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PAD #28 | DWELLING ON THE MOVE

0. EDITORIAL #28

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NOMADISM AND CULTURAL IDENTITIES

From Wandering Tribes to Digital Villages

The Evolution of Nomadic Living to Art and People

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Modern Nomadism, Mobile Spaces, Mobility, Technology, History.

Abstract
Nomadism is a continuously evolving phenomenon, stretching from prehistoric migrations to present-day digital communities. This paper traces historical evolution to situate modern digital nomadism within a continuum of design responses to mobility. This paper traces the trajectory of nomadic practices, exploring how motivations, such as survival, trade, and self-actualization, have remained consistent over time. This study employed a multi-method qualitative and quantitative design: (1) eight semi-structured interviews with self-identified nomads (aged 22–38, balanced by gender); (2) digital ethnography of 100 social-media artefacts gathered Jan-Mar 2024 across LinkedIn, Instagram, Reddit, TikTok and Facebook; (3) desk review of historical and contemporary literature; (4) and a digital survey of 20 self-identified nomads (aged 18 to 50, balanced by gender). The analysis investigates how intentional mobile living design can foster stability and community. It also examines whether modern nomadism represents an act of escape or a meaningful evolution in dwelling practices.

In today's fluid, technology-driven world, mobile living can be a voluntary pursuit of autonomy or a socio-economic necessity. Traditional nomadic communities moved for resources influenced by seasonality, while contemporary nomadism often drives individuals in search of freedom, belonging, and personal growth. This research analyzes the motivations of various nomads, including digital nomads, seasonal nomads, and trade-driven nomads, and their impact on local populations, raising questions about whether mobility provides stability or fosters disconnection.

This paper explores how contemporary nomadism navigates the tension between stability and impermanence, emphasizing the transformative role of technology in redefining what it means to dwell (Fig. 1).

1. Introduction

Figure 1. ©Lovesa Chang - Sheep Grazing Near Traditional Yurt via Pexel.

Kira, a participant interviewed, sits in a Medellín courtyard, laptop open, coffee in hand. It is her second country in three months. Sharing a co-living space with other remote workers, her mobility is not driven by necessity but by a search for autonomy and transformation.

"I was stuck," she says. "This made me feel alive again." Her story exemplifies a broader shift in nomadism, from a survival-based necessity to a technologically enabled, identity-driven lifestyle. In Kira's case, digital tools support not only her ability to move but also her attempt to create meaning and stability within that movement.

Historically, nomadic movement followed water, pasture, and trade rhythms. Pastoralists and traders migrated with environmental cues. Permanent settlement later became dominant, but the impulse to move never vanished; it adapted (Sattin, 2022).

Today, digital access shapes mobility as much as physical infrastructure. Cars, trains, planes, and budget airlines move faster and farther; WiFi, social media, and global platforms make it continuous. What used to require a passport now requires a login. For some, movement is an act of freedom or experimentation. For others, it is a way to navigate precarity – rising housing costs, job instability, or global crises. In this way, nomadism today operates as both adaptation and agency. Investigating the experiences of modern nomads reveals whether their mobility, enabled by technological innovations, is primarily a pursuit of stable, meaningful dwelling or an intensified state of impermanence.

2. Nomadism Through Time

2.1. Early Human Nomadism (Prehistoric - 13,000 BCE)

Early ancestors roamed the world, traversing the prehistoric landscapes of Africa. Homo sapiens, who emerged around 200,000 years ago, did not roam alone. They coexisted with earlier human relatives such as Homo habilis, Homo erectus, and Homo neanderthalensis.

The first nomadic humans on Earth were part of a mosaic of overlapping paths, shared genes, and evolving survival strategies (Christian et al., 2016).

The evolution of Homo sapiens involved the development of a smaller but more efficiently wired brain compared to Homo neanderthalensis.

This “social brain” facilitated complex interactions crucial for nomadic life, as early humans formed tribes of 20-50 people and relied on hunting, fishing, and foraging while constantly moving to follow animal herds and seasonal plant cycles. This adaptability was essential for a nomadic lifestyle (Christian et al., 2016).

As the Paleolithic transitioned to Mesolithic, human behavior shifted; brain development became linked to the emergence of complex culture, rituals, and belief systems. Simple rituals evolved into intricate practices, with elaborate burials and artistic expressions on cave walls. Humans transformed from mere survivors into meaning-making beings, creating a rich culture of myth, ritual, and shared memory.

