

REBUILDING

*Winners, Runners-up , and
a selection of entries*

SILK CITIES PHOTO FESTIVAL 2025-2026



Silk Cities is an independent and transdisciplinary professional and scientific hub for knowledge exchange, research, international engagement, and raising awareness of under-explored contextual and global challenges and opportunities before cities and communities. Its initial geographic focus is on issues experienced in countries along the Silk Roads in the West and Central Asia. Defined by history and geography, this region is home to long-lasting urbanism and ancient civilisations, enjoying a rich tangible and intangible heritage developed throughout its history.

However, the region also suffers from ongoing contextual and global challenges affecting cities, societies, and their development. For example, the region has experienced a variety of destructive disasters, especially in recent decades, ranging from natural hazards such as earthquakes and floods to human-induced crises such as wars and conflicts. To foster international dialogue, knowledge exchange, and collaboration, Silk Cities extends its reach to other cities, regions, and countries that are prone to similar issues and global challenges. With a vision to improve the quality of cities, urban development, and the urban experience, Silk Cities bridges the gap between local and global efforts, connects younger and more experienced generations of diverse urban stakeholders, and brings together academia and practice. It has a growing global and regional network of individuals and organisations.

Other Publications

Recognising Intangible Heritage in Urban Transformations

Book edited by Fatemeh Farnaz Arefian, Judith Ryser, Yves Cabannes, 2026, Springer.

Community's Cultural Life in Public Space

Photo eBook, 2024, Silk Cities

Historic Cities in the Face of Disasters

Book edited by Arefian F.F., Ryser, J., Hopkins, A., MacKee, J. 2021, Springer

Prerequisites for Post-Disaster Regeneration of Historic Cities

eBook edited by Ryser, J., Arefian, F.F., 2021, Silk Cities

Urban Heritage Along the Silk Roads

Book edited by Arefian F.F., and Moeini S.H.I., 2019, Springer

Organising Post-Disaster Reconstruction Processes

Book authored by Arefian, F.F., 2018, Springer

Urban Change in Iran

Book edited by Arefian F.F. and Moeini S.H.I., 2016, Springer



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Rebuilding Life

Silk Cities Photo Festival 2025-2026

Preface

In my view, Silk Cities' visual projects are an invitation to think critically through the camera lens and present those reflections artistically, as the powerful photos in this eBook show. The publication of this eBook documents and disseminates the results of the Silk Cities Photo Festival 2025: *Rebuilding Life*. It marks another milestone in the evolution of our visual projects. As our second eBook of this nature, it includes the winning and runner-up entries, as well as a few other selected photos we wanted you to see. Congratulations to all!

The story of how visual projects were added to Silk Cities' portfolio as an activity theme goes back to an internal brainstorming session in 2022. Discussions were sparked by an early-career Silk Cities volunteer, Diba Deihim, a graduate architect at the time. Our brainstorming highlighted the need to step beyond scientific jargon and actively engage with a wider audience—people who may not be academic researchers or established practitioners, but who are deeply interested in, observant of, or engaged with the core real-life issues Silk Cities explores. Organically, the idea of using the camera as an investigative tool emerged from further internal discussions and community interactions. Tapping into these critical observations and experiences would further enhance the transdisciplinary nature of Silk Cities, so we decided to run a pilot.

Our first visual project (photo and short video) on *Community's Cultural Life in Public Spaces* (2022-2023) saw submissions from several countries across Asia, Europe, the Americas, and Africa. Interestingly, both early-career and experienced artists and practitioners participated. These heartwarming results gave us the green light to continue with this Photo Festival.

Silk Cities' visual projects are designed to complement our other initiatives. Specifically, they complement our scientific conferences, just as these photo eBooks complement our peer-reviewed publications. The themes of our visual projects closely mirror our current conference topics, shedding light on the breadth, scope, and human interpretation of these subjects. The use of photography in urban development, heritage, and resilience can be communicative, illustrative, analytical, and more. In parallel, the need for greater involvement of artists to enhance resilience and sustainability is increasingly recognised by international agencies. For example, photos can enable a deeper, human-oriented understanding of communities and their interactions with a multiplicity of environments—whether built, natural, political, economic, or otherwise. In all cases, the photos are the result of relationships between the photographer and the subject, conveying profound insight. They can reveal contradictions with official accounts and formal presentations, capture urban memory, document transformations, provide data for content analyses, and shed light on marginalised narratives, among other impacts.

