

Cambridge Elements

Global Humanities

Small Worlds

Theorising Human Material and Environmental Legacies

Virpi Timonen,
Malin Bäckman,
Federica Previtali,
Friedemann Yi-Neumann
and Young-Kyu Shin

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Cambridge Elements

Elements in Global Humanities

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Abstract: This Element introduces the concept of legacy-making: future-oriented actions and ideation concerning the material and environmental effects that humans leave behind with reference to their eventual demise. Interviews conducted in Italy, Sweden, South Korea, and the United States are drawn upon to illuminate material-environmental relationalities and entanglements constructed through everyday legacy-making practices. Material and environmental legacies are made by people within the small worlds of their environments and kinship structures, yet they are also connected to the small world of shared global practices and processes that engender the biggest challenges of our time: socio-economic inequalities, environmental degradation, and climate change. This title is also available as open access on Cambridge Core.

Keywords: legacy, inheritance, environment, generation, more-than-human

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> My wisdom is simple, and there are no doubt people who despise it . . . We must live in the small world. We shall be content with that and cultivate it and make the best of it. Suddenly death strikes, suddenly the abyss opens, suddenly the storm howls and disaster is upon us – all that we know . . . The world is a den of thieves and night is failing. Soon it will be the hour for robbers and murderers. Evil is breaking its chains and goes through the world like a mad dog. The poisoning affects us all, without exception . . . No one escapes . . . So it shall be. Therefore, let us be happy while we are happy, let us be kind, generous, affectionate, and good. It is necessary, and not in the least shameful, to take pleasure in the small world, good food, gentle smiles, fruit-trees in bloom, waltzes.
>
> Gustav's speech in Ingmar Bergman's film *Fanny and Alexander* (1983)
> Credit: The Ingmar Bergman Foundation

1 Introducing Legacies

1.1 Legacies: The Concept and Contexts

What do we leave behind? Discourses surrounding us suggest some answers to this question. Parents and grandparents are advised to leave behind resources and assets to help younger generations to survive and thrive in a future world where preparedness for change and crises is necessary. Advertisements suggest setting up savings and investment portfolios for babies as soon as they are born, taking care of their future security and well-being in the face of a competitive and uncertain future; charities and civil society organisations solicit testamentary bequests, often with reference to enabling children or young people to fulfil their potential, thereby extending the giver's legacy into the future. In relation to more mundane possessions, an organised and aware (midlife or older) person is encouraged to reflect on the things they will leave behind, and start 'death cleaning' (Magnusson, 2017), that is, donating, recycling, or otherwise organising their material estate to prevent it from becoming a burden for family members and friends.

Bequeathing to younger generations is not limited to such *material legacies*, as there are also ubiquitous references to *environmental legacies*. The trope of 'gifting the Earth' to younger and future generations is widespread both in its positive version – leaving behind a better world – and negative variants where it is suggested that we are leaving behind a spoiled planet. Through such textual and visual discourses, we are encouraged to act for younger and future generations on a personal level and as citizens by passing on 'positive' legacies (money, assets, liveable environments) and avoiding or minimising 'negative' legacies ranging from old junk – stuff that nobody wants – to actions that contribute to the 'spoiled gift' of environmental destruction (Timonen et al., 2026). Discourses pertaining to legacies and legacy-making therefore, are

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amply present across societies: this Element examines how material and environmental legacies are understood and acted upon – made – by ordinary people in four different Global North contexts. Private giving and receiving of material legacies is a central engine of societal and global wealth inequalities, and daily personal consumption choices are connected to processes of environmental degradation. A deeper understanding of the thinking and practices behind legacy-making can generate new insights into global megatrends – inequalities and climate change – that are interlinked with legacy-making at the micro level.

Further, we propose that the dynamic intergenerational processes of legacy-making take place within *small worlds* – places and social contexts that are conducive to meaningful action in a world that otherwise appears increasingly turbulent, out-of-control and crisis-ridden. Legacy-making also takes place within *a small world* in the sense that the structures that generate and uphold inequalities and environmental destruction are not unique to any single context but rather are shared and in this sense constitutive of a proverbial small (globalised) world. Moreover, these structures are often described through similar discourses across different contexts, making for a rhetorically small world.

This Element arises from a European Research Council (ERC) funded project titled *Material and environmental legacies in the 21st century: A theory of legacy-making between generations* (short title: *Legacies*). The project and the Element are animated by questions concerning human legacies – *what we leave behind* – which are linked to generational relationships to environmental degradation (including and especially climate change) and kinship-based giving and receiving of material wealth and possessions. While the findings discussed in this Element – drawing on data collected in Italy, South Korea, Sweden, and the United States in 2024–25 – pertain to the actions and ideation of 'ordinary people', these are connected to the global processes of growing inequalities and environmental crises. Legacies and legacy-making are conceptualised as dynamic social processes that implicate everyone. Hence, legacies are framed differently from some everyday uses of the word (e.g., referring to outdated technology as 'legacy systems') and elitist uses of the term (e.g., legacies as the preserve of notable public figures). This Element focuses on legacies that *everyone* has a stake in and conceptualises legacy-making as practices that are shaped by and contribute to (undoing) global processes generating inequalities and environmental injustices. Legacies are defined as

> future-oriented actions and ideation concerning the material and environmental effects that we leave behind (and receive), with direct or implicit reference to our own and our generation's eventual demise.

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Generational relations are central to legacy-making practices, both with reference to material legacies (bequests and inheritance) and environmental actions. The literature on material legacies features qualitative studies of family practices (e.g., Finch & Mason, 2000), quantitative analyses drawing on statistics on inheritance (e.g., Szydlik, 2016), cultural-historical studies (e.g., Hartog, 2012), and comparative analyses (e.g., Beckert, 2018). Works on inheritance, justice and equality (e.g., Halliday, 2018; Laurent, 2024) also resonate with generational considerations such as cumulative inequalities that ensue from kinship-based material legacies.

Demographic changes – lower fertility and greater longevity – have widened the window of opportunity for generational exchanges involving time, space, assets, care, and ideas. The longer the shared lifespan between generations and the smaller the number of people in each generation, the greater, in principle, the scope for intergenerational interaction and passing on (material and immaterial) resources to younger generations. These patterns are connected to social policies, with welfare states to varying extents prioritising younger or older age groups in resource allocation, thereby shaping opportunities for generational social mobility and independence from family, or accentuating dependencies between family generations. These factors in turn influence the need for, and timing, of material legacies. The practices associated with material legacy-making between generations are under-researched in view of significant developments such as the prevalence of childlessness and orientation to chosen families, among other patterns that interlink with environmental legacy ideation, for example, deciding against having children on environmental grounds.

The scope for environmental legacy-making is also enhanced where generations overlap and interact for longer periods of shared lifetime, potentially shaping each other's ideas and actions in relation to the environment. While thinking about kinship (family) generations is central to material legacies, extending the intergenerational perspective beyond two or three generations to include a longer future – considering the rights and needs of future generations of humans and non-humans – has become a key focus of environmental and climate justice movements. Generational relations in the realm of environmental legacies extend from kinship-based to planetary concerns in a dynamic relationship with past and future time perspectives. Extensive and growing literature focuses on various aspects of human-environmental relations (e.g., Gabbott & Zalasiewicz, 2025; Giraldo & Toro, 2024), but none combines such focus with discussion of material legacies.

The integration of material and environmental legacies in this book foregrounds possibilities to witness and think about time from biographical, generational, historical and planetary perspectives. Although the book draws on

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cross-sectional interviews conducted at one point in time, these incorporate period, cohort and biographical temporalities as reported by research participants of different ages. Individuals witness societal responses to climate change and other manifestations of environmental degradation from their generational vantage point and through events such as the *Fridays for Future* movement and the rise of Greta Thunberg to global media attention, the Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change (IPCC) conferences, extreme weather events attributed to climate change, and reports on health issues related to pollution. Discussions on environmental legacies prompt individuals to consider how material-historical changes have shaped their lives and are changing future lives. Cultures of consumption that were normal and desirable in the recent past (c.f., Gilleard et al., 2005) now appear irresponsible and environmentally destructive to those who connect personal choices to environmental legacies. Material legacies also reflect the accumulation of material (dis)advantages over generations. Recounting their biographical experiences, people often consider how their lives have been influenced by the generational accumulation of material assets and possessions, or their absence. These accounts link biographical and generational histories, such as the transfer of assets from asset-rich older generations to precarious younger ones.

This Element draws upon certain strands within the larger turn in social sciences from human-focused approaches to ones that integrate materiality (new materialism) and non-humans (the more-than-human). Materiality and relationality with living and non-living things and environments are an integral part of legacy-making. The small worlds that individuals craft around their material and environmental legacy-making practices are discursively constructed and sensed, fenced in or opened, and cared for, through embodied relations between humans and non-humans. Where non-human and material agency are acknowledged, humans are no longer centre stage, nor alone in control of their surroundings. Such perspectives call for a distributed understanding of agency (Bennett, 2010) and view humans as part of more-than-human entanglements (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017).

The findings are grounded in interviews with 148 research participants across four fieldwork sites and their surrounding areas: Turin in Italy, Gothenburg in Sweden, Seoul in South Korea, and the San Francisco Bay Area in California, United States (US). The interviews were conducted between August 2024 and June 2025, and while they are a snapshot, they will be relevant to readers interested in new ways of looking at a seemingly crisis-ridden world. The research took place amidst geopolitical, economic and climate (policy) upheavals, which pose a multitude of challenges affecting both material and environmental legacies, including the declaration of martial law and subsequent

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presidential impeachment in South Korea in December 2024, and the cataclysmic start of the second Trump presidency in January 2025 and its consequences for social, economic, and political inequalities and ecological degradation. While the extent to which prominent events are reflected in the interview data varies, they feature both directly and indirectly in each context. For example, political developments in the United States, Russia's war on Ukraine, and the increased risk of other conflicts in Europe feature in the interviews conducted in Italy and Sweden through expressions of uncertainty, and in some cases, a shift in focus away from environmental concerns.

1.1.1 Small Worlds

The idea of *small worlds* emerged on a fieldwork trip to California during the wildfires in January 2025, upon realising that most people in the greater Los Angeles area were *not* focused on what the rest of the world thought they would be focusing on – the fires – because they were getting on with their lives within much 'smaller worlds' (habitual localities and everyday activities). In fact, during a stay in the area, the fires were a minor conversation topic, barely mentioned during many encounters. This is not to suggest that people we met were ignorant or in denial, but to highlight that this encapsulates a much larger pattern: people seeking to cope and to act within microcosms while being aware of 'big problems' 'out there', as illustrated by the findings discussed in Sections 3.1 and 3.2.

The eponymous *small worlds* resonate with prominent themes in the findings on environmental legacies: individuals focusing on 'small', that is, local, accessible, and tangible aspects of their environments that can be meaningfully acted upon and cared for at the time of ecological crises and turbulence. Across the contexts, we witnessed a turn to manageable and comforting actions that serve as a refuge from the global scale of problems: within these small worlds, people find and craft spaces for reparative care practices, educational sharing, trust-building, solidarity between generations, and affective more-than-human relationships. These actions often are construed as indirect interactions with larger structures, through efforts that could be described as *doing what one can in the small deeds, to influence the larger scheme of things*. While creating circumstances and relationships that comfort them, people strive to engage in processes of making the world otherwise. It is important to acknowledge that interest and engagement in such activities are not shared by everyone, and while mostly focusing on individuals who are in various ways acting in relation to their environments, we also shed some light on the views of people whose small worlds do not entail environmental actions. Furthermore, small worlds

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sometimes contain contradictory or paradoxical actions, such as sustainability-informed lifestyle choices enabled by unsustainable practices (e.g., investing in shares in fossil fuel-based corporations).

Small worlds also refer to the family and friendship circles within which most material legacy-making (giving and receiving of inheritances and bequests) happens. Inheritances and bequests are conducive towards inequality precisely because they take place within the small worlds of kinship networks, which are growing smaller still with demographic changes; instead of inheritances being divided among many descendants, they increasingly converge upon a small number of heirs or a sole heir in the youngest family generation. Where inheritances and bequests are channelled outside formal kin, they tend to flow to small circles of friends, rarely pertaining to 'bigger' causes. The convergence of inherited resources around the small worlds of (chosen) kinship circles is accentuated by the absence or low level of inheritance taxes, or plans to reduce these taxes, in diverse polities ranging from India to Sweden.