To thrive, ancestors crafted stone tools, marking vital brain evolution milestones. Toolmaking requires strength, fine motor skills, memory, and foresight, enhancing mental agility. Knowledge passed down through generations was crucial for survival techniques.

Life revolved around the seasons. People followed animal migrations, fished in new rivers and lakes, and foraged plants, nuts, fruits, and roots. They lived in harmony with the land, guided by instinct and nature’s cues (Sattin, 2022).

2.2. Agricultural Revolution and Its Impact (13,000 BCE - 5000 BCE)

For 2.5 million years, our ancestors lived nomadically, often leaving behind the elderly and carrying children. The Mesolithic period shifted to semi-nomadic lifestyles, fostering social structures and a sense of belonging as technologies improved.

The Neolithic period marked the agricultural revolution, leading to settled communities. Populations grew, allowing the elderly to stay put, children to learn, and adults to engage in various activities.

With early irrigation systems, organized nomadic lifestyles emerged, including hunter-gatherers with deep knowledge of their environment, pastoral nomads following seasonal grazing patterns, and tinker traders who exchanged goods and performed specialized tasks (Christian et al., 2016).

2.3. Technological Innovations and Nomadic Expansion (5000 BCE - 1886 CE)

As humans spread beyond Africa, horse domestication became a pivotal advancement in human mobility, aiding pastoral management and creating warrior figures for tribal defense (Fig. 2). Even in 2025, horses symbolize freedom, strength, and a bond with nature, especially among nomadic peoples who view them as sacred partners essential to identity.

Warfare has historically driven movement, and military service continues to influence mobility today.

The Silk Roads, a key trade network, expanded this movement, facilitating the exchange of goods, religions, technologies, and ideas across continents.

These routes also enabled the spread of diseases, such as the Black Death, which impacted populations but ultimately strengthened resilience over generations.
The Silk Roads were vital not just for trade but for fostering connections and shaping civilizations, contributing to today's interconnected world.

Figure 2. ©Fadhil Abhimantra - Brown Horse with Saddle via Unsplash.

2.4. Industrial Revolution to Digital Revolution (1886 -2004)

The invention of the automobile in 1886 initiated a significant transformation in human mobility, enabling travel beyond the limitations of horse-drawn transportation.

This advancement reshaped societal structures, expanding urban areas and interconnected regions through highways and passenger trains. The mid-20th century saw commercial air travel revolutionize global connectivity, with budget airlines and online platforms democratizing international travel by the early 2000s and contributing to the rise of mass tourism.

The mobility revolution extended into the digital realm with the advent of Wi-Fi in 1999, facilitating remote work and reducing reliance on physical office spaces. The emergence of social platforms like Facebook (2004) and WhatsApp (2009) further enhanced global communication, enabling personal and professional interactions across vast distances.
This convergence of transportation advancements and digital infrastructure has fostered a new paradigm of accessibility, erased traditional boundaries of work and leisure and giving rise to the modern nomad.

3. Today's Digital Nomadism

3.1. The Rise of Modern Digital Nomadism (2006 - Present)

The evolution of technology has facilitated the rise of modern digital nomadism. This transformation began with significant innovations, such as the introduction of the first handheld mobile phone in 1973 and the commissioning of the TAT-8

fiber-optic cable in 1988, which enabled efficient transatlantic data communication. Additionally, the first online transatlantic chat took place in 1988, further enhancing connectivity and mobility.

The rise of social media platforms, such as Facebook in 2004 and WhatsApp in 2009, further blurred the lines between work and life, making the digital nomad lifestyle increasingly accessible. The COVID-19 pandemic later accelerated this shift toward remote work, normalizing working from anywhere and prompting businesses and employees to rethink traditional practices.
This transformation turned the notion of a nomadic lifestyle from a luxury into a mainstream reality, supported by the emergence of remote work-friendly visas and coworking spaces that contributed to the broader acceptance of digital nomadism.

