrity doyens of English gardeners, Monty Don and Alan Titchmarsh, caution that wilding is 'puritanical nonsense' and 'misleading propaganda' (Tree, 2023). Here public urban wilding is seen to threaten the character of well-groomed neighbourhoods, evidencing neglect and jeopardising the value of private property. Wilding challenges the moral authority of generally old, White, and frequently affluent and/or time-rich suburban gardeners. Their reactive antipathy to mess echoes the response of some traditional farmers to the landscape changes imagined by (re)wilders for the British countryside, who are often caricatured as ecologically ignorant urban arrivistes (Rebanks, 2020). But conservative urban opponents call on the aesthetic value of the recreational garden, rather than the nebulous appeals to pastoral order and/or productivity and food security that underpin the opposition of their rural political cousins.

In response, urban (re)wilders have developed novel aesthetic visual 'cues of care', 'designing orderly frames for messy ecosystems' (Nassauer, 1995, p. 161) to signal that the novel landscapes of urban wilding are deliberate experiments in 'the controlled decontrolling of ecological controls' (Keulartz, 2012, p. 58; Figure 2d). These involve frequent signage explaining that verdant verges, unkempt parks, and rotting wood piles are 'for the birds and the bees'. It requires urban design and land management interventions that frame wild sites to indicate that they are deliberately created and curated—for example by cutting around the edges of unmown grass, by placing rotting wood in neat, rectilinear boxes, or by using 'dead hedges' to steer pedestrians around ecologically sensitive sites. Urban wilders like the not-for-profit environmental consultancy Pictorial Meadows, which also produces wildflower seed mixes suitable for urban areas, use strategic 'aesthetic distractions', curating attractive meadows in front of biodiversity enhancing—but messy—features, like rotting wood piles. They evidence how the labour of urban wilding involves balancing aesthetic curation, public accessibility, and ecological enhancement. This novel urban aesthetic must grapple with the political challenges posed by the commitment of rewilding to open-ended ecological emergence and the generation of surprises (Lorimer & Driessen, 2014).

## 4.3 | Wilding and gentrification

The messy aesthetics of urban wilding in London are also contested by a second and very different set of urban publics concerned with a version of what Wolch et al. (2014) call the 'green space paradox'. They coin this term to describe how efforts to address 'park poverty' in communities of colour and low-income neighbourhoods in the USA 'improve attractiveness and public health, making neighborhoods more desirable. In turn, housing costs can rise. Such housing cost escalation can potentially lead to gentrification' (Wolch et al., 2014, p. 235). As noted above, the aesthetic of managed urban wilding has been central to the economic revitalisation and green gentrification of formerly deprived urban neighbourhoods like those around the High Line in New York and the Olympic Park in East London. Wilding is contested by some urban social justice advocates on the grounds that it risks accelerating the displacement of marginal urban citizens.

Furthermore, critics suggest that the feral, wasteland aesthetic associated with some urban (re)wilding projects is often White and male, and can neglect the perceptions and experiences of marginal groups—including women concerned about the lack of visibility in rewilded parks, and ethnic minorities with very different perceptions of untended grassland, abundant insects, and the 'morticulture' of leaving rotting wood (Prior, 2023). In London, publicly funded greenspaces are required by law to be equally beneficial to all, regardless of socioeconomic status or identity. But Snaith and Odedun draw on Office for National Statistics data to argue that despite the fact that 'people claiming Black ethnicities are nearly four times as likely as people claiming White ethnicities to have no access to outdoor space at home', urban green spaces are visited 'far more frequently by people from White British ethnicity with middle and higher income than by people claiming the UK Census high level ethnicity categories, Black, Asian and other UK minority ethnic background' (2023, p. 2). They describe how visitor counts at the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in East London show that while the 'anthropocentrically designed' part of the park attracts an audience whose ethnic makeup closely resembles that of the surrounding catchment area (55% UKBAME), the 'ecocentric' part of the park (that exemplifies a wilding aesthetic) attracts an audience with only 34% UKBAME people (Snaith & Odedun, 2023). They suggest that this underrepresentation of UK minority ethnic groups in the ecocentric part of the park signals that urban (re)wilding has an inclusivity problem, which is compounded by a tendency to blame minority groups for not understanding or using such sites.