Rebuilding Life aimed to visually explore how individuals and communities recover and rebuild, whether on a personal or collective level. The resilience, recovery, and reconstruction of cities and societies is a pillar of Silk Cities' focus areas; in both practice and research, these are complex and multi-layered topics. Reconstruction relates to many aspects of existence: bouncing back from a major personal setback, rebuilding physical structures and urban assets, forming social networks in a new country after immigration or forced displacement, or seeking mental healing and redefining oneself, and more. This project sought to capture how communities and individuals renew and revitalise both their environments and their spirits. Participants were invited to share photo stories addressing recovery and resilience in their broadest senses—physical, mental, social, economic, etc.

Providing equal opportunities “to see and to be seen” and “to learn and to teach” is in the DNA of Silk Cities. Therefore, in addition to English (the official language of Silk Cities), the call for entries and the festival poster were produced in several other languages. This was our tailored invitation and “we see you” message, ensuring meaningful inclusion and diversity in our projects. We received 42 qualified photos from 17 countries, telling stories from across Asia, Europe, Africa and Americas. As a transdisciplinary exercise, the initial and final selections of photos considered thematic relevance, originality, creativity, visual quality, and authenticity. The Jury panel represented this trans-disciplinarity, bringing

together visual artists, urban development experts, and architects. We were all impressed by the quality of the photos, the depth of the observations, and the contextual diversity of the entries. Through our online digital gallery, open-access eBooks, and in-person exhibitions during our conferences, we provide global platforms for selected entries while photographers retain full copyright of their submitted work.

This eBook tells powerful visual narratives. Some photographers captured community stories (e.g., *Voices of Survival*, *One Note Against a Thousand Bombs*, and *The Blue Fig*). Others focused on individuals (e.g., *More Than a DC Number*, *Throat Cancer Survivor Working in His Workshop*, and *Mr. Junior*). Finally, some chose artistic metaphors to convey their message (e.g., *Remains*, *Borders and Walls*, and *From Love to Hate*). They highlight community-level challenges and approaches to dealing with adversities such as climate change, rising sea levels, conflicts, community rights, and political instability. Some show that rebuilding is, in fact, the persistent everyday act of dealing with risk and navigating possibilities amidst harsh environmental realities or radical life changes (e.g., *Kissed by Scarcity*, *Rock Breakers*, *Holding What Remains*, and *After the Storm Nothing Remains Still*). Some focused on the transformative moment of realisation and embracing change, although it is almost certainly painful or uncertain (e.g., *Liberation: The Breath of Renewal*, *Voices of Resistance*, and *Yellow Hands*). Importantly, many of them present deep hope and optimism for betterment despite these adversities. They acknowledge the long road ahead while explicitly believing in the capability of the next generation to make it happen (e.g., *Still Standing*, *Between Yesterday and Tomorrow*, and *Hand of God*).

Finally, the successful completion of this photo project was made possible by the work and support of many who contributed their time, creativity, and skills. We all worked on a voluntary basis. It was a close collaboration between the Silk Cities team and the Jury, and I would like to acknowledge my colleagues together in alphabetical order: Ali Ettehad, Ali Puya Khani, Diba Deihim, Mohammadreza Ebrahimyaslami, John Mullin, Negin Pazoki, and Sanjoli Mathur. We are especially grateful to the friends of Silk Cities who translated our call for entries into 11 languages. They are acknowledged in alphabetical order: Abhishek Jain, Francesco Gennaretti, Madina Junussova, Miwako Kitamura, Mustafa Anil Kayi, Rahaf Orabi, Teresa Oduor, Tsvetelina Srebrova, Sandeep kaur, Xenia Gryshchenko, and Zena Asswad.