Lastly, the title's *small worlds* evoke the expression 'it's a small world' by referring to the shared features and circumstances of material and environmental legacy-making across the contexts discussed in this book. Notwithstanding the many important differences between societies, we also live in a proverbial small world that has been getting smaller still with globalisation and worldwide cultural and organisational processes (Buzan, 2004; Meyer et al., 1997). The messages directed at people are essentially the same in Italy, South Korea, Sweden, and the United States: recycle or reuse what is left over from consumption, but *do* consume. Delivery vans for giant online retailers like Amazon zip around San Francisco and Turin, the idea that waste generated through consumption can be neatly and harmlessly disposed of or recycled features in awareness campaigns, advertisements, and notices in Seoul and in Gothenburg, and all manner of consumption is facilitated in these cities with great convenience for those who can access and afford it.

1.1.2 Contexts: Similarities and Differences

Population ageing, wealth inequalities, and environmental degradation are shared megatrends across the world, but there are also important differences between the four contexts, such as the timing and extent of fertility decline and resulting family structures, inheritance legislation, social policies impinging on transitions across the life course, environmental policies and education systems, and key features of political systems. Nonetheless, the similarities of the main challenges faced in the four contexts – and the Global North's disproportionate role in generating those challenges – arguably outweigh the differences.

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Legacies could be investigated in any context and are relevant in every society, but the ones discussed here serve as vehicles for elucidating the impacts of the megatrends of inequality, changing generational dynamics, and environmental degradation. The contexts evince different profiles in inequality of wealth and incomes (OECD, 2024). Sweden is a comparatively egalitarian society and, despite some setbacks in the last few years, has long been considered a frontrunner regarding environmental policies (Malm *et al*. 2025). Yet Swedish society is firmly anchored in industrial production with associated economic interests and remains embedded in consumption habits that impact negatively on the environment, notwithstanding the fact that many individuals are making environmentally conscious lifestyle choices (Kronsell *et al*., 2019). Sweden has maintained extensive family policies and an emphasis on gender equality while adhering to the trend towards declining birth rates (SCB, 2023; Wilson, 2025). The research in Sweden focuses on Gothenburg (Göteborg), Sweden's second largest city located on its west coast, once an important port city and home of the automobile manufacturer Volvo. Now a post-industrial city, Gothenburg has adopted the moniker *innovation city* and is undergoing many large urban development projects (Göteborgs Stad, n.d.).

The United States is a highly unequal society (Pfeffer & Killewald, 2018) where wealthy family dynasties and so-called high-net-worth individuals make good use of sophisticated financial advice to consolidate family wealth (Sklair & Glucksberg, 2021) while financial anxiety has increased among those in the middle of the income distribution (Hastings, 2019). The United States is the world's largest economy, and second in greenhouse gas emissions. Public opinion about climate change is polarised (Dunlap et al., 2016), and personal knowledge, experience, and trust in societal actors influence how people view it (Lorenzoni & Pidgeon, 2006). Some regions are affected by extreme weather events, including droughts and fires in California. The research conducted in the United States focuses on the San Francisco Bay Area, incorporating the Silicon Valley, which features stark differences between high-earning and precarious workers, with almost half the population living on low or very low income (Fukumori & Robbennolt, 2023).

The population of Italy is declining due to low fertility and modest levels of immigration. Life course transitions of young adults – labour market entry, co-residential partnerships, and formation of independent households – happen much later than in the European Union (EU) on average, a pattern that is attributable to institutional failure to adapt to economic and social changes, including women's employment (Fiori et al., 2017). The young adult population is adversely affected by labour market precarity following the Financial Crisis and the coronavirus pandemic. In Italy, similarly to the United States, children's

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earnings are strongly linked to their parents' income, implying low intergenerational mobility and reliance on intergenerational transfers and inheritance (Acciari et al., 2024). Norms around family formation and dissolution are comparatively traditional, manifest in relatively low divorce rates, but also evolving, as seen in the declining marriage rate (Eurostat, 2025). Italian policymakers' discourses on climate change have been characterised as 'largely un-polarized' (Ghinoi & Steiner, 2020), even if lately the interest in green transitions is overshadowed by competing social and security priorities. The focal point for research in Italy is Turin (Torino), a 'smart city' with industrial heritage, an official policy agenda for intercultural integration (Nesti, 2020) and aspirations to become a 'circular . . . green city' with 'infrastructure . . . capable of reducing the risks associated with the climate emergency' (Vision Turin 2050, n.d.).

South Korea modernised extremely rapidly, leading to major generational differences in experiences, expectations, and cultural practices due to democratisation, rapid economic growth, and ideological change (Baik, 2020). There are significant differences in the lifetime experience and prevalence of poverty across generations, with a large proportion of the older population living in relative poverty. Due to low fertility, there often is a sole direct descendant in the youngest family generation, and a high level of concern about education, life chances, and cultural transmission on the part of older family generations. A declining share of the population in South Korea perceives marriage as imperative, especially among the younger age groups (Raymo & Park, 2020). South Korea's fertility rate – in part a result of postponed childbearing – is characterised as ultra-low. Some manifestations of sexism, such as skewed sex ratios at birth (an indicator of son preference) have disappeared (Choi & Hwang, 2020), and support for childcare has been extended, but South Korea is marked by highly unequal gender relations in both public and private realms (Kim & Cheung, 2019). Per capita carbon emissions have been on a steep upward trajectory, and South Korea's current environmental policy targets are modest. A survey conducted in 2024 found that South Koreans expressed a relatively high level of concern about climate change compared to respondents in other countries, with older Koreans reporting greater concern than younger age groups (Shin et al., 2024). The empirical investigation of legacies centred on Seoul, the capital. The city is renowned for the sky-high cost of housing and intense 'education fever', hosting the nation's top three universities and competitive secondary schools. Many young people aspire to buy a home in Seoul and secure the city's educational advantages for their children, yet these goals are often unreachable without substantial financial help from their families.

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There are important differences between the contexts. For example, thinking and actions around material legacies are more strategic and goal-oriented in highly unequal societies; in more egalitarian societies, material legacies are generally approached in a less strategic manner as people tend to be less dependent on them (e.g., due to more redistributive education, housing, and other social policies). However, this book focuses on the *commonalities* in legacy-making across the four study contexts, both for intellectual and practical reasons. As part of the conceptualisation of small worlds, commonalities are foregrounded. While this book's short format does not allow elaborating on differences, these are alluded to throughout.

Accessing Legacy-Making

Not acting in relation to one's material or environmental legacies is evident from facts such as many people dying intestate or denying the existence of environmental crises. Nonetheless, enmeshment in legacy-making processes is inescapable insofar as everyone living in wealthy societies is implicated in processes of (over)consumption and relations of possession to varying degrees. For some, environmental legacies are a matter of daily concern, and intense personal or collective action aimed at countering negative legacies, while others barely pay them any attention or consider their personal actions irrelevant. Everyday environmental actions happen in homes, workplaces, neighbourhoods, and communities. While various choices concerning lifestyle and living arrangements can reflect orientation to environmental legacies, many of them are not readily conducive to observation and recruitment of research participants. Research participant recruitment in Gothenburg, Turin, Seoul, and the San Francisco Bay Area therefore, focused on public or otherwise accessible settings where people were *acting in relation to* their environment, often but not always the local 'natural' environment, ranging from awareness raising to clean-ups, as elaborated in Section 3.1.

After accessing most research participants through environmental groups and activities, settings that were conducive to establishing trust and rapport, it was possible to ask them about actions that typically are confined to the private sphere, including their material legacy ideation and practices. For example, Erik, a Swedish participant recruited through a local environmental protection group, explained how he and his siblings had moved to smaller homes when their children had grown up, a choice that he saw as a reaction against his parents' generation, who continued living in their large houses long after their children had moved away. The practice of downsizing from a large house to a smaller one after children have left home is here linked to a value-based

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intention to consume less energy and framed as a reaction against the previous generation's choices and associated negative environmental legacies. This is also an example of interlinked material and environmental legacies, as environmentally motivated downsizing relates to what is the single largest bequeathable material asset for most people: their home.

1.1.3 Section Structure

Human legacies are now more complex and significant than ever because the window of opportunity for generational interaction has been radically extended; because legacies straddle the material and the environmental; and because these conjoined legacies assume greater importance in an increasingly unequal world where irreversible environmental changes are taking place. We approach legacies as material and environmental inheritance: what older adults hope and prepare for as their legacies, and how younger people understand what they (are due to) inherit in material and environmental terms, and how they begin to shape their own future legacies.

Section 2 focuses on material legacies and starts with two vignettes that illustrate material legacy-making practices. Section 2.1 addresses the giver's perspective on bequests and inheritances, focusing on the ideas, concerns, and actions of those who are planning and have disbursed material legacies. Section 2.2 mirrors these perspectives by examining the experience of receiving material legacies. Accounts of inheritance as a burden emerge as a central theme in these two sections. In Section 3, we turn to environmental legacies, also starting with two short vignettes. In Section 3.1, different approaches to thinking and acting in relation to environmental legacies in daily life are discussed. In Section 3.2, we turn to examining how people understand the connections between their actions within the small worlds of their local settings and communities, and the mechanisms whereby (alternative) collective and planetary environmental legacies (could) come about. Section 3.2 also explores diverse ways of envisioning human and more-than-human futures. Section 4.1 offers reflections on the interconnections of material and environmental legacies, the implications of their entanglement, and the scope for large-scale change originating within small worlds.

2 Material Legacies

Owen is an environmentally active retiree in his 70s who lives with his wife in the San Francisco Bay Area. He worked in the tech sector and over time has accrued significant assets in the form of retirement savings and a house that has greatly increased in value. As a childless couple with no regular contact with the younger

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family generations, their chosen granddaughter (the daughter of a student they hosted decades ago) has become a key receiver of large bequests. Due to geographical distance, minimal direct personal contact, and apparent lack of need for such gifts on the part of the chosen granddaughter, this provision of financial support appears to be unnecessary and lacking reciprocity. The couple have named Owen's siblings, nieces, and nephews as heirs and appointed his two brothers as executors. Even though the will focuses on formal relatives, Owen's legacy aspirations and visions are oriented towards the chosen granddaughter who lives abroad and rarely talks to the couple.

Tae is a 27-year-old woman who recently graduated with a master's degree in the humanities. During her studies, she moved from her parental home to her grandmother's apartment located in an upper middle-class district of Seoul. The move was motivated by emotional closeness to the grandmother, further reinforced when Tae's studies took a less practical direction, something that her parents were not keen on, but the grandmother supported. Tae had received a bequest worth approximately 20,000 US dollars from her grandmother, a gesture she valued more for the affection it signalled than the amount itself. Tae attributes their closeness to the fact that she is the eldest granddaughter, as the grandmother has a feminist agenda which includes advice against having children. Despite the existence of a will where the grandmother leaves the very valuable apartment to Tae, there are signs that one of Tae's aunts might challenge the will in the interest of other grandchildren. For now, Tae continues to live with her grandmother and enjoys the prospect of always being able to live in the district where she feels at home.

2.1 Making Material Legacies: The Giver's Perspective

Inheritances and bequests are often considered a private or family matter, yet they have profound societal consequences. This chapter addresses both inheritance-based inequalities and legal frameworks governing inheritance, and the concerns and considerations that guide material legacy-making practices from the individual giver's perspective.

Literature on inheritance and bequests underlines their role in reproducing inequality: *to him that hath, more shall be given* – the so-called Matthew effect after the biblical reference. Inequalities engendered by inheritance tend to accumulate over consecutive generations of heirs, impairing social mobility (Halliday, 2018; Keister et al., 2019). Material legacies will assume unprecedented importance as the large post-World War II cohorts in many countries reach advanced old age and gradually pass away. Across the OECD, it is estimated that inheritances in 2025 amounted to 6 trillion US Dollars. Inheritances are growing as a share of overall wealth and as a share of GDP: relative to national output, inheritances in France have doubled since the 1960s, and tripled in Germany since the 1970s, and they amount to over 15 per cent of GDP in Italy (*The Economist*, 2025). Net wealth inequality in Italy is increasing

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progressively due to the growing size and inequality of intergenerational transfers to fewer heirs in smaller birth cohorts (Bavaro et al., 2025). In the United States, the 'Great Wealth Transfer' is already underway: it is estimated that over 85 trillion US Dollars will be transferred through intergenerational inheritances by mid-century as material legacies pass from the Baby Boomer generation to younger ones (Cerulli Report, 2024). Similar patterns are unfolding in other Global North contexts, calling for a deeper understanding of the social practices behind material legacies.

Posthumous material legacies that are disbursed through written or verbal wills feature in all societies, and *premortem* material legacies (bequests) are growing in importance in some. While many aspects of *premortem* or *inter vivos* legacies – assets, possessions and significant monetary gifts conveyed while the giver and receiver are both alive – remain poorly understood, both *premortem* and posthumous legacy-making practices tend to follow kinship lines (Hann, 2008; Yanagisako, 2015). According to the socio-material convoy theory, social and material resources and relations interact across the life course (Ekerdt & Baker, 2014), so that, for example, marriage entails both kinship formation and resource distribution with effects across the life course (e.g., Ginn & Arber, 1991). Our findings are testimony to the continued dominance of kinship-based material legacy-making, but we illuminate less well-understood practices within this, such as bequests and inheritance 'skipping' a generation, typically in the form of *premortem* bequests or posthumous inheritance conveyed by grandparents directly to grandchildren.

This section also discusses practices of material legacy making outside formal or legal kinship, such as planning to give to friends, to chosen kin, and to causes, for example, education, minority rights, and environmental protection. These insights are especially valuable given the increasing number of individuals who have no 'obvious' heirs (direct descendants), as illustrated by the vignette about Owen. Often, there is no inheritance at all, or it is spent down, but where material legacies are foreseen and planned for, a prominent theme pertains to framing them as *burdens*, a counter-intuitive finding that also features in Section 2.2 from the receiver perspective. Although they are not always adhered to, we begin by outlining the formal rules that frame material legacy-making in Italy, Sweden, the United States, and South Korea.

2.1.1 Formal Rules Governing Material Legacy-Making

The legislative and institutional aspects of legacy-making differ across the four contexts. In Italy, traditional norms of kinship-based inheritance continue to exert significant influence in shaping family bequests. Italian law mandates

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a fixed distribution of inheritance, prioritising spouses and children if they are alive. Family members are required to give support and care to each other, for example, children are legally obliged to provide care for their parents, including financial support where necessary (Biancardi, 2024). While family dynamics in Italy are evolving, the pace of change is slow. For example, the divorce rate in 2023 per 1,000 individuals was 1.1 in Italy, compared to 1.6 in the EU and 2.5 in Sweden (Eurostat, 2025). Nevertheless, second marriages and births outside marriage are becoming increasingly common. These changing family structures coexist with rigid inheritance laws and deeply rooted familistic cultural norms. Furthermore, due to the economic insecurity faced by younger generations in Italy, inheritance plays a critical role in long-term planning by individuals and families.

Detailed regulations govern the division of inheritance among legal heirs in Sweden, and drawing up a will is rare (Erixson & Olsson, 2015). The Inheritance Code prohibits leaving legal heirs empty-handed, as half of the legal heir's portion is reserved for them regardless of the will, meaning legal heirs can claim this share if they choose to (Regeringskansliet, 2023). The government has launched an enquiry aimed at updating the Inheritance Code, and including cohabiting partners and cousins as legal heirs is being considered as part of this (Regeringskansliet, 2024). Inheritance tax was abolished in Sweden in 2005, partly in response to tax evasion under the previous system (Elinder & Erixson, 2021).

Inheritance legislation in the United States is based on freedom of testation, including the right to exclude children (Beckert, 2018). However, as most people in the United States die intestate (without a will), inheritances often are distributed by probate according to federal and state inheritance laws that guarantee equal shares among descendants and protect the surviving spouse (Saulnier, 2020). Inheritances further accentuate the high wealth inequality in the United States due to tax exemption on most inheritances. Notwithstanding laws focusing on equal shares among formal descendants, access to family wealth continues to reflect gender inequalities (e.g., Cooper, 2014).

South Korea has a significant gender gap in intergenerational wealth. Although discriminatory inheritance clauses have been erased from legislation, gender-based inequalities persist in inheritance allocation (Kim & Lim-Soh, 2023). According to the South Korean Civil Act, the order of heirs and the proportion of inheritance are primarily determined by the decedent's will; statutory inheritance rules apply only in the absence of a will. In a society where Confucian traditions persist, particularly among the older generation, this framework is often used to allocate a larger share of assets to the eldest son or other male heirs. However, even if a decedent stipulates in a will or bequest that

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all assets should go to someone other than the legal heirs, those heirs retain the right to claim a portion of what would have been their statutory share. This legal mechanism is intended to mitigate the potential negative consequences of will-based inheritance for legal heirs, and female legal heirs in particular.

2.1.2 Kinship-Based Practices of Material Legacy-Making

In conjunction with the formal rules, material legacies are shaped by kinship, a concept that we interpret 'generously' (Finch & Mason, 2000), guided by the notion that family and kin are what they do (Morgan, 2011). Families are diverse, fluid, and complex (Smart & Neale, 1999); in addition to the 'traditional' nuclear family form constituted by a heterosexual couple and their child(ren), families take multiple forms including blended /stepfamilies following divorce/separation and new partnerships (Bildtgård & Öberg, 2020); queer families (Connidis & Barnett, 2019; Nordqvist, 2019); and lone parent families (Demo et al., 2000). Even pets can be designated as kin members (Haraway, 2003), as exemplified in a later section. Intergenerational friendship and other non-kin ties within or between generations are important for some (Elliott O'Dare et al., 2019), but the proximate context for generativity in most older adults' lives is the familial one, with a strong focus on relationships with their (grand) children.

Across the contexts, thinking and acting in relation to material legacies therefore centres on kinship-based, generational giving. Individuals typically plan to leave material legacies to their spouses or partners, children, and grandchildren. Hye, a seventy-two-year-old Korean woman, envisages passing all assets and possessions to her two sons, including a plot of land which she accepts is likely to be sold by them (after cremation of the ancestors' remains located there) because maintenance of the site and the graves in accordance with traditional *Jesa* rites would be too burdensome for her sons. Eunmin, a Korean woman in her late 60s, had already provided extensive financial support towards her only child's education abroad. After inheriting money from her own mother, she placed a property in her daughter's name and prepared informal wills, along with carefully earmarked keepsakes stored in her dressing room. She made clear that all her assets and possessions would ultimately pass to her daughter. Where such kin members are not present, the first choice typically is siblings, nephews, and nieces. This is the case for Viveca, a Swedish woman in her mid-70s who has no children and describes herself as coming from a wealthy background. Both of her brothers have died. She refers to one brother's family as her own and has decided to leave her savings and apartment to his children, writing a will with the help of a solicitor to avoid any ambiguity after her death.

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The kinship-based inheritance laws provide a frame for both givers and receivers, creating reciprocal expectations of acting within the norms. However, individuals may feel restricted by the taken-for-grandness of the inheritance norms, and some report uneasiness about adhering to the mandatory share for heirs. Relationships between (prospective) givers and receivers can change over time, shaping the perception of the fairness of these norms. Antonio, 89 (Italy), is a father of two, a son and a daughter, as well as a grandfather and great-grandfather. His daughter lives in the same building and helps to care for him and other older relatives when needed. His son lives further away and has adopted a lifestyle that Antonio finds hard to understand. Antonio laments that his son and the son's children rarely visit and sometimes entertains the possibility of adjusting his will to leave more to his daughter and her family, although he is unsure whether he will act on this idea. Antonio effectively deliberated whether he should adhere to the principle of equality (equal division among kins) and altruism (bequeathing without expecting anything), or reciprocity (the prospect of inheritance reciprocated by transfer of resources, such as care), reflecting the principles that orient the literature on intergenerational transfers (Silverstein, 2006).

Skipped Generation Legacies

Grandparents' influence on various outcomes for their grandchildren has been theorised and, in some realms, empirically interrogated (e.g., Bengtson, 2013, on intergenerational transmission of religiosity). The role of grandparents in driving wealth inequalities among grandchildren has been identified as a unique and significant predictor independent of parental influence on wealth (Pfeffer & Killewald, 2018). To date, the literature on grandparent–grandchild relationships has overwhelmingly focused on childhood, and we know much less about interaction between grandparents and their *adult* grandchildren (Arber & Timonen, 2012; Connidis & Barnett, 2019). This is a major lacuna in understanding important familial relationships, and one that is becoming more significant because – as a result of longer shared lifespans – many grandparents know their grandchildren into the grandchildren's teenage years, adulthood, and even middle age. Many older adults now witness the growing old of their own children, and increasing numbers will coexist with their grandchildren long past the latter's entry into adulthood, a pattern that is unprecedented in human history. However, it is also an increasingly common experience to have only one or very few grandchildren, or none at all (Margolis & Arpino, 2020).

The cost of raising children is increasing in competitive economies as the race to garner valued educational qualifications intensifies, and the cost of obtaining

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these credentials grows. Grandparents – alongside or instead of parents – are becoming important sources of direct material legacies to their grandchildren as the younger family generations face challenges with the costs of childrearing, education, and housing. For Seoul resident Tae (vignette at the start of the section), orienting her studies in a less economically rewarding direction required the support of her grandmother. Living rent-free, receiving sizeable financial support, and the prospect of inheriting her grandmother's apartment frees Tae from the need to earn the large income that otherwise would be necessary for living in the wealthy neighbourhood where she grew up.

Tae's case illustrates how significant skipped generation legacies can be given *inter vivos*. The challenges that younger generations are experiencing in finding secure employment and housing are prompting more 'giving while living' than in the past, when shorter lifespans contributed towards 'timely' receipt of inheritances. Where the oldest family generations live to 80, 90, or beyond, the timing of posthumous inheritances increasingly is postponed to the old age of children, and the middle age of grandchildren, prompting some to consider *inter vivos* bequests where the benefits of giving are witnessed by the giver. Older people transferring the ownership of houses and apartments to future heirs while still alive via *donazione con riserva di usufrutto* emerged as a common practice among the interviewees in Italy, allowing the donor to continue living in the house while also avoiding inheritance taxes. Grazia had registered her newly renovated house in the mountains for her grandchildren, portraying this as gifting them a place close to nature, where they spent their childhood. However, it is also a strategic choice to skip the children's generation: Grazia has one daughter from a previous marriage, and her second husband has a daughter from another relationship, but only Grazia's biological daughter has children. Therefore, bequeathing to the grandchildren avoids complications with the two daughters.

Skipped generation legacies often benefit both the 'skipped' generation (adult children) and the grandchildren. Nakkiran was born in the San Francisco Bay Area to a family with Indian origins. She and her sister had recently received 80,000 US Dollars each from their grandfather after he passed away. Initially, she did not view this amount as her inheritance; it seemed like something that her father managed. The money covered the cost of university for both siblings for one year of study – a significant financial relief for her parents. Nakkiran emphasised how much she valued this inheritance from her grandfather, who had saved 'so much money' for many years to support his grandchildren's education. However, this inheritance is also related to conflicting priorities within the family in the past. She described the relationship between her father and grandfather as strained, as the grandfather had refused

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to pay for a more distant, prestigious college for Nakkiran's father. The legacy, therefore, represented a transformation of the giver from being a strict father to becoming a more sensitive grandfather, opening educational opportunities for the next generation and reducing the financial burden for Nakkiran's parents.

2.1.3 Kin-Making through Material Legacies

Material legacies are also channelled through means other than conventional testaments and kinship lines. These processes are construed as *kin-making*, where the giving and receiving of material assets and possessions play a central role but take unconventional and to-date poorly understood forms that are gaining in importance due to greater diversity in choices concerning kinship. In his work on kinship in the United States, Schneider (1980, p. 50) framed family relations as 'enduring diffuse solidarity', emphasising their lasting but also indeterminate character. Legacy-making can reflect dissonances between lived realities and long-established, influential conventions of kinship and inheritance that individuals seek to re-interpret. The vignette on Owen illustrates aspects of diffusion in legacy making reflected in the orientation towards the chosen granddaughter, which is challenged by limited contact, alongside the pursuit of a pragmatic approach based on a conventional understanding of kinship, despite the distant relationship to the younger generations of his family. Conventions can remain relevant even when ways of living do not correspond to traditional normative ideas, for example, in the form of legal frameworks which, despite their supposed focus on equality, produce disparities among heirs in the context of queer and other non-conventional legacy relations (Sorainen, 2018).

Legacy-making sometimes orients to friends, either fully or in part. Irene (US), a self-employed woman in her early 60s, has long been engaged in activities related to environmental protection, both locally and internationally. After experiencing major personal losses, she developed her own approach to legacy-making and kinship. In the aftermath of her husband's death, Irene's friends had assisted her in dealing with his belongings, helping to decide what to keep or re-purpose, and what to sell. This experience motivated Irene to think about a will that designates beneficiaries based on closeness and need: 'I'm a firm believer . . . and it's not just because I don't have children, that you pick your family . . . and [the beneficiaries] are my family . . . very dear friends . . . not blood-related . . . they're all younger than me . . . I have other friends . . . that are even tighter with me, but they're either my age or older'. Irene explained that these older friends are not beneficiaries of her will as they are 'set' (financially secure). After her death, the designated friends will be invited to

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her house and can take anything they want. A friend she has named the executor will then sell her house and split the proceeds among the beneficiaries (the younger friends), a decision that testamentary freedom in the US permits. She hoped to 'give them [friends] a leg up' but did not care how they used the inheritance, as she considered environmental protection projects and the shared process of learning and growing related to these to be her main legacy.

Kin-making is discursively negotiated within legal norms and considerations that often pertain to deservingness. Mauro (Italy), a gay man in his 30s, has no children and does not intend to have any. He explains that cultivating a chosen family is necessary for him, as he is excluded from having a vertical family structure (his own children and grandchildren). Upon moving out of his family home, he made a concerted effort to build a horizontal family to secure reciprocal emotional and practical support. Mauro plans to leave most of his inheritance to this family, which includes his nephew, partner, and close friends. However, he emphasises that both his biological and chosen family will inherit only if they remain emotionally and physically close to him until his time of passing. Similarly, Tiziana's (Italy) situation prompts her to think beyond the norms. She is a sixty-five-year-old woman who has no partner, no children, no nephews or nieces, and her only close relative is her childless older sister. In the absence of any heirs in the family, she considers bequeathing to cat protection associations, having come to view her cat as a family member that gives her unconditional affection.

2.1.4 The Burden of Giving Material Legacies

From the positionality of a giver of material legacies, the research participants ranged from attesting disinterest or uncertainty to highly strategic actions. The prospect of leaving behind sizeable material legacies often gave rise to concerns about the tax burden and led to strategizing about the manner and timing of giving in view of the negative influences that large bequests and inheritances might have on the recipients. *Inter vivos* bequests were, in some cases, made with the explicit intention of avoiding inheritance taxation, as admitted by Sun, a Seoul resident in his late 60s who had transferred funds amounting to approximately 0.8 million US Dollar equivalent to his daughter at the time of her marriage. As they pondered Korea's steep gift taxes, the daughter suggested labelling the money a loan and paying monthly interest on it; Sun agreed. Ever since, the interest payments have arrived with clockwork regularity. On paper the arrangement reads like an ordinary loan, but its true purpose was to sidestep gift taxation. Such parent–child arrangements are commonly used in South Korea, particularly when children purchase an apartment with parental support.

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Myra, in her 60s and recently retired from the education sector in the San Francisco Bay Area, expressed concerns about inheritance within her family. She worried about the dependency that inheritance might create, emphasising the importance of her daughter and son finding 'their own place in the world'. She feared that leaving them too much money might make them reliant on their parents' wealth. Her husband's lucrative job in the tech industry was the main source of the family's wealth. The couple had bought a house recently in a prosperous South Bay neighbourhood where the median price is 2 million US Dollars. She stated that she did not want to give her children money outright and that she and her husband had decided to limit the amount their children would receive in their will and donate the rest of their estate 'to charity, so that it could do some good in the world'. She mentioned they might help the children with down payments if they bought property, but her main concern was their self-reliance. Myra also considered the timing of legacy-making a challenge, with reference to extended longevity: 'We don't plan to die when they [children] really need this money . . . We haven't received our inheritance [from parents] yet, and now we don't need it . . . it becomes unnecessary by the time you would likely get an inheritance'. From this perspective, 'giving while living' in a measured way can address the challenges of longer lifespans and contribute to children's projects without risking their independence. In the context of her wealthy family, Myra felt that inheritance must be carefully controlled in terms of timing and quantity to have a positive effect on the recipients.

Some prospective heirs stand to inherit money from multiple sources, such as grandparents, parents and stepparents, aunts and uncles, and non-formal kin. This concentration of generational wealth from single or multiple sources was a concern for Zach, a self-made multi-millionaire in his 40s living in the San Francisco Bay Area. As a childless person living away from his family of origin in Europe, his legacy ideation nonetheless followed the kin line as he planned to leave to his nephew, his nearest relative in the next generation. However, he was concerned that the inheritance would have a negative impact on the nephew, as he is also due to inherit from his wealthy parents. Zach had specified certain preconditions under which his nephew would receive the inheritance, to ensure that the personal and financial independence of the receiver would not be jeopardised by the material legacy.

While limiting the amount of *inter vivos* gifts to avoid 'spoiling' the younger generations was emphasised by wealthy participants, this practice might be perceived as unfair and unnecessary by the prospective heirs. Emanuele (Italy) is twenty-nine years old and would like to buy his first house, but this purchase is made more challenging by his parents' hesitation to transfer part of his inheritance *inter vivos*. Emanuele acknowledges the family history based on

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generations crafting their own wealth and not bequeathing while alive, as well as his parents' potential need to finance care in older age. Nonetheless, he resents his parents' decision, which he views as limiting his current financial possibilities in the interest of preserving family wealth: in his opinion, younger people in Italy do not have the same ability to save as previous generations.

2.1.5 (Not) 'Spending the Kids' Inheritance'

Most testators could, in principle, choose to use and deplete their material wealth while still alive. In English-speaking Western countries, this is sometimes framed humorously as becoming a member of the 'ski club', short for 'spend your kids' inheritance'. Contrary to this stereotype, most older adults consider it important to make provision for leaving something to their children, but spending down financial resources and assets (that might otherwise be bequeathed) is a realistic prospect in the United States, where the cost of long-term care in old age is high (Gruber & McGarry, 2025). The idea of perhaps needing one's own savings in old age also featured prominently in South Korea. Jong (Korea), age 67, had set aside savings that he was keeping 'for now' to guard against the uncertainties of very old age – illness, long-term care, and the possibility that life would not end quickly or cheaply. He held on to these funds so he could take responsibility for his own needs and avoid becoming a burden to his children, sparing them heavy expenses and worry. Hye, a Korean woman in her 70s, describes late life as a time to be light on costs and possessions. After years in nursing and small-scale farming, she and her spouse live modestly on savings and what their land yields. She plans to pare back belongings and budgets so that utility bills, repairs, and groceries remain low if income tightens. She frames this as a gift to her children: by keeping the household simple now, the children will not face medical bills or a cluttered home later.

Adult children, in some cases, reacted by encouraging their parents to spend on themselves while still alive. Bae, a Korean woman in her early 50s, said that her and her brother's typical response to her mother's attempts to start a conversation about inheritance was telling her to 'spend it all on yourself while you are alive'. Eunmin, a Korean woman in her late 60s, recounted that her mother had spent a lifetime scrimping – buying a small rental flat, living off the rent, and saving rather than treating herself. In response, Eunmin had repeatedly (to no avail) urged her to use the money for her own comfort. Joel (Sweden), in his 30s, recalled how he always had what he needed while growing up, although his parents were not wealthy. His parents' generation's decision to sell an inherited house that had been used as a summer cottage within the extended family, had resulted in a significant amount of money. This had

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allowed his parents to travel more than earlier, and Joel appreciated that they could now afford to enjoy such experiences. While he hoped there would be some money left for him to inherit, he did not think the amount mattered much. Similarly, Olivia, in her 30s and the only child of parents who lived in a big house outside Gothenburg, estimated that her parents would make a lot of money if they were to sell their house, and expressed the hope that they would use as much of the proceeds as they wished. Nevertheless, Olivia was confident that there would be some assets left for her to inherit eventually. Swedish participants generally viewed inheritance as an appreciated bonus, not as something that defined their life choices or was necessary for affording fundamental things such as housing, a perception that did feature in Italy, South Korea, and the United States.

Spending down one's savings and assets can occur in situations where there are no children who could otherwise expect an inheritance. Jody (US), in her late forties, was reorienting professionally at the time of her interview. Based on her solid retirement provisions, she could afford to work in a lower-paid job that allowed for a greater positive impact in the environmental field. She had not received any inheritance, considered financial independence essential, and felt no need to care for others financially. She intended to use up the wealth she had accumulated herself, having actively decided against having children. She hoped the money would allow her to spend time with her extended family. She mentioned the possibility of leaving an inheritance to her nephew and niece, but seemed hesitant, given their parents' wealth and her priority of encouraging self-sufficiency. In fact, Jody was not sure whether she would have something to leave behind: her father was using up his wealth as he had moved into an assisted living facility, and Jody anticipated that she might be in a similar situation in the future.

2.1.6 Conclusion

Material legacy-making centres around the maintenance and construction of small worlds where resources are typically directed at a small number of beneficiaries. Whether kinship-based or extending beyond formal kinship, material legacy-making orients to the small worlds understood as the people and things the giver feels most invested in. Distributing one's material possessions across many people or causes (e.g., charities) is rare, even where testamentary freedom would allow this, and focus on family is mandated by inheritance systems that specify legally enforceable shares based on kinship relations. Legal frameworks are not always in line with the 'new' practices of material legacy-making and are sometimes circumvented or approached

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selectively, especially in the case of *inter vivos* bequests: gaining further insight into such informal practices is important for understanding central mechanisms of unequal resource distribution.

The prospect of spending down one's savings and assets is a realistic one in the United States, where there is little protection against the potentially enormous costs of long-term care. Some people wish to spend down their inheritance in the interest of maintaining a particular lifestyle and exercising freedom of choice, and they may be encouraged to do so by their potential heirs. Planning and disbursing material legacies becomes burdensome in situations where there are differences of opinion about the timing of bequests, or where concerns arise about the potential effects on recipients, especially their independence. Givers of large material legacies often feel burdened by the responsibility of ensuring that the recipients are not 'spoiled' by these legacies, and delayed inheritances can lead to burdensome family dynamics. This theme extends to Section 2.2, where the burden of *receiving* material legacies is discussed.

2.2 Receiving Material Legacies: Inside the 'Black Box'

This section analyses central features of the experience or anticipation of *receiving* money, assets and objects through inheritance and bequests. Material legacies have been described as a 'black box' due to the difficulty of obtaining empirical insights – data on inheritance are scarce, patchy and in many contexts, non-existent (Beckert, 2018; Keister & Moller, 2000). There are understandable reasons for the lack or deficiency of data on inheritance, to do with privacy, social desirability bias, and sensitivities around death, as well as the general difficulty of getting people to disclose detailed information about their finances. It is only to be expected that some people are guarded and evince various biases in discussing their material legacies, as even well-designed surveys that guarantee respondent anonymity struggle to elicit information on incomes and assets, let alone on their distribution among beneficiaries.

We were nonetheless encouraged by the fact that researchers have been able to build rapport and trust in legacy-themed interviews. In fact, we were surprised by how forthcoming most research participants were about the inheritances and bequests they had received, in many cases detailing their value and significance. People's attitudes and behaviours in relation to legacies are often (seemingly) contradictory, for instance, seeing legacies both as unmerited wealth *and* taken-for-granted family support (Schaeffer, 2014). Material legacies can also be approached as something that ties – or even chains – givers and receivers together, a situation that receivers sometimes experience as uncomfortable, and givers could deploy quite strategically.

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Apart from money and large assets that can have significant monetary value, such as apartments, houses and investment portfolios, material legacies can take the form of objects, ranging from (in monetary terms) valuable items such as jewellery, musical instruments, and art, to pieces that have sentimental or symbolic value (Liliana et al., 2010). Research on bequeathing objects has broached the topic of managing one's 'material room' in old age – for instance by 'downsizing' (Ekerdt, 2020) and giving away possessions in anticipation of death (Larsson & Hagberg, 2014) – yet this topic demands more attention in view of the growing number of older adults with unprecedented quantities of material possessions ensuing from consumption patterns across the life courses. Further, objects deserve attention due to the commonly unacknowledged role that material items have in shaping people's lives and relationships (Miller, 2009), making it difficult to separate the human from the material (Miller, 2010).

A prominent theme in the findings relating to receiving – as with giving, outlined in Section 2.1 – is that of burdens: receiving material legacies frequently is framed as burdensome and is accompanied by ambivalent feelings. This applies in the case of unwanted items, but can also extend to seemingly valuable material legacies. Why are inheritance and inheriting often, surprisingly and counter-intuitively, portrayed as burdensome? The section also discusses the difference that receiving inheritance or bequests can make for the receiver, including, in some cases, enabling more environmentally sound lifestyles and career choices, the purchase of property, and financial support for studying. While the amounts received vary greatly and are not always disclosed in detail, the significance of inheritance and bequests in securing opportunities is generally acknowledged despite the ambivalences surrounding inheritance.

Critique of inheritance as an engine of inequality was largely absent across the research contexts, and we explore some possible reasons behind this. While the wealthiest 20 per cent across the OECD inherit with a likelihood of 39–69 per cent (depending on country), not receiving any inheritance, or receiving a very modest inheritance, are common experiences. For example, in Italy, only 3 per cent of people in the lowest income quintile inherit something (OECD, 2021; Salas-Rojo & Rodriguez, 2022). We begin by outlining how this position of *not* inheriting is portrayed.

2.2.1 Non-Existent, Uncertain, and Hesitant Material Legacies

Absent or very minor inheritance was something that people generally did not want to or could not discuss, and hence, they typically turned to outlining various immaterial inheritances, such as values. Several conversation partners

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in the United States did not anticipate receiving material legacies. This is not surprising as only one-in-five Baby Boomers and Generation X members in the United States expect to leave an inheritance (Northwestern Mutual, 2024). Some described the obvious disadvantages of not having access to multigenerational wealth, resulting in financial pressure and the need to succeed professionally in view of the high cost of living in the San Francisco Bay Area. However, given the strong focus on values of personal and financial independence, they did not necessarily portray the absence of inheritance in negative terms. When asked what he had received from his parents, Victor, an engineer in his late thirties, gave an emotional account, referring to the love and care that was given to him by his parents, who had arrived as undocumented migrants, referring to this as 'the things that I feel like I've been very fortunate to have . . . [and] can try to carry forward'.

Uncertainty or hesitancy regarding prospective inheritance was also common. Family practices regarding communication about inheritance and large gifts vary greatly. Lilavati (US), a young woman about to be married, had already had extensive discussions with her parents about what she was due to receive by way of significant *inter vivos* bequests upon her marriage. However, such open discussions about inheritance with family members were quite rare even in situations where this seemed timely. Julius (US) stated that talking about matters related to death is avoided in his family due to several painful losses of close family members in the past. Fred and Aarav (US), being away from their families of origin in Asia, expressed sadness when asked about the prospect of inheritance, which they connected to their parents' eventual demise. Some older participants also stated that they did not wish to contemplate the prospect. Gianna, a seventy-one-year-old Italian woman, acknowledged that she and her husband 'should get ready' by considering how to split their inheritance among their two daughters. The idea that her children might fight over this distressed her, as she had experienced conflict over inheritance in her family. According to Gianna, her husband is 'terrified' by the topic of inheritance because it forces him to think about his future and death. As a result, they are avoiding the discussion for now.

2.2.2 Inheriting Valued Objects

Material and immaterial legacies can be interlinked: for instance, accounts of personal values and family traditions (immaterial) often are corroborated through records such as photographs and letters (of symbolic value) or objects of art, jewellery, furniture, and domestic ritual such as tableware (that might have high material /monetary value but also be entirely mundane). Passing on

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objects is a way of passing on testimony – conveying how one sees and experiences the world. Research participants displayed emotional ties to particularly relevant inherited objects and often provided detailed information about them.

Grazia (Italy) identifies as a feminist and cherishes an old letter written by a distant aunt who lived against the conventions of her time by remaining unmarried and experiencing numerous tumultuous love affairs at the end of the nineteenth century. Gemma (Italy) treasures the cooking utensils once used by her mother, who can no longer cook due to cognitive decline: cooking emerged in her interview as a family practice transmitted through generations of women. Specific objects are also important for Nakkiran, a student in her early 20s. Born in the Bay Area to a family originally from India, she wore a striking gemstone necklace during the interview. The necklace, a bequest from her grandmother who lives in India, represents her Indian heritage and the close relationship with her grandmother. When discussing environmental legacies, Nakkiran realised that she would also inherit her grandmother's brass pots, currently used by her mother. In her words, everything in the United States is 'use and throw' while in India, items like metal lunch boxes and cooking pots last for generations. She considered family recipes and the cooking pots essential parts of the legacy she envisaged passing on to her future children.

Older adults often occupy the position of receiver, keeper, and prospective giver of objects that have been inherited or will be bequeathed. Elsa, a Swedish participant in her early 80s, has kept many items from previous family generations and has lived in the same house since she was a young adult. During the interview that took place in her home, she proudly presented many different types of embroidered textiles, old furniture, small decorative objects, and her mother's doll. All these items, especially the embroidered textiles made by different women in her family, hold great sentimental value for Elsa. Her children have reassured her that she need not worry about what will happen with the house and all her cherished items when she is no longer alive: it is for them to take care of one day. While she is reassured to know that they do not expect her to clean out her house, she is not certain her children are aware of all the stories attached to the items.

2.2.3 The Burden of Receiving Material Legacies

Alongside findings that speak to material legacies as something positive, the theme of material legacies as a burden featured across the four contexts. This was especially counterintuitive and puzzling in the case of receiving: why do people so often consider bequests and inheritances, large and small,

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burdensome? We will next outline the main forms that this burden discourse took, ranging from 'stuff' as burdensome, to large inheritances proving burdensome, and disputes or negotiations over inheritance becoming a burden.

Burdensome 'Stuff' as Material Legacy

In the case of material legacies, it is helpful to distinguish between valued assets and 'stuff' designated as being of little monetary value and often also lacking any other value. Lack of attachment to 'stuff' sometimes is held up as a sign of an enlightened (post-materialist, minimalist, environmentally aware) person, but this is not the same as disregard for financial security or for material inheritance. While the notion of burdensome inheritance typically was associated with items that were not considered valuable or in keeping with one's values, it also features in association with some material legacies that were generally welcomed and cherished.

Participants across the four contexts frequently described the (prospect of) receiving household contents as a burden, evident in statements such as Susanne's, a Swedish woman in her early 40s, referring to her parents' house as something 'you do not want to think about . . . when they pass away, what a project it will be to clean their house. They have so much stuff'. Pedro (US) rejects the idea of inheriting anything from his parents, including money or their house, as he considers this contrary to maintaining his independence, a rare stance among the interviewees. He was emotionally affected by his parents' clutter and had started disposing of items he considered unnecessary; his interventions in his parents' domestic order of things caused 'a little bit of friction' at times, for example, when he decided his parents should keep just one of the three peelers they had. His emotional reaction reflects Pedro's concern about his parents' tendency to accumulate consumer goods and mementos, and the environmental consequences of such behaviour.

Nonetheless, a distinction can be drawn in the category of 'stuff' between 'junk' and what is valuable. Some things are valuable because they are, for example, portable items that are in fashion, and others are 'junk' because they are outdated and hard to recycle. Participants felt burdened by the idea of 'stuff' that they have inherited or expect to inherit, where the items were considered out-of-date, something that needs to be processed, and recycled in a time-consuming manner giving rise to ambivalent feelings, often relating to environmental legacy ideation. Phyllis (US) recounted how the family had to deal with the unwanted inheritance of accumulated items from her deceased grandparents and dispose of them. Her grandmother had decluttered during her move to a retirement residence, keeping only a few particularly valuable objects.

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However, Phyllis felt compelled to secretly get rid of some of the remaining items and admitted that this was difficult while her grandmother was still alive.

Actual or potential conflict with the surviving parent or siblings features in interviewee talk on plans and action in relation to 'stuff'. Some people think that they should recycle all the 'rubbish' contents, but are not sure if they can be bothered, have the time, or would find the process upsetting. The 'stuff' might be seen as obsolete, not in keeping with the heir's lifestyle or preferences that have moved in a simpler or minimalist direction. There is a generational component to this: adult children often regarded their parents' lifestyle as having been unnecessarily consumerist, or bizarrely 'conservationist'. Erik, a Swedish participant in his early 60s, wants to distance himself from his parents' generation. His mother continues to live in a large house surrounded by items connected to past generations. While Erik thinks that 'one cannot simply throw away old letters', he finds some of the family heirlooms charged with symbolic value that he does not want to pass on to future generations.

Some older adults shared that they, too, are engaging in behaviours that point to lesser value being accorded to 'stuff'; for example, they have undertaken 'clearing out' of household contents in response to understanding that the younger family generations are not fond of 'stuff'. This, in turn, relates to the notion of burden in a different way – older adults working towards (some of) their material legacies *not* being a burden. When important objects are considered a burden by future heirs, people might act ahead of time and find a good home for them. Vittorio, a seventy-one-year-old graphic novel enthusiast from Italy, believes that his daughter 'could not care less' about his substantial library of comics and had found a suitable place to take his collection after his death. Min (Korea) had started to think about her material possessions around the age of sixty and wants to reduce the number of things she owns. She avoids buying new things, reuses what she has, and pares down so that nobody would be burdened with clearing her effects after her death. She had identified destinations for items, for instance, donating embroidery to a museum. Lee, a Korean woman in her early 60s, has deliberately downsized – letting go of furniture and keepsakes, culling papers, and limiting new purchases – so that relatives are spared days of sorting boxes after she is gone.

Burden of Large Material Legacies

Even when valuable in monetary terms, received or anticipated material legacies often were portrayed as burdensome. The idea that legacies are a burden took several different forms, sometimes expressed directly, other times indirectly, for example, participants striving not to come across as overly privileged.

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Inheritances and bequests spent on 'noble purposes' such as widening horizons through travel are easier to talk about and can be used to signal personal awareness and orientation towards immaterial goals. Sometimes the inheritance was portrayed as not worth much, even when its value could be extrapolated as quite significant – the interviewee thereby signalling that they do not attach much importance to material inheritance.

Marta, a twenty-eight-year-old Italian woman, expressed her anxiety about the houses she is due to inherit. As an only child, like her mother before her, the entire inheritance from the maternal side is unequivocally destined for her. She feels the burden of having to manage this inheritance alone. While she acknowledges the privilege of receiving properties that have both financial and emotional value, this also scares her as she wonders: 'will I be able to keep them?' Her concerns include the economic strain and the physical labour required to maintain, and eventually sell, the properties: 'I don't know if I will have the capacity … the financial, mental time … to keep up with it'. Disposing of belongings is not only physically demanding – requiring time, effort, and physical strength – but also emotionally taxing. For ecologically conscious individuals like Marta, discarding items is not a viable option. She feels a strong ethical obligation to consider how objects might be reused, recycled, or donated to minimise the environmental harm. Like Marta, Adam, a young Swedish man, is an only child and prospective heir to his mother's childhood home, a countryside property consisting of several buildings. While his mother had wanted this to be a place where the extended family could gather, her grandiose plans for the estate were never realised. Although his mother is hoping he will keep the place and take care of it, he says he would rather have a place in the countryside closer to where he lives, a prospect that he cannot discuss with his mother due to her attachment to her childhood home.

Familial wealth is often subject to different priorities, and negotiating these can become burdensome. Chomchom, an Asian American woman in her 50s, had cared for her mother for several years, and at the time of the interview was taking care of her father and the family's large real estate portfolio. Her family of origin had a modest rural background in an Asian country and had started from scratch upon their arrival in the United States. Her parents and her economically successful siblings had invested in Bay Area real estate when it was more affordable, enabling them to accrue considerable wealth over time. Her siblings had entrusted Chomchom with the important task of managing this wealth because she 'does not care' about money. She described how her mother had perceived the family's success as a God-given blessing and wanted to 'pay back' by regularly gifting to a church in their country of origin. As a queer person who had faced discrimination and exclusion from the church, this

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practice was a considerable challenge for Chomchom. Despite her claim of not caring about the money personally, it became clear that Chomchom struggles with how the family's wealth is handled and seeks to limit the amount the family can leave to the church. She envisages that, after her father's passing, the family assets will be divided among the siblings. Until then, she tries to balance the diverging concerns of her father (loyalty to the church) and sound management of family assets.

Burden of Disputed Material Legacies

Talking about burdensome 'stuff' might be a way of avoiding talking about what is seen as the opposite – the valuable material legacies that are burdensome *in a very different sense*, for example because they give rise to tax complications, because there might be less or more to inherit than one expected, because this in turn needs to be sorted out through negotiations with family members and in interaction with authorities, and so on. A distinct category here is inheritance disputes that lead to tension or even termination of relationships with close kin. Conflicts within other people's families were recounted as cautionary lessons, often accompanied by a stated resolve to avoid such burdens whenever possible. Paolina, an Italian mother of two in her 40s, stated that 'rather than fight (over inheritance), I would prefer to have nothing, live in peace'. She is familiar with horror stories of families torn apart over inheritance and is determined not to engage in conflict. Her position is shaped by her current lack of material need – she owns a large house and runs a stable business. Among the (fewer) first-hand accounts, Hak, a Korean retiree in his late 60s, recalled feeling stunned when he read his father's will, which left everything of value to the first and third sons, leaving Hak and the youngest with nothing. The decision rippled through the siblings' relationships, leaving them awkward and distant from one another. Min, a Korean woman in her early 60s, had experienced a severe dispute over inheritance in her large sibling group, which resulted in a permanent rift and led her to view material legacies as toxic. As a single woman estranged from her siblings because of the inheritance dispute, she is committed to helping others around her in the here and now (including large monetary gifts to those in need) as a conscious strategy of expanding her friendships, in part to replace the lost family network. She has selected a close friend who is about ten years her junior (also a single woman) to act as the executor of her will.

Divorce and the formation of new or blended families can alter legal entitlement and emotional attachment to the material legacies of parents and other relatives. Fighting over inheritance sometimes is construed as an inescapable burden – a perceived necessity to assert one's right to inherit over others (such

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as new spouses or stepchildren) who are seen as lacking legitimate claims. Jasmine, a fifty-nine-year-old separated working mother from Italy, states that she would prefer if her mother's substantial inheritance 'would go to the cats' rather than to her stepsisters, the daughters of her mother's second husband. She has chosen to pursue legal action to ensure that her mother's property does not end up in the hands of these stepfamily members, whom she has never accepted. Such narratives and financial trajectories are deeply intertwined: Jasmine is invested in the inheritance as her financial situation is precarious, but her claim is also shaped by long-standing resentment over her parents' divorce and her mother's new life.

Situations where the testator is affected by cognitive impairment can entail a specific burden associated with establishing genuine intentions. Accounts of manipulation and financial abuse of older adults or ill relatives include that of Min, who identified her eldest brother's manipulative behaviour in relation to their parents as the original cause of the drastic inheritance dispute in her sibling group. In Italy, the practice of (informally) employing a co-resident carer (*badante*) for older adults is common, and the data feature accounts of older relatives passing on savings and assets to carers, posthumously or while living. Gianna referred to her childless uncle, who had left a substantial inheritance to his *badante*, reserving only the minimum amount required by law for formal heirs. According to Gianna, the *badante* took advantage of the old man, who progressively lost his cognitive ability. Notwithstanding the possibility of financial elder abuse, these narratives could also reflect difficulty in accepting that older individuals can assert their agency by departing from familial expectations – forming new attachments, altering life trajectories, and adjusting inheritance decisions accordingly.

2.2.4 Inheritance as 'Chain'

Historically, the promise of inheritance in return for various forms of support was an important negotiation tactic and incentive when seeking to secure care in old age (e.g., Hartog, 2012). In contemporary Global North contexts, the promise or withholding of inheritance might be less frequently used with the specific strategic objective of securing care, but it can be deployed in a low-key manner. Some anticipated reciprocities are quite subtle, such as expecting someone to visit to include them in the will or making *inter vivos* bequests in return for gestures of respect and affection. Inheritance can be used to reinforce ties of obligation, which in turn can be reciprocated, tolerated, or rejected. Inheritance connects people, or expectations of reciprocity may prompt them to reject the connection ('unchain'

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themselves from the performance of duties in return for receiving something). What we mean by 'chain' here refers to negative emotions and experiences that arise when one is expected to do something in return for inheritance or bequests.

In South Korea, the eldest son or grandson (still) is often expected to perform certain ancestral rites and to look after graves, and in the past, this was tied to a greater share of inheritance, but the connection between inheritance and this duty is unravelling. Some perform these duties happily and consider them an honour, duty and a privilege, while others resist or consider them outdated (want to 'unchain' themselves). Tyler, a Korean student in his 20s felt honoured by his designation as the favoured grandchild with associated future ancestral duties. Dae, also in his 20s, had no intention of continuing the rites as he grew older, despite his strong commitment to traditional culture, farming and rural life, and confident anticipation of inheriting land. Doh, a Korean student in his 20s, said that he would observe the rites if his parents explicitly wished for *Jesa* to be held for them after they passed away; otherwise, he would not feel bound by the tradition.

While strict conditions attached to inheritance are quite rare in contemporary Global North contexts, one example of this is Lilavati, a student in her early twenties from a wealthy, originally Indian family living in the United States. She had faced significant pressure from her parents, who disowned her for a time due to her economically unprofitable choice of college course, only relenting when she chose a course that the parents considered sensible. Lilavati related this to the fact that her family had only recently begun to build its wealth, while children from non-migrant families with multi-generational wealth accumulation faced significantly less pressure to succeed. While Lilavati had come to accept her family's practices as a form of reciprocity (bequests in return for 'sensible' life choices), Luigi (Italy) is a clear case of perceiving bequests as enchainment. Luigi's mother had encouraged him to buy an apartment in the house next door and bequeathed the money to renovate it. Subsequently, Luigi had come to think that his mother had 'intended to ensure that I remain here, because she selfishly wanted this' and that 'by giving me money, they have tied me'. Luigi does not know whether this was done with the intention of later receiving care, as his mother never explicitly stated it. However, by living nearby, Luigi has ended up being responsible for attending to his mother's illnesses, together with his sister, who lives in the same house. Luigi would have liked to leave a long time ago, but the family situation and financial considerations have left him, in his own words, 'entrapped'.

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2.2.5 Inheritance That Makes a Difference

Bequests and inheritances can bring about significant positive transformations in the lives of the beneficiaries, and receiving an inheritance can represent a turning point in the life course. Material legacies are sometimes reimagined as environmental legacies when they enable more ecologically aligned and personally authentic choices. Rina, a twenty-nine-year-old woman from Italy, was able to change her professional trajectory after receiving an inheritance from her grandmother. She had previously worked as a sustainability consultant within a corporation where she experienced constant dissonance between her values and those of the company. To resolve this conflict, she retrained and now works as an educator and accountant for a charitable organisation, an important life change that she was able to undertake with the help of her inheritance.

Enea, an Italian entrepreneur in his 30s, comes from a family of farmers. His father, now in his 80s, chose not to pursue the family business, which he associates with a childhood marked by physical labour and a modest rural lifestyle, and instead adopted a recreational approach to nature. After studying economics, Enea decided to rejuvenate the family business. For him, the business is more than an occupation; it is a conscious choice rooted in an affective connection with the farm and the surrounding environment. This lifestyle offers an alternative to what he describes as the 'imprisonment' of urban life and is made financially sustainable by a renewed interest among younger consumers in organic produce, ecological lifestyles, and the commodifiable experience of engaging with nature. Enea has revitalised traditional organic farming practices passed down the generations, transforming them into a viable family enterprise – one he hopes to pass on to his son, should he wish to continue the legacy.

Despite the burdens that receiving material legacies often entail, complete renunciation of material legacy for environmental or other reasons is uncommon, as financial resources remain essential or desirable for building a personal life. Depreciation of assets due to environmental degradation is not yet perceived as a concrete risk in most Western countries. In a rare example of anticipating this, Giacomo, a young professional from Italy, says he is not looking forward to inheriting his parents' house, as he believes it will lose its economic value once desertification affects the region. He would prefer that his parents use their money for something more meaningful, such as supporting environmental organisations. However, at this stage of his life, he has not taken any concrete action to refute the bequest.

Despite the evident role of material legacies in generating inequalities (Salas-Rojo & Rodriguez, 2022), the critique of inheritance as a social

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institution was quite rare across the four contexts, suggesting that inheritance is considered a private matter and is almost exclusively approached from a personal and family perspective. The idea of raising inheritance taxes seemed unfair or impractical to most Italian participants, even those who identified multiple social and economic injustices. While they support redistribution of resources in principle, taxing their own inheritance was seen as unjust. Mauro considers it unfair that inheritance is taxed when it originates from earned income that has already been taxed, such as salaries. Marta struggles with the idea that her generation should be the one paying for inheriting. Belonging to a generation already facing financial difficulties, she argues that the money should have been taxed when it was originally earned.

In the rare cases where critique of inheritance emerged, it tended to be sharp. Nils argued for the re-introduction of inheritance taxation in Sweden, despite being aware that this would decrease his own children's inheritance. For Min (Korea), the implosion of her entire sibling group as a result of an inheritance dispute was a traumatic grounding for her conviction that material legacies should be heavily taxed or made public property. Joon, a retired Korean professor in his 60s, believed that existing inheritance and gift taxes were insufficient and noted that they could be circumvented. He favoured higher taxation of large wealth transfers – such as the passing on firms or sizable shareholdings – that he considered 'unearned income'. Jin, a forty-four-year-old woman from Korea, maintained that inheritance taxes should be raised substantially. She linked this position to her broader opposition to dynastic succession and family-run corporations, arguing that large private fortunes ought to be redirected to society rather than reproduced within families. Marco, an Italian father in his 50s, criticises the idea of inheritance and its deep connection to private property, which he sees as a root cause of inequality. Zach (US) also articulated a sharp criticism of wealth – and saw himself as part of the problem. Iris was in favour of higher inheritance taxation but did not anticipate that American voters would overcome their 'wishful thinking . . . that they are going to inherit 14 million dollars' (the threshold for inheritance tax exemption).

2.2.6 Conclusion

The cost of increasingly long lives poses the very real possibility that resources accumulated across the life course might need to be spent down in old age, and as the findings illustrate, some people must or choose to do so. Yet passing on material legacies endures as the predominant normative expectation and social practice. As the number of descendants within families has declined over time due to smaller family size (fewer legatees in each successive

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generation) in parallel with unequal accumulation of resources (Piketty, 2014), material legacies accrue to individuals who often stand to benefit from multiple legacies. For example, an only child of a parent who has childless siblings is likely to inherit from her parents and the parents' siblings and may also receive 'skipped generation' bequests from grandparents. Against this backdrop of accumulating inheritances, it is perhaps understandable that many aspects of receiving inheritance featured as burdensome, ranging from perception of inherited objects as 'junk' to concern about the ability to manage inherited asset portfolios.

The potential to reduce inequalities through taxation of bequests and inheritances animated a minority of participants, but overall, the findings point to widespread disinclination to see inheritance as a public matter: even in the face of growing inequalities, material legacies continue to be seen through the small world lens of hoping to benefit personally and wishing to pass on with minimal tax liability. Despite the widespread portrayal of inheritance as a burden, those who receive material legacies are generally better positioned to make choices that are in accordance with their preferences, including orientation to study or career options that would otherwise be unviable. In some cases, such (re-)orientation enabled by inheritance and bequests was motivated by environmental legacy ideation, a topic we turn to next.

3 Environmental Legacies

Violetta has devoted decades of her life to environmental activism and education in Italy. She has organised and participated in many activities related to environmental education such as reducing plastic use and saving water and electricity. She continues to participate in public discussions about ecological activities and city planning. However, she is doubtful about the legacy of all this work. Looking at the current situation, she cannot see lasting institutional changes, and while she has contributed to raising awareness among younger generations, she doubts this education will transform into change if institutions do not change first. Talking about her legacy, Violetta refers to her children and the education that she gave them, especially her son who works in the environmental sector. When social change proves hard to achieve and politics is volatile, Violetta is comforted by thoughts of her children, and how they represent a continuation of her values.

Leif runs so-called growing circles for newcomers at an allotment garden in Gothenburg. He also takes people on mushroom walks in the autumn and tries to educate others to take a circular approach to cultivation. He is very aware of changes in biodiversity, how the types of birds and fish encountered in the Gothenburg region have changed over the years. While Leif had belonged to activism-oriented organisations in the past, he is now mostly involved in practical actions that he undertakes within the allotment community. He emphasised the importance of everyone – 'you and I' – bearing responsibility for the changes one

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can observe in the environment and how 'you and I' can do something that is very easy, namely 'eat according to the season' by using vegetables and fruit grown in the vicinity.

3.1 Relating to 'Spoiled' Environmental Legacies

In Section 2.1 and 2.2, the older (kinship) generation featured as givers and the younger ones as receivers of material legacies. The generational 'give and take' is more evidently multidirectional when environmental legacies are considered. For example, as the window of opportunity for intergenerational co-existence grows due to longer shared lifespans, (older) grandchildren can influence their grandparents' values, attitudes, and behaviour through dialogue about environmental issues, and vice versa (Delerue Matos & Borges Neves, 2012; Marrese et al., 2024). While people across the four contexts tended to avoid stereotypical references to generational culpability or victimhood, there are generational dimensions to how they relate to environmental legacies (Previtali et al., 2026). The emphasis in this section is on the everyday lives and actions of the research participants, and how environmental legacies are understood to shape (or not to shape) these actions. The section focuses on participants' accounts of the environmental changes they have witnessed and how they position themselves vis-à-vis responsibility and actions that seek to conserve or remedy environments, ranging from intensive daily engagement to disillusionment. We start by outlining how these environmental legacy-making ideas and practices were accessed through fieldwork in the four contexts.

3.1.1 Accessing Environmental Legacy-Making

Research participant recruitment in and around Gothenburg, Turin, Seoul, and the San Francisco Bay Area focused on settings where people were *acting in relation to* their environment, often the local natural or cultivated environment. We start by characterising the 'landscape' of participant recruitment in the four contexts.

Sweden has a long history of environmental protection groups. One of the older associations, the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation (*Naturskyddsföreningen*) was founded in 1909 and has local groups across the country, including Gothenburg. The 2022 general election in Sweden resulted in a government that has been widely criticised for insufficient climate policies (see, e.g., Magnusdottir & Widengård, 2025; Malm et al., 2025). As a counter-reaction, *Naturskyddsföreningen* saw a peak in new membership registrations in 2022. Some associations have formed more recently and often bring together people of similar age, gender, or political orientation. The long-standing groups

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like *Naturskyddsföreningen* have a political agenda but are less radical than, for instance, Extinction Rebellion or the loosely organised Take back the future (*Ta tillbaka framtiden*) network. There is solidarity among the different groups in Gothenburg, and some members are involved in several of them. In addition to the various environmental groups and associations, care for the environment is also expressed by spending time in nature or in allotment gardens, practising circular cultivation, and teaching others.

The San Francisco Bay Area has a long history of environmental justice movements that have been shaping the region socially, politically, and ecologically over several decades (Perkins, 2022). This is reflected in a large number of protected habitats and strong networks of nonprofit organisations. These organisations provide a variety of opportunities for people in the Bay Area to participate in environmental activities and events. People's motivations to engage in these are varied: some have a strong desire to make a positive contribution to the environment and the surrounding communities, while others want to spend time with like-minded people. Students often participate to receive credits for serving community hours or to strengthen their college applications. Nonprofits offer well-structured volunteering opportunities for often-changing volunteers, some of whom have been engaging in similar activities for years. Environmental action is dynamic and focuses on local contexts and issues, such as restoration of habitats (e.g., planting native species), reducing waste pollution (e.g., clean-ups along waterways), education activities, and wildlife documentation.

Turin features many active non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in line with the prominence of the third sector in Italy and the history of charitable organisations (often with Catholic roots) and activism linked to environmental protection (such as opposition to the Turin-Lyon high-speed rail project). The biggest Italian and international environmental associations are active in Turin. Long-standing and newer associations promote sustainable lifestyles and provide opportunities for education and local engagement. These associations are formalised and adhere to the 'institutionalised' model of offering volunteering opportunities alongside activist campaigns. Recently, less formalised, youth-led international environmental groups have started operating in the city, including *Ultima Generazione* (Last Generation) and Fridays for Future. In addition, local committees born out of citizens' initiatives strive to protect green areas in the city, which they see as threatened by ongoing major urban renovation funded by the EU recovery and resilience funds. Social and community-based enterprises provide spaces and resources for organic gardening and ecological practices. As in Gothenburg, these associations frequently support each other.

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Environmental movements gained significant momentum in South Korea during the 1980s and 1990s, reaching their peak in the early 2000s, when the influence of NGOs was particularly strong across all sectors of society, as many people believed that the financial crisis and subsequent International Monetary Fund bailout in the late 1990s were caused by corporate corruption and bureaucratic incompetence. In the 2010s and 2020s, however, public attention to environmental issues declined as they were overshadowed by other major societal transformations, such as rapid digitalisation and ultra-low birth rates. Recently, interest in environmental issues has resurged, with growing media coverage and public concern as the impacts of climate change have become increasingly evident in daily life. Korean research participants were recruited in Seoul and the surrounding region, where environmental engagements took place, and from environmentally themed courses of study and gatherings of civil society groups concerned about projects that were impinging on natural environments.

After accessing research participants through a variety of groups and activities in their communities and (in most cases) opening the conversations with reference to environmental legacies, it was possible to ask them about actions that are confined to the private sphere, including both their daily actions vis-à-vis the environment, and their material legacies (discussed in Section 2.1 and 2.2). This section progresses from outlining changes the participants had witnessed in their local or otherwise familiar environments to discussing how they related to and experienced environmental degradation and hazards. Different forms of environmental engagement are examined, ranging from individual (in) actions to steps towards collective engagement (the latter coming into focus in Section 3.2). We also discuss what the actions signify for the participants and how they constitute meaningful engagements in the small worlds of their local contexts, despite growing societal and global concerns. First, however, we will introduce the concept of more-than-human as it relates to environmental legacies.

3.1.2 Engagements in More-Than-Human Environments

People across the four contexts related to the non-human actors and elements in the environments that they are concerned about and care for in various ways. The term more-than-human is employed to underline the interdependencies between what is commonly referred to as human and non-human (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017) and attempts to overcome human/non-human dualisms. Such dualisms have been widely criticised for resulting in human exceptionalism where humans are seen to be superior to everything other-than-human

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(e.g., Plumwood, 2009). The research participants' relations with other-than-humans range from the highly urbanised and microcosmic (e.g., pets and parks as the closest contact with nature) to long-term and intensive engagement with nature and wilderness, practices of cultivation and remedial actions that involve close observation and involvement in more-than-human entanglements. Some of the engagements can be understood as relational care practices (Tronto, 2013) and reflect ambitions to act towards a desired future. Some visions of the future (outlined in Section 3.2) evince strong belief in the resilience of the non-human, even if such resilience is envisaged as a response to anticipated environmental disasters where the human is obliterated.

The more-than-human is often present when people convey their own ways of relating to 'the environment'. Although we hold that the environment is made up of interdependent more-than-human materialities, people's perceptions of 'the environment' take many different forms. We therefore approach the environment as a socially constructed concept perceived in various ways (Barry, 2007). When carefully reflecting on what this concept signifies, it becomes apparent that people portray different ways of relating to 'the environment', ranging from 'nature out there', separate from their everyday lives, to 'the here and now' that includes humans (Bäckman & Timonen, 2026). The accounts thus include human/nature dualisms, alongside more relational ways of understanding the environment as something humans are part of and interdependent with.

Where the environment is understood as synonymous with nature, people talk about how they enjoy spending time in a specific forest, park, garden, in the mountains, or by a lake. Often this was associated with the generational perspective in the form of recollections of how parents, grandparents, or other (older) relatives had acted as conduits or informal guides, passing on knowledge and appreciation of nature. Research participants relayed many examples of being in awe of nature, seeing time through natural processes (e.g., how long it takes for a tree to grow), grasping human size through vast landscapes, or travelling and realising that the keenly expected non-human element (e.g., snow, glacier) was not there. In some cases, such recollections of relating to environments entailed seeing oneself as part of non-human elements. Victor (US) explained how he had always been fascinated by trees, a passion instilled by his grandmother's engagement in gardening. He recalled climbing and playing on trees and described how learning about sequoia trees blew his mind due to their size and longevity. He remembered feeling 'so little' while standing in front of these giants, which he compared to looking up to a deity.

Participants' own living environments, past and present, as well as their holiday or ancestral homes, acted as locations where they developed an understanding of and relations with the non-human. Moon, a resident of Seoul,

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relayed his young son's love and enthusiasm for a country home he had inherited from his grandparents. For Dae, a Korean student in his 20s who grew up in a farming family, the fields are the site of his family's agricultural history, a place he can always return to after testing his path in the city. Some of the Korean participants had focused on local ecologies over extended time periods, developing deep knowledge about specific areas and habitats and actively engaging in saving a place or a species. Many harboured a wish to protect a particular environment for their children or younger generations. Lee, a Korean woman aged sixty-three, had kept returning to the same mudflats and river mouths in an estuary, turning close observation of tides, reedbeds, and seasonal birds into deep, place-based knowledge she shares through talks, writing, and school visits. This fuels her protection work: marching and petitioning against reclamation, joining counts and monitoring, and making estuary life visible to officials who see only a development site.

Understanding and appreciation of environmental change was framed as something that had to be acquired over time. Cornelia, a middle-aged woman who grew up by the sea in Southern Sweden, referred to her childhood home as a place where she had learned to understand changes in the environment. She talked about changes that happened when she was younger and how the sea had 'taken' land from the coast. She recalled with a sense of prescience – 'I knew it, I sure knew it' – how some people had built a house close to the water, only for it to be destroyed by the sea. Her example illustrates how humans are not in control of their surroundings and serves as a cautionary tale of the consequences of not understanding one's environment. Cornelia further described how the area has become popular among people doing water sports and how these recreational visitors erode the coast. She reasoned that people who have only recently started visiting the place cannot understand the changes in the environment, in contrast to her perspective, which has been shaped over time.

While Cornelia portrays a relational understanding among humans and non-humans, typically participants addressed 'the environment' and nature in more instrumental terms, emphasising the need to preserve the environment 'out there' so that humans can continue enjoying it. Approaching the environment as something one visits for recreational purposes was evident in Joel's reasoning around the importance of understanding the value of nature. A Swedish man in his late 30s, Joel, described himself as an outdoor-loving engineer. He had grown accustomed to spending time outdoors and in nature reserves from an early age. Joel's accounts of relating to 'the environment' evince a clear divide between the everyday environment and going out in nature – the latter being what counts as environment and needs to be protected because of its utility for recreational purposes. Joel emphasised the importance of introducing his child

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to outdoor activities, as this has been such an important aspect in his own life. In a similar vein, for Eunji, a Korean woman in her 20s, the environment is something to keep clean and convenient to visit. She thinks of it as neat parks, tidy trails, and fresh air – things that make daily life and weekends nicer. She recycles, carries a tumbler, and picks up litter on walks and supports clear signs and stronger rules so that shared environments stay neat. Instead of focusing on ecosystems or long-term stewardship, she wants nature 'out there' to stay pleasant – a place people can visit to relax and feel refreshed. Similarly, several people in Turin talked about nature as 'the mountain', something separate from the urban environment; the former is cherished and longed for, while the latter is, sometimes, a prison from which one needs to escape. Giovanna commented on this perspective, referring to the mountain as 'the new Luna Park' (an amusement park in Turin), portraying the typical human relation to the mountain as a performative recreational location (for sports, hiking, leisure) rather than one of care and respect.

In some cases, relations with the non-human took highly focused or micro-cosmic forms. Expressions of affection towards pets or animals in the neighbourhood as elements of the non-human were most noticeable in hyper-urban settings. Yeol, a Korean man in his 20s, walks the same neighbourhood paths and low hills week after week, learning where sparrows gather, which scrub patches hum with insects, and which railings pigeons favour. He picks up litter as he goes – not as a campaign, but as a quiet routine. For him, nature is the repeated meeting with familiar birds and bugs just a few blocks from home. Han, fifty-two, cared for street cats *and* birds in his neighbourhood in Seoul (making no mention of cats being predators of birds), and Sun, sixty-eight, conveyed a deep attachment to his dog as a representative of the non-human, to which he felt great affinity. In contrast, some expressed criticism of what they saw as excessive focus on pets. Patricia (US), in her 70s and deeply concerned about the implications of Trump's second presidency for humans, including her own multiracial family, was incredulous about the amount of care and money lavished on some pets and unapologetically foregrounded the threats to human wellbeing in the current political climate. However, she also described an intense connection to farmland that she had inherited, including her efforts to rewild parts of it, illustrating how relating to the non-human takes many and often complex or ambivalent forms.

3.1.3 Witnessing Environmental Change

Whether being unseasonable or changeable was perhaps the most common reference point for witnessing environmental change. New species, invasive

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species, and things happening 'out of season' were recounted as worrying examples of human impact on the environment and climate. The accounts and considerations of environmental change often aligned with different perceptions of 'the environment'. Changes were thus described both as the result of human impact on nature 'out there' and as changes within environments where humans were understood as one actor among many.

In Italy and Sweden, the amount of snow was used both to 'prove' and 'disprove' that changes had taken place. Anders, a Swedish participant in his late 60s, recalled one snow-free day in February during his childhood. This was such an unusual event that his family took a photo to capture the memory of this snow-free winter day. He described it as a 'strange experience', contrasting it to winters without snow having become less exceptional. In a more hesitant tone, Liv, another Swedish participant in her early 60s, reflected on how one might think there is less snow during winters now, but she was not sure whether she could really notice any difference. Klas (mid-30s) struck a somewhat sceptical note when he stated that he might be influenced by increased temperatures being discussed in the media, rather than by directly experiencing warmer temperatures in Gothenburg.

Similar accounts were shared by older adults in Turin, where the mountains, snow, and skiing form an integral part of regional culture. Antonella, seventy-five, like Anders from Gothenburg, had vivid memories of an unusual weather event from her childhood. She now experiences a sense of sadness when she visits the mountains to ski and finds no snow. However, she is quick to recall that snowless winters also occurred decades ago, when her daughters were young, remembering how they 'went to the mountains and there were flowers and blueberries'. As a living witness to change over time, Antonella uses her personal experience to support her belief that climate change is not a new phenomenon, asserting her belief that it has always occurred and will continue to do so. In her view, which is marginal in the study sample, climate change is not necessarily the result of human activity.

Another marker of change over time was invasive species in local environments, something generally understood to be a result of human activities. Eva, a young Swedish woman actively involved in an environmental association, recalled how surprised she had been when she first noticed an invasive oyster species many years ago on the beach in her hometown. Now she sees this species often and no longer considers it unusual. Leif, an active member of an allotment garden for many years, talked about how certain birds rarely seen in Gothenburg in his youth were now very common. He had taken action to eliminate invasive species in the allotment garden and tried to teach others to act like him. Talking about changes in his local environment, he did not present

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these as isolated events, but rather as chain reactions linked to human activities: his friend who had been fishing outside Gothenburg since he was a child had seen a certain type of crab only in the last couple of years and Leif wondered if this crab would attract octopus (main enemies of crabs), and how octopus in turn would lead to other changes in the marine system.

Leif's reasoning took a broad perspective reflecting the interconnectedness and interdependencies between species and how seemingly small changes can have long-lasting or irreversible effects. His environmental engagement centred on the allotment garden, a combination of his own actions, and teaching and influencing others. While the allotment garden can be understood as Leif's *small world*, his reasoning around chain reactions and interdependencies between various species links the changes he is witnessing in his local environment to myriad complex processes related to human activities, yet beyond human control. His perspective reflects an acknowledgement of non-human agency and understanding humans as part of more-than-human entanglements, rather than superior to and in control of the non-human.

3.1.4 Embodied and Diffuse Environmental Legacies

Environmental degradation and hazards, in some cases, were experienced as *embodied,* or it was feared that they would become embodied. This was manifest in people questioning the quality of air, water, or food. Seong, in his 60s, expressed concerns about the quality of air in South Korea, which he called 'the factory of the world'. Eunseo, a Korean woman in her 20s, says she often must give up outdoor activities because of severe fine dust. References to microplastics and indestructible particles that are harmful to health were common among the participants in the United States, and some saw houses and building materials (e.g., concrete) as something that will burden the environment for a long time. Several participants in the United States had responded by taking various measures to protect themselves, resonating with the idea of inverted quarantine articulated by Szasz (2007). Inverted quarantine refers to (consumer) behaviours motivated by the wish to protect oneself from (perceived) environmental dangers – exemplified by choices such as eating organic food, drinking filtered water, or making plans to move to an environmentally less risky area – behaviours that Szasz argues are not solutions but rather serve to perpetuate the collective action problems and policy failures that cause environmental hazards in the first place.

Food and water safety concerned research participants in the San Francisco Bay Area, who referred to a high level of exposure to microplastics and chemicals allowed in food in comparison to other Western countries. Owen,

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a retiree engaged in restoration projects in the Bay Area, advocated against artificial turf in sports grounds. His main concern was groundwater pollution through long-lasting chemicals in the turf linked to harmful health impacts. Owen had considered leaving the Bay Area after retirement due to the cost of living and the wish to be closer to nature, but had abandoned the plan as the alternative locations were repeatedly ravaged by wildfires, illustrating the dilemmas of inverted quarantine. Several research participants in the United States felt exposed to non-transparent corporate actions threatening water, food and energy safety; Iris expressed her discontent that access to safe water and food are increasingly a privilege of the elites, and Kiran was concerned about the consequences for future generations whose bodies contain microplastics and chemicals even before they are born.

In Italy and Sweden, the impact of environmental degradation on health was not identified as the primary issue. People tended to refer to the visible effects of negative environmental legacies – such as waste accumulation, land use changes, and the loss of natural areas – instead of 'invisible' issues such as microplastics. There was more concern about the traces left in the environment than about chemicals and plastics entering their bodies, although traditional practices of growing vegetables featured as a means of exercising control over food production. Sandra, a woman in her early 60s who had studied architecture but had left the industry on environmental grounds, was very concerned about what she described as a massive negative legacy from concrete structures in the form of large quantities of concrete abandoned in forests and seas. Instead of focusing on her own health, Sandra's worries centred around the effects of human actions on the environment and the kind of Earth that is left to future generations.

3.1.5 'Real' Crises Unfold Elsewhere

Although some research participants had concerns about hazardous elements affecting their bodies and health, they generally felt far removed from the most serious and damaging manifestations of climate change and severe environmental crises. Despite the occasional reminder that climate change is a global issue, research participants envisaged crises unfolding *elsewhere*. Some Swedish participants referred to summer 2018, which was exceptionally hot and dry, resulting in many forest fires in Sweden. This had sparked public discussions of how the consequences of global warming are also affecting Sweden. Karl, a Swedish participant in his early 60s, recalled that during and shortly after that summer, people who felt they had been affected by the heatwaves and fires wanted 'something to be done', yet it all seemed to have

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been forgotten after a few months. Jonatan, whose grandparents had fled to Sweden due to war, thought that Swedes (including himself) had gotten used to a very comfortable life, and it might be healthy to have to suffer a little. The idea that certain sacrifices would not hurt and that severe climate events might be a useful wake-up call was echoed among other Swedish participants. A minority of Italian participants perceived environmental threats as proximate and personal. Giacomo, a young Italian professional, is not interested in inheriting his parents' house as he believes it will hold little economic value once desertification starts to affect the region. Water scarcity and rising temperatures are not only plausible climate scenarios for Italy but, in many areas, an emerging reality. While some individuals refuse to acknowledge this future – seeking psychological shelter by relegating it to distant times or places – others like Grazia have begun to prepare for it, for instance by installing systems to collect and reuse rainwater in their homes.

The sense of living largely shielded from major environmental crises was widely shared even in areas where climate-related disasters feature regularly. The geography, ecologies, and environmental policies of the San Francisco Bay Area were generally interpreted as favourable, but personal experiences had in some cases shattered this idea. Kaito, an environmentally active retiree in his 70s, used to think that the Bay Area was better positioned than other parts of the United States affected by tornadoes, hurricanes, or blizzards. When his sister's house in northern California almost burnt down, he realised that his family could fall victim to wildfires. The intense heat of recent summers, interspersed with heavy downpours, featured in interviews conducted in South Korea. Kang and Joo, Korean booksellers, recounted how rainwater had seeped through a ceiling seam and run behind their shelves during a storm. By the time they noticed, the lower rows were already damp; cleanup stretched into days of rethinking the layout for their carefully chosen collection of books. Jin, a doctoral student in her 40s, likened recent summers to a pressure cooker: heat that made even short errands taxing, followed by sudden cloudbursts that hammered the streets. Jeong, in her 20s, described subway stairs that still radiated yesterday's sun, office commutes planned for a sliver of shade, and downpours that turned pavements into streams. Despite such vivid, embodied experiences, participants did not feel personally threatened by climate change; the 'real' impacts were seen as unfolding elsewhere.

3.1.6 Environmental (In)Actions in Daily Life

People across the contexts recounted choices concerning how to live in line with their environmental ideation, including giving up work or changing jobs in

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order to live their ideals, wanting to avoid leaving traces, or taking daily actions that ranged from easy to renouncing previous pleasures related to consumption. A minority had committed to rigorous adherence to principles even in the face of 'the precipice', including acting with integrity despite having little faith that things would change. Hee, a Seoul-based doctor in her mid-40s, feels her 'environmental karma' intensely and has adapted her consumer behaviours extensively, among other things renouncing the purchase of new clothes. Ginevra, an Italian woman in her late 20s, had stopped skiing despite her deep enjoyment of the activity because she found it distressing to witness the degradation of the mountain environment caused by human activity. However, she feels uncomfortable sharing this decision with her friends as she does not wish to burden them or diminish their enjoyment.

Outside the group of those highly committed to acting environmentally, most participants were striving to make regular or at least occasional 'environmentally friendlier' choices. Jin, a Korean woman in her 40s, tries to keep her environmental footprint small through everyday habits: buying less, repairing and reusing, cycling when she can, carrying a reusable tumbler, and cutting back on detergents and disposables. Jeongsoo, a thirty-year-old Korean journalist, tries to lower his environmental impact by planning daily life and work around minimal consumption. He limits purchases and deliveries and donates books once he has read them. Some of the Swedish participants accounted for things they do in their daily lives, which typically are framed as environmental deeds, without considering themselves particularly environmentally engaged. Edda, a Swedish woman in her early 30s, stated, 'of course I recycle, of course I don't own a car' as if these were self-evident and did not consider herself particularly environmentally engaged. It is likely that she was comparing herself to more radical individuals or had integrated certain habits and choices into her life at an early age and, therefore, did not see these as anything exceptional.

A small minority in the study sample dissociated from environmental actions completely or declared themselves 'sceptical' towards the claim that human activities are causing environmental degradation and climate change. Henrik, a Swedish man in his 70s, attests to awareness of 'what is being said' but does not fully believe human activities are behind the changes taking place. Nevertheless, he described himself as someone who does not consume much and enjoys spending time outdoors. He sometimes litter-picks, but he did not want to connect this to a caring attitude towards the environment, considering it something he does simply because litter does not belong in nature. Henrik refused to connect his actions to environmental awareness, being of the view that environmental questions have become overly politicised.

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Living off his savings and investments, Zach, a self-made multi-millionaire, had spent considerable time exploring possibilities for a more sustainable life in the San Francisco Bay Area. He sought to acquire skills that would be useful after what he saw as the potential collapse of high-energy society. He was particularly interested in agriculture, volunteered on a farm, and was experimenting with growing mushrooms at home by utilising food waste. However, ecological and social aspects played a minimal role in his financial investments. Zach was aware of the contradiction between his wealth and his attempts at sustainable living. He planned to use the resources he acquires as a skilful investor to develop sustainability-focused projects, which he construed as a reasonable compromise. Much like Zach, Olivia, a young Swedish mother, was interested in an everyday life where she would have time to engage in activities that she considered meaningful, such as growing vegetables, spending time with family, and writing. She and her husband were investing in the stock market to afford working less, and ultimately, to secure their employment-free future. For her, the biggest contradiction was awareness of some of the companies included in the investment portfolio being reliant on oil extraction. Nevertheless, she was not willing to risk her plans while also stating that, on a societal level, she is in favour of a fossil-free future.

Younger and older participants' stances towards environmental actions evolved over time. Lee, a sixty-three-year-old Korean woman, outlined a process whereby she had moved from entertaining ideas of 'living in nature' – which she had come to realise would not be an ecologically sound choice – to living in a small apartment in a town close to a coastal environmental monitoring site that was for her a site of meaningful engagement with non-human life. Han, a Korean man in his early 50s, had begun on a conventional corporate path in construction, but growing discomfort with wasteful practices led him to quit. What started as small habits (such as carrying a reusable tumbler and sorting rubbish) grew into a lifestyle that involves tracking yearly waste, composting for a small garden, and buying less. Eva, a young Swedish woman who is actively involved in an environmental association, described how her perspective on the type of engagement she finds meaningful has shifted from individual towards collective. When she was younger, she dreamed of moving to a remote place where she would grow her own food. Gradually, she had come to realise she would not have much societal impact through such a lifestyle and had opted for engaging in collective action in the city.

Collective action was framed by many as a way of coping with personal anxiety and maintaining hope. Alice, a Swedish participant in her early 60s, explained how she had felt alone in her thinking and acting around environmental issues, as people close to her did not share her concerns. She had stopped

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working before her official retirement age and was living off her savings. One of the reasons behind this decision was to have more time to be environmentally engaged. At the time of the interview, she was exploring different initiatives and groups in the hope of finding a suitable setting, as she wanted to feel less alone and be with other people who were concerned about similar issues. Otherwise, she said, 'I get so dark [gloomy]'.

3.1.7 Conclusion

Relating to 'the environment' takes disparate and sometimes ambivalent forms. The environment is construed variously as 'nature out there' and as 'the here and now' that often entails more-than-human entanglements. While certain hazardous elements in their environments were recounted in detail, generally the research participants felt removed from the severe effects of environmental crises, which were perceived as unfolding *elsewhere*. Both spontaneous, self-directed engagement with the environment and organised activities are conducive to crafting small worlds: orienting to 'doing what one can', meeting like-minded people, and translating concerns into actions. Research participants generally considered it meaningful to engage in environmental actions and to care for their environments within the small worlds of local settings and groups, as these were seen as the only way of reconciling crisis awareness and the wish to do something. People select their engagements on grounds that relate to environmental legacy ideation and make them their own, for example, by orienting to teaching others within formal or informal networks. The next section elaborates further on the understandings of how the personal and the local relate to larger structures and global processes and outlines the different visions of the future that research participants harboured.

3.2 Imagining Alternatives to 'Spoiled' Environmental Legacies

This section widens the analytical lens from the personal to the political and from the present to future visions by connecting the everyday, situated actions discussed in Section 3.1 to structures and processes that generate collective environmental legacies. Different interpretive frames are used by individuals to make sense of what counts as meaningful individual action. These frames are shaped by constructions of the relationship between the personal and the political – between individual responsibility and ecological agency on the one hand, and political-economic power dynamics on the other. People deploy these frames to account for their environmental legacy-making and to envision viable mechanisms of change. The future visions ranged from bleak to perhaps surprisingly optimistic, and from preparation for private survival strategies in

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the event of environmental disasters to belief in collective and technological solutions. These visions are used to interrogate