Given their nascent status, urban (re)wilding initiatives have the potential to build in multiple cultures of nature from the outset and to find ways of avoiding green gentrification. Here, Wolch et al. (2014)—following Curran and Hamilton (2012)—advocate strategies that are 'just green enough … to reap the public health benefits of improved access to urban green space while avoiding the urban green space paradox'. While this dynamic is yet to play out fully in London, just green enough interventions in the context of urban (re)wilding would be better tailored to the cosmopolitan aesthetic preferences of local residents, while resisting the commodification of urban wildness that happens through the addition of elite consumption infrastructures (like bars, coffee shops, etc.). They might also include a more open-minded approach to the introduction and management of non-native species, that are common in urban areas, and are taken by some to exemplify the cosmopolitan origins, character, and ethos of the city.

Taken together this analysis of the aesthetics of urban (re)wilding in London diffracts existing analyses of cultures of urban greening. Rewilding differs from the orthodox aesthetics of urban restoration, picturesque gardening, and the contemplation of wastelands. It evidences a controlled decontrolling of ecological controls that celebrates managed emergence and ecological surprise. It generates a novel aesthetic politics of mess in which the choreography of emergence unsettles existing forms of ecological and political order.

## 5 | CONCLUSIONS

In 2005, Hinchliffe and colleagues noted that 'things do not look too rosy for urban wilds. Not pure enough to be true and not human enough to be political, urban wilds have no constituency' (p. 645). Their work, and that of others that followed, has helped remedy this neglect, documenting and amplifying the diverse affections for urban natures that have burgeoned over the last two decades. Yet while existing work has offered stimulating readings of cities as lively, more-than-human assemblages (an ontological critique), critical genealogies of urban ecology as a scientific field (an epistemological critique), and revealed the uneven geographies of urban natures (a political critique), it is yet to engage systematically with the active instantiation of urban wilds in the manner required by the provocation that 'urban rewilding' unleashes. This absence is, in part, due to the recent emergence of urban rewilding on the conservation policy landscape in few cities and its recent proliferation as a popular actors' category amongst urban administrators and publics. This paper thus builds on and departs from existing literature to document the character of a distinct model of urban rewilding emerging in London.

Starting with the properties of the urban fabric as dense, fragmented, and in flux, we advance a relational and topological spatiality for rewilding; one suited to peopled landscapes rather than those absent from modern humans. In this cosmopolitics of fragmentation and flux, the rewilder's job is to weave lines and mend patches in pursuit of an emergent and meshworked biogeography. Urban rewilding is thus rooted in unending practices of ecological maintenance and repair, which we flag as key areas for future empirical and conceptual elaboration (see Wilson, 2024). Next, we use London to speculate on how urban rewilding is being diffracted through London's political economy, outlining the agencies that are constituting it as a discernible political project, and alert to the multiple forms it takes as it is re-configured by entrepreneurial urbanism, elite capture, and forms of urban commoning. In the final thematic section, we show how cosmopolitan cities like London, that are marked by diverse and sometimes divergent cultures of nature, offer insights into the contested aesthetic politics of rewilding. We foreground minority perspectives that have long been marginalised from rural rewilding projects to evidence the persistence of an 'inclusivity problem' in ecocentric models of landscape management.