I hope you enjoy these artistic and thought-provoking photos. You can also view the webpage and digital gallery. To see the results of our first visual project (photo and short video), Community's Cultural Life in Public Spaces, visit its [webpage](#), [eBook](#) and the [photo](#) and [video](#) digital galleries.

Silk Cities continues to engage with both younger and experienced generations of academics, practitioners, and artists, and the public who are reflective on and care for real-life urban challenges and opportunities in front of cities and communities. Our future projects, whether our next events like conferences and festivals, or the ongoing ones like Interactive Then & Now and Urban Talks, always require your contribution. We welcome listening to your ideas for Silk Cities and their delivery, your comments on how we are doing, and your support to keep developing. You are also invited to step forward and help us translate materials into your own language for our next photo project. Let your community be seen too!

Fatemeh Farnaz Arefian
Founder of Silk Cities
September 2026, London

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Winners



First Place
Voices of Survival
Rayhan Ahmed



Second Place
One Note Against a Thousand Bombs
Mouneb Taim



Third Place
Between Yesterday and Tomorrow
Mohammad Ezzattalab Moghaddam
Kodehi

First Place

Voices of Survival

*Rayhan Ahmad
Bangladesh*

Two individuals climb atop a massive pile of waste, scavenging while dogs roam and birds circle above. Their struggle embodies resilience, the art of survival in harsh conditions, where poverty and pollution cannot erase the strength of human spirit.



Second Place

One Note Against a Thousand Bombs

*Mouneb Taim
Syria*

Syria, Idlib
October 6, 2019

:

Amid the ruins, the "Peace Player" played his music to bring a fleeting moment of hope to children and families. His song is "How beautiful it is to live in peace and safety" echoed softly against the sounds of war.



Third Place

Between Yesterday and Tomorrow

*Mohammad Ezzattalab Moghaddam Kodehi
United Kingdom*

The photo shows two different generations and shows hope of living even in a hard situation



Runners-up

In alphabetical order

Remains

Agata Joukov

Rock Breakers, Northern Pakistan

Christopher Wilton-Steer

Liberation

Damira Tagaeva

The Blue Fig

Mohammad Rakibul Hasan

Kissed by Scarcity

Ololade Olawale

Voices of Resistance

Rayhan Ahmed

After The Storm, Nothing Remains Still

Shubhodeep Roy

Act of Justice

Sujan Sarkar

Throat Cancer Survivor Working His Workshop

Tapas Halder



Remains

*Agata Joukov
Israel/Russia*

The apple will not heal. But the board is no longer a battlefield. Resilience is staying at the table after the cut.



Rock Breakers

Northern Pakistan

Christopher Wilton-Steer
Pakistan

It takes experience and knowledge of rock textures to know where the seams lie that can be used to crack open each rock.



Liberation: The Breath of Renewal

Damira Tagaeva
Russia

The photograph represents the transition from darkness to light, where the survivor begins to reclaim their environment and their inner peace. The person's quiet expression and the presence of nature symbolise "healing and self-discovery" mentioned in the festival's theme. The wounds are still there, but they no longer define her; they have become part of a new, stronger foundation. This image is a visual testament to the possibility of renewal after severe life changes. It celebrates the moment when a person stops merely surviving and begins to live again, finding joy in the simple warmth of the sun and the beauty of flowers.



The Blue Fig

Mohammad Rakibul Hasan
Bangladesh

Global warming's effects are alarmingly unequal. While certain regions witness moderate alterations, others, like Bangladesh, bear the harsh consequences of intensified natural calamities, including storm surges and floods. Bangladesh's vulnerability, characterised by its coastal regions, is a dramatic consequence of climate change. Communities along its coasts are tied to the sea, which now jeopardises their existence. The Sundarbans Forest exemplifies this vulnerability.