Who is the modern nomad? They encompass freelancers, startup founders, graphic designers, software engineers, and writers, typically in their twenties or thirties, equipped with the skills needed for remote work and driven by a desire for autonomy over their routines. More than anything, they are on a quest for a place, a rhythm, or a version of life that feels authentically their own. Unlike traditional nomadic lifestyles, often rooted in community and survival, contemporary nomadism frequently characterizes individualistic pursuits focused on personal growth, self-discovery, and global exploration.
This modern form is not monolithic; it includes various practices and motivations, one of the most recognized being

digital nomadism – individuals who leverage remote work and digital technologies to maintain mobility while employed. These nomads reframe conventional routines, such as the 9-to-5 workday and morning rituals, into mobile, often transient practices. Although this lifestyle offers flexibility and autonomy, it also challenges maintaining structure, stability, and work-life balance.

Another category includes seasonal nomads who temporarily reside in specific locations before traveling for cultural immersion. Supported by personal savings or short-term local employment, this nomadism prioritizes experiential learning and exploration, allowing individuals to create intentional systems that balance rootedness with movement. Additionally, a third form consists of those whose careers inherently require mobility, such as military personnel regularly relocated due to duty assignments, often accompanied by family. This type of occupational nomadism is shaped by external factors influenced by geopolitics, demonstrating how historical patterns of warfare have impacted human mobility, a dynamic that remains relevant today.

Research from the University of Southampton (2014) illustrated how phone records could trace shifts in population density, revealing how people in France migrate from cities to coastal areas during summer months (Cheshire & Uberti, 2021). This seasonal migration reflects a fundamental human impulse to move and explore, showing that digital nomadism is a modern extension of this instinct, amplified by technology and global interconnectedness.

Ultimately, our desire to be mobile is not new; it simply takes on new forms and is motivated by new motivations.

Many modern nomads, like research participant Kira, embrace a lifestyle prioritizing uncertainty over conventional stability, finding freedom in navigating new environments and relinquishing rigid routines. Kira's journey evolved from merely escaping routine to a reflective experience marked by clarity and a softened sense of urgency. She recognized that movement does not always mean constant physical travel; instead, her sense of home shifted from a specific location to being present. Her nomadic lifestyle mirrored her desires and needs, illustrating that being "on the move" can represent a reorientation of life rather than a mere escape from it.

3.2. Challenges, Tensions, and New Forms of Belonging

The modern nomadic lifestyle is not without its complications. Legal limbo is a common thread – navigating visa rules, tax obligations, or shifting government policies can leave even seasoned nomads on unstable ground.

Loneliness often surfaces in conversations among those on the road. The question of "Where is home?" lingers in the background, especially as online connections replace in-person roots. There is a tension between escape and commitment, the desire to see what is next, and the need to feel grounded in something.

Still, hubs have formed. Bali, Chiang Mai, Lisbon, Medellín – places once quiet corners of the world are now magnets for mobile workers. Coworking spaces, WhatsApp threads, and

digital nomad visas create a new infrastructure—a soft landing for those constantly in motion. Temporary communities emerge and dissolve, shaped by shared routines and mutual understanding.

However, this movement has a ripple effect. The influx of foreign money raises rents and changes neighborhoods. Gentrification is not an abstract concept in these cities; it is felt. At the same time, many nomads make conscious efforts to integrate—learning the language, engaging with local businesses, or volunteering their skills. Still, the balance between visitor and participant is delicate, and not all local communities welcome the changes that accompany a growing population of digital nomads. Online platforms – Slack groups, subreddits, newsletters – act as connective tissue.
They offer advice, emotional support, and the sense that, even alone, one is never really solo. However, the romanticism of the digital nomad can be misleading. Work-life balance is not always easier when the beach is calling, and deadlines still loom. This lifestyle is often seen as ideal but requires discipline, adaptability, and more planning than most people expect.

3.3. Digital Nomadism on Social Media

Through social media analysis of 100 ads, articles, and posts across LinkedIn, Instagram, Reddit, TikTok, and Facebook, conclusions were drawn that illustrate sentiments of the modern nomad. “Loneliness” appeared in 36 % of posts and mirrors Kira’s admission that route-planning is “mentally exhausting”. Conversely, “excitement” (42 %) parallels her

claim that the lifestyle "made me feel alive again". This triangulation underscores how individual experiences align with collective affect in digital-nomad communities.

Most marketing ads exhibited a neutral sentiment, promoting services and products for digital productivity. However, individual posts revealed key themes: curiosity about others' experiences, excitement in sharing journey updates, and feelings of loneliness, characterized by boredom and solitude in new environments, despite having a lot and little to do.