We conclude by highlighting three salient lines of enquiry for future research into urban rewilding that emerge as a consequence of our analysis. First, given that only a small number of Global North cities have shaped theories of urbanisation (e.g., London, Los Angeles, Paris, Chicago, New York), future research should begin by investigating emerging practices and politics of urban rewilding in cities other than London, allowing for our theorisations of urban rewilding to be shaped by and narrated through a diversity of empirical cases (Robinson, 2022). Such an approach melds productively with a diffraction lens, becoming a means to avoid a generalised conception of what urban rewilding is, and instead think it through a diversity of sites and cases, including being open to its provincialisation via southern urbanisms. Fabric, politics, and aesthetics are key heuristics for structuring these research programmes that usefully highlight material and semiotic differences across geographies. Second, across our three sections we have highlighted the importance of understanding minoritarian, everyday cultures and practices of urban nature, but there remains a stark absence of ethnographic perspectives on this topic, whether in the Global North or South. There is work to be done exploring how localised ways of conceiving and practising the urban wild can shape our academic theorisation of urban rewilding, as well as its political agenda and implementation. Can urban wilds be made compatible with minority perspectives for which the wild might be inaccessible or threatening, rather than charging the marginalised with not appreciating wildlife or being adverse to it?

Third, future work should explore the urban–rural patterns and traffic in rewilding ideas and practice. Rather than reifying a rural–urban schism, our intervention opens space for a two-way dialogue, pushing back against the idea that urbanites are necessarily disconnected from, or unexpert in, the arts of noticing and caring for nature. Instead, versions of urban (re)wilding have a potential for radical politics concerned with land ownership, multiple knowledges of nature, and the accessibility of wild spaces. They engage the greater diversity of citizens who have a stake in urban nature. We wager that this version of rewilding that we have elucidated in London could be instructive for the politics of (re)wilding in rural areas. Given the involvement of many of the same powerful actors from the rural rewilding community in the nascent phase of urban rewilding in London (e.g., the membership of the London Rewilding Taskforce), there is a clear pathway by which this knowledge transfer could take place, making this research well placed to have impacts beyond metropolitan borders. The relation between urban and rural, however, will differ across national contexts, where the countryside is managed and peopled differently. Future research should explore and compare the patterns and traffic in rewilding between urban–rural contexts in other post-productivist and post-industrial countries. We speculate that the geographies of rewilding in France will differ in interesting ways from those of Japan and the USA, for example.

As suggested in the previous paragraph, our intervention is timely because what is happening in London is already being emulated in other cities around the world through international networks of urbanists (including mayoralties of large cities). While our contribution is primarily to the scholarly fields of environmental geography, urban political ecology, and more-than-human geography, we see potential for our work—and that of other geographers—to steer the debate on urban rewilding amongst policy-makers and publics as it emerges and develops. Hence, we have offered an affirmative style of critique, open to the sociopolitical potential urban wilding has for building more inclusive and sustainable ecological futures. In doing so, we aim to prefigure a progressive mode of environmental politics that can inform and work with urban rewilders.

Finally, we hope the diffractive mode of analysis we offer in this paper will be of use to other geographers working across contexts. While not named as such, this diffractive mode has precedence in other areas of geography where, for instance, geographers have diffracted terrestrial concepts (like territory) through oceanic media (Steinberg & Peters, 2015) to develop new conceptual approaches (e.g., wet ontologies) that are milieu-specific (Jue, 2020). Geographers have also placed non-human animals as the subjects of various geographical concepts (e.g., mobilities, atmospheres) to diffract these concepts into more-than-human variants (Hodgetts & Lorimer, 2020). As a mode, or method, of research, diffraction demands rigorous empiricism, which we hope this research agenda can usefully shape, and which we intend to offer in our future work on urban (re)wilding.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

For reasons of ethics and privacy, data are not shared.

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## Endnotes

[1] Although many more studies on urban nature in geography exist, which we do not cover here (e.g., work on cyborg urbanism and urban metabolism (see Gandy, 2004; Heynen et al., 2006; Swyngedouw, 1996) and work on planetary urbanisation (Brenner & Schmid, 2014)).

[2] For exceptions, see Owens and Wolch (2019) and Piana et al. (2024).

[3] See https://open.spotify.com/episode/33C1YcA6cAY3b9PW6IzLKB.

[4] See https://www.buglife.org.uk/projects/making-a-b-line-for-london/.

[5] Refraining from mowing private lawns or cutting the grass (and wildflower meadows) in public areas in spring is normal practice in some countries, including parts of Switzerland and Germany, where this practice is managed by local governments and widely accepted by publics. ‘No Mow May’ emerged in the UK's specific cultural milieu.

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