Located at the convergence of the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna rivers, it is forest's threats are twofold: escalating sea levels and extreme weather events. Encompassing rich in biodiversity, including the Bengal tiger. Alarmingly, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change predicts a potential one-meter sea level rise by 2100 in the Bay of Bengal. This means a forthcoming disaster for the Sundarbans is certain, endangering its unique ecosystem and affecting the livelihoods.



Kissed by Scarcity

Ololade Olawale
Nigeria

The photo reflects on the desert's vast stillness, where absence is not emptiness but a condition for resilience. It reveals how beauty, presence, and meaning emerge from limits, reminding us that even scarcity can hold its own quiet abundance.



Voices of Resistance

Rayhan Ahmad
Bangladesh

Hands rise, flags wave, and voices unite under the banner of justice. This protest scene embodies resilience through solidarity, capturing how communities transform anger into hope and rebuild strength through collective action.



After The Storm, Nothing Remains Still

Shubhodeep Roy
India

Beside an active railway line in Kolkata, she sits within what remains of a life repeatedly undone. Until recently, her shelter—built from scrap plastic, wood, and discarded fragments—stood here. After days of heavy rain and storm, even that fragile structure has been washed away. Trains continue to pass in relentless motion, carrying others forward, while she remains in a space that offers no permanence. There is no clear beginning to rebuild from—only remnants, and the quiet necessity to start again. Her gesture, caught in a moment of pause, speaks of exhaustion, but also of something harder to name—a persistence shaped by loss that does not announce itself loudly. This photograph reflects a form of reconstruction that is continuous and uncertain, where survival itself becomes an act of rebuilding, again and again.



Act of Justice

Sujan Sarkar
India

Today humankind is a lot more powerful and has the power to eradicate many of the curses of this world. The curses of poverty, illiteracy, hunger, pollution, diseases, etc. Humankind, especially the new generation has the power to make a better world.



Throat Cancer Survivor Working His Workshop

*Tapas Halder
India*

A total laryngectomy, which involves the complete removal of the larynx, becomes necessary when conservative methods like chemotherapy, radiotherapy or partial removal are no longer effective for advanced laryngeal tumours. After a total laryngectomy, breathing and swallowing are completely separated. The surgeon then creates a so-called stoma (tracheostoma) with a hole in the neck to help breathing after the surgery. It is a hole visible in the neck and remains so for the rest of the life.



Selected Entries

In alphabetical order

Mr. Junior

Bongani Tshabalala

Inspirational Women

Goran Erfani

Holding What Remains

Mantinieri

More Than a DC Number

Mark Krancer

Hand of God

Michał Konrad

From Love To Hate

Olga Volodina

Melancholy

Roman Kosh

Borders And Walls

Rovin

A Safe Space For Children In Anata

Shireen Allan

Yellow Hands

Siavosh Ejlali

Still Standing

Sybriëa Lundy and Alice Frankenberg

The Art Of Everyday Earth

Utsho Kanti Das

Mr. Junior

*Bongani Tshabalala
South Africa*

An elderly man, known as Mr. Junior, stands quietly in the corner of his damaged bedroom, surrounded by the visible aftermath of heavy storms. The walls bear cracks and water stains, their surfaces peeling where rain forced its way inside.



Inspirational Women

*Goran Erfani
United Kingdom*

Against the backdrop of Mount Marapi, Indonesia's most active volcano, the women of Rambeanak turn daily labour into a shared act of strength, continuity, and quiet resilience.



Holding What Remains

*Mantinieri
Italy*

Captured in the southern region of Irpinia, Italy, this photograph portrays an elderly survivor of the earthquake, framed within a doorway that separates shadow from light. Her gesture—a hand covering part of her face—suggests both concealment and reflection. The doorway becomes symbolic: a threshold between what was lost and what continues. In the aftermath of disaster, reconstruction is often measured in physical terms through restored buildings and repaired roads. Yet the deeper reconstruction happens within individuals, where memory, grief, and resilience subtly coexist. This woman's expression reveals an inner landscape shaped by time and experience. The harsh contrast between the dark interior and the illuminated exterior echoes the tension between past trauma and present survival. Recovery here is not about forgetting; it is a quiet negotiation with memory, rebuilding life not by erasing what happened, but by learning to live alongside it.