Terms like "DN", "DNing", "expat", and "digital nomad" are often used interchangeably. Online, noted diverse lifestyles, from homeschooling mothers and young adults to seasoned nomads. This diversity makes digital nomadism hard to define universally, but what connects these individuals is their shared pursuit of a life that challenges conventional boundaries. Unlike historical nomadic tribes, which thrived in close-knit groups for survival, modern digital nomads often journey alone or in loose associations.

However, emerging trends like nomadic villages and co-living spaces create opportunities for connection and community. These environments allow nomads to learn from each other and choose when to be alone or with others, offering a sense of belonging and support without needing permanence. Digital nomads depend on online communities, which serve as their virtual villages. For instance, Facebook is a dynamic resume hub for remote job seekers, featuring marketing ads from companies and individual nomads.

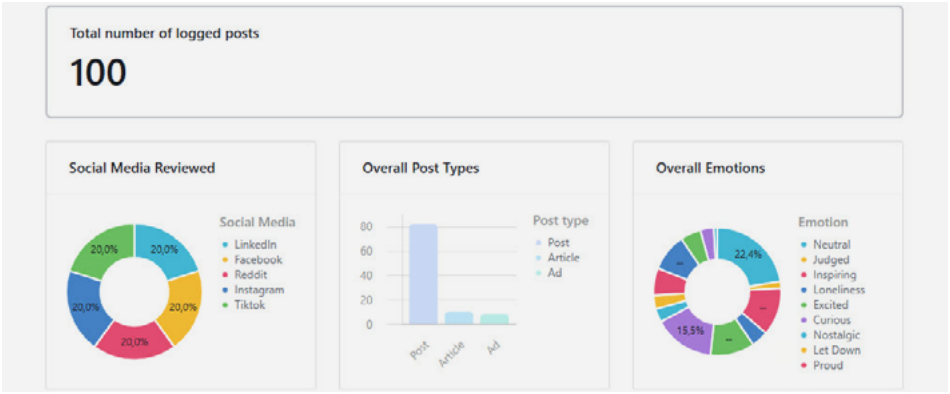

Figure 3. This image showcases a small dashboard that highlights the second part of the social media listening process, logging 100 posts, 20 from each of the 5 social media platforms analyzed.

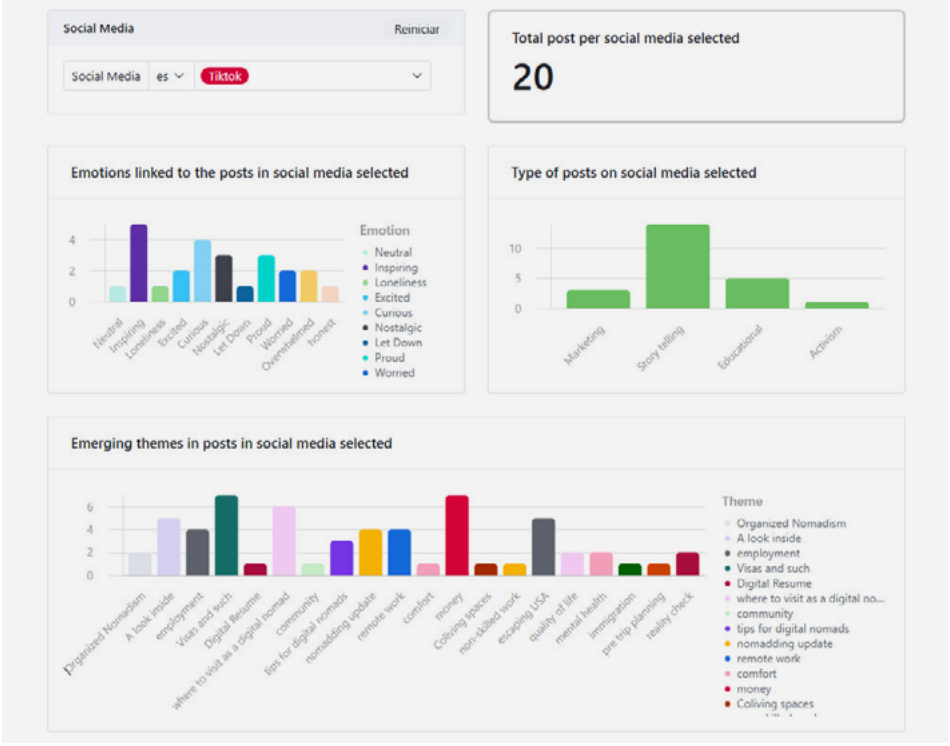

Figure 4. This image shows another section of the dashboard that focuses on only 1 of the social media platforms, and the themes, emotions, and types of posts found. In this case, Tiktok.

LinkedIn focuses on nomadic reflections and professional marketing. Discussions cover structured nomadism's impact on localities and personal updates.

Conversely, Reddit harbors more negative sentiments, addressing loneliness and seeking solutions for nomadic challenges like employment and finances abroad. TikTok, fueled by emotion, showcases pride, nostalgia, and curiosity. Users share brief narratives on visa tips, financial strategies, and aspirations to permanently relocate abroad amidst global political shifts, aiming for transformative lifestyle changes.

Across various social media platforms, a common theme among digital nomads is the emotional labor involved in constant planning. In her interview, Kira mentioned that deciding on her next destination can be mentally and emotionally exhausting. This continuous decision-making process often distracts from fully experiencing the present moment. Determining the next steps often involves careful thought, strategic planning, and seeking advice from fellow nomads within their digital communities (Figg. 3 & 4).

4. Broader Themes Shaping the Nomadic Archetype

4.1. The Allure of Freedom, the Weight of Walls

Property and ownership can provide stability but may feel restrictive to more nomadic individuals. Historically, nomadic tribes like the Tuaregs have thrived on a mobile lifestyle. With the rise of agriculture, humanity faced a choice between settling down or maintaining a nomadic existence.

This tension persists, as reflected in the Tuareg proverb "a house is a coffin for the living" and their self-identification as *imohag,* or "free men" (Lam & Hanaor, 2023).

The archetype of freedom associated with the ability to move and adapt is central to historical and modern nomadic life. Nomads have often rejected the constraints of property for a more fluid lifestyle. However, does modern nomadism provide genuine freedom, or does it create a different impermanence? Is it stability shaped by movement or an avoidance of rootedness? Examining this tension helps us better understand whether modern nomads find authentic stability through mobility or if they are perpetually caught in transition.

4.2. Ritual and Purpose in Mobile Living

Unlike the tendency in settled societies to accumulate possessions, nomadic peoples typically own belongings that serve clear and practical purposes. Take, for example, the *gers* used by Mongolian nomadic tribes. These mobile dwellings offer a sense of home, belonging, and community while serving as vessels for passing wisdom through generations.
A ger is more than just a shelter; it holds deep cultural significance. Remarkably, a ger can be disassembled in three hours and reassembled in just one. This mobility is not just about the physical act of moving but reflects a life constantly in transition (Cope, 2023).

Contrast that with the average urban dweller – how long does it take to pack, disassemble furniture, and move apartments? Moreover, how much meaning do those belongings hold?

Moving in the modern world is often chaotic, disruptive, and disconnected from a deeper purpose.
In a nomadic lifestyle, every day, season, and ritual – especially moving – holds deep significance. For those living in a Mongolian *ger*, moving days are celebrated as important events (Figg. 5 & 6). The head of the family dresses in their finest attire, emphasizing the occasion's importance. This practice reflects a profound connection to purpose in the process, where each moment, including transitions, plays a vital role. In contrast, much modern life views transitions as burdens or inconveniences rather than embracing them as opportunities for meaningful experiences.

The freedom linked to movement and adaptability is central to historical and modern nomadic life. While nomads typically reject property constraints for a fluid lifestyle, modern nomadism raises questions about true freedom versus a new kind of impermanence. Is it stability through movement or an evasion of rootedness? These questions are crucial for understanding human evolution.

4.3. Cultural Identity

Contemporary digital nomads embody a fluid and evolving cultural identity as they travel through various countries and absorb diverse cultures. For them, nomadism is a journey of self-discovery and personal growth, where each new location broadens their worldview and fosters new connections. Unlike traditional nomads with a static cultural heritage, digital nomads embrace a dynamic multiculturalism, actively engaging with and adopting elements from different cultures.

Figure 5. ©Ariungoo Batzorig - White and gray tent on green grass field near mountain under white clouds during daytime via Unsplash.

Figure 6. ©Julia Volk- Kazakh Curtain Decoration in Nomadic Tent via Pexel.

This shift highlights a move from preservation-centric nomadism to a more adaptive, globally connected lifestyle facilitated by technology, allowing them to share experiences and build networks across geographical boundaries.

The contrast between community building and solitude varies significantly between traditional and modern nomads. Historically, nomadic tribes formed close-knit groups comprising 20 to 50 individuals, where cooperation was essential for survival. These communities thrived on shared responsibilities, mutual aid, and the innate need to protect one another. In contrast, today's digital nomads often travel alone, yet they cultivate virtual villages—online communities that offer a sense of belonging while celebrating the solitary journey of personal growth. These digital networks function as support systems, providing spaces to share experiences, seek advice, and foster connections, all while individuals maintain their physical independence.

At the heart of both worlds – past and present – lie the traits of adaptability and resilience.

Nomads, whether navigating harsh landscapes or embracing new cultures, have always depended on their ability to adjust, survive, and thrive. Their way of life hinges on the capacity to withstand uncertainty, transforming potential challenges into opportunities.

4.4. Redefining Stability: A New Philosophy of Home

Ultimately, the nomadic lifestyle – ancient or modern – challenges the conventional understanding of stability. Is it tied to a specific location, or can it thrive within the movement?

Is stability established through walls, or does it come from what is carried? The true essence of the nomadic spirit resides not in physical space, but in the human capacity to embrace change, find meaning in movement, and cultivate purpose within an ever-evolving life.

5. Predictions for the Future of Nomadism

The future of nomadism is filled with exciting potential as technology, sustainability, and global mobility unite to transform how people live, work, and connect.

Imagine a new generation of nomadic villages that integrate the wisdom of Mongolian gers – circular, collapsible, and rich in culture – with the latest advancements in renewable energy, modular infrastructure, and digital connectivity.

These communities would evolve from fringe outposts to self-sufficient micro-societies that operate in harmony with nature while remaining connected to the global network.

These futuristic nomadic hubs might feature solar-paneled *gers* equipped with mesh networks for Wi-Fi, hydroponic vertical gardens, and compact greywater recycling systems.

The ethos of mobility would not just be about freedom – it would be about responsibility. As climate change accelerates and global migration patterns shift, mobile living becomes not just a lifestyle but a potential solution to overcrowded urban centers, housing shortages, and the search for more sustainable, adaptable ways of life.

Digital nomadism is evolving but requires more transparent global agreements to thrive. Taxation, healthcare access, and visa reciprocity remain ambiguous, causing challenges

for today's mobile workforce. While countries are starting to address these issues by creating digital nomad visas and policies, a shared international framework is crucial for scaling this lifestyle responsibly.
However, with the rise of opportunities comes potential tension. Concerns such as resource competition in tourist-heavy areas, digital colonialism, and socio-economic exclusion pose risks of creating a divide between privileged nomads and local communities.

If the principles of community, mutual care, and environmental balance inherent in ancient nomadic cultures such as Mongolia's are genuinely honored rather than merely appropriated, they could inspire a regenerative model of mobile living. Such a model would enable individuals to move freely across geographic boundaries while fostering a more ethical and interconnected global future.

6. Conclusion

Nomadism has undergone a profound transformation throughout history—from ancient tribes migrating with the seasons for survival to contemporary digital nomads seeking freedom, flexibility, and personal fulfillment. Despite dramatic shifts in tools and context, core motivations remain consistent: autonomy, adaptability, and meaningful experiences beyond conventional structures. However, contemporary nomadism reveals a complex interplay between stability and impermanence, with technology serving both as an enabler of freedom and a disruptor of traditional notions of home. Looking ahead, the question is no longer whether peo-

ple will continue to live nomadic lives, but how mobility can be intentionally designed to promote dignity, sustainability, and community.

Through thoughtful infrastructures that harness technology, future nomadism has the potential not merely to reject traditional roots but to redefine the very meaning of being rooted, feeling “at home”.

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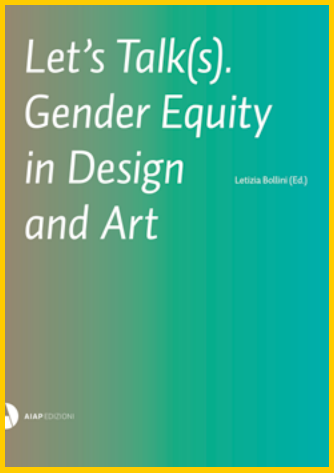

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