More Than a DC Number

*Mark Krancer
United States*

After struggling with addiction and incarceration, I found faith and discovered a passion for a new life—building a family, pursuing a career in photography, and remaining dedicated to my sobriety. This photograph reflects that I am far more than the sum of my past, including the "DC number" assigned to me in prison.



Hand of God

Michał Konrad
Poland

This self-portrait was taken against the backdrop of an active hard coal mine in Radlin, southern Poland, which produces coking coal used in steel manufacturing. The facility was established by Germany prior to Poland regaining independence. Following the Silesian Uprisings, the territory was integrated into Poland in 1922, only to fall under German occupation again from 1939 to 1945. This site represents a convergence of two worlds: conventional agricultural cornfields juxtaposed with an industrial landscape. Both industries have historically anchored, and continue to sustain, the local community.



From Love to Hate

Olga Volodina
Bulgaria

This photograph is part of a series exploring the artist's relationships with men across different stages of her life. Everyday domestic objects, such as a broken clay vase and toilet brushes, serve as symbolic motifs. Drawing from personal experiences of heterosexual relationships, Olga reflects on love, intimacy, friendship, jealousy, rivalry, disappointment, and the conflicting emotions that surface in these encounters. Through metaphorical still-life compositions, she narrates intimate stories spanning fleeting encounters, such as failed speed dates, to enduring romantic partnerships.



Melancholy

*Roman Kosh
Sri Lanka*

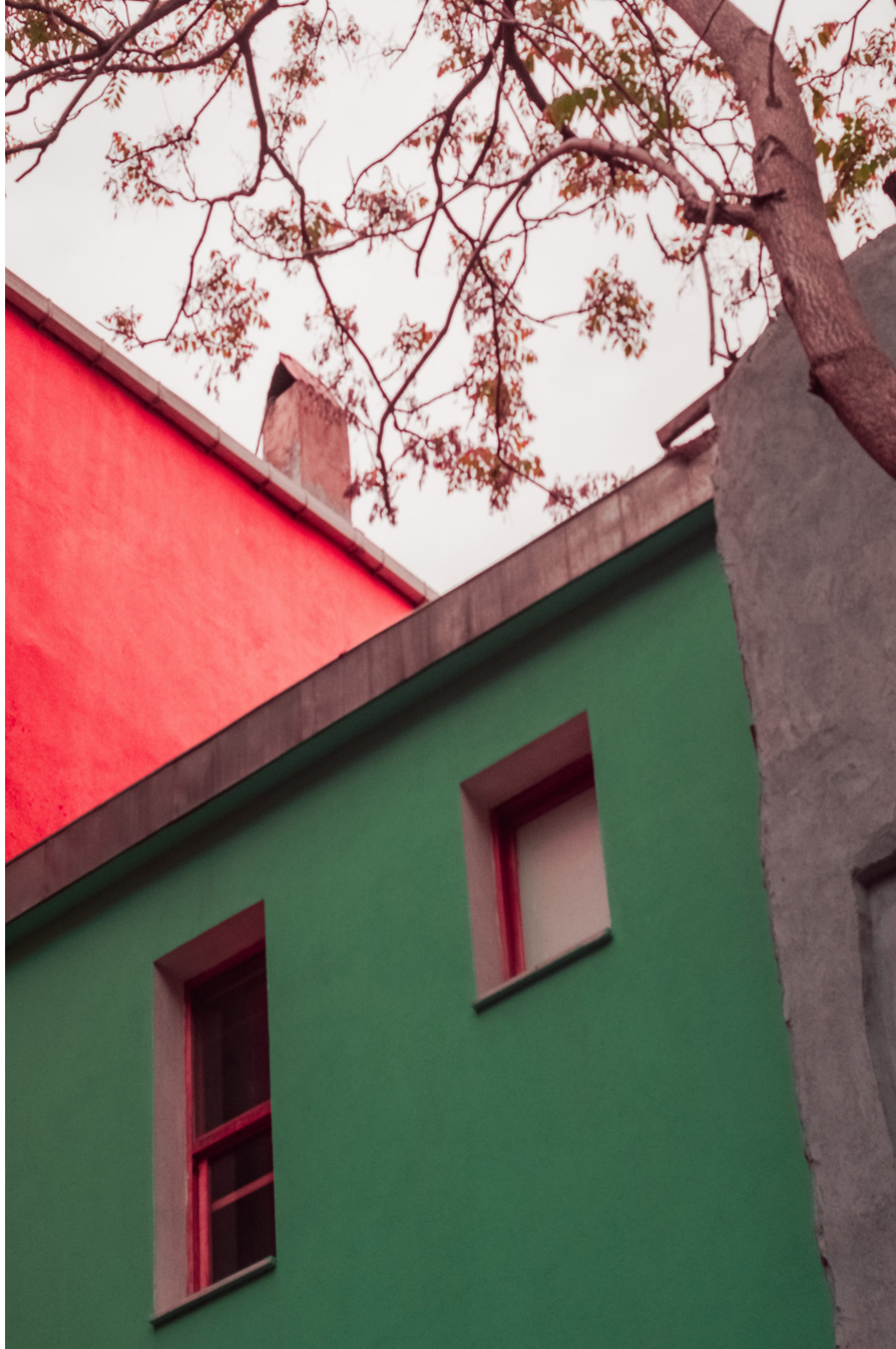
Spontaneous portraits capture elderly individuals navigating isolation amid profound global upheavals. Photographed primarily on trains and at railway stations during travels across Russia between 2022 and 2024, the series documents their quiet endurance and contemplative daily existence.



Borders and Walls

*Rovin
Türkiye*

Existence takes shape through a dialectic between stillness and movement. The boundaries of nature are as fluid as they are distinct; every transformation marks another manifestation of being. Yet humankind, driven by an instinct for shelter, consistently erects walls. This impulse reflects a desire for an imposed order that ultimately constricts human agency. While the borders of nature continuously evolve through movement, human-made walls carry the illusion of permanence and remain bound to decay. Stillness set against motion is as rigid as it is fragile. Which of these paradigms reflects truth: drawing fluid borders or building rigid walls?



A Safe Space for Children in Anata

Rural Jerusalem, Behind The Apartheid Separation Wall

*Shireen Allan
Palestine*

This photograph documents an archaeological site in Anata, a Palestinian town isolated by the separation wall, which has deepened its social exclusion and severed connections to Jerusalem. Neglected for years and reduced to a dumping ground, the site faced severe structural decay and the erasure of local heritage. Through restoration efforts led under the Anata Cultural Center, the location was transformed into a community library and art workshop where children can gather, read, and create safely. While this initiative revitalized the space, the project now faces acute property ownership disputes and an absence of sustainable funding. These pressures threaten ongoing operations and risk returning this critical cultural and educational resource to abandonment.



Yellow Hands

Siavosh Ejlali
Iran

A painter stands inside an abandoned home marked by cracked walls and dim light. Dressed in black and wearing bright yellow rubber gloves—once used to clear household debris—she performs a quiet ritual of return. Behind her hangs a faded sketch from her past, serving as a reminder of her former self. Her gaze remains resolute rather than defeated. This scene marks a threshold: the decision to reclaim creative agency within a discarded space. The gloves represent labour, care, and readiness. Reconstruction begins here—not through grand declarations, but by standing firm, reclaiming identity, and preparing to paint again.



Still Standing

*Sybriea Lundy and Alice Frankenberg
United States*

"I fix it," my daughter Lilly declared after surveying the scene, setting immediately to work. Her generation carries the resolve needed to restore what has been broken.



The Art of Everyday Earth

Utsho Kanti Das
Bangladesh

A pair of hands, a touch of pigment, and deliberate focus bring life's smaller creations into being. Rather than merely performing manual labour, the artisan shapes his environment on his own terms. These everyday practices reflect the enduring connection between human activity and the material earth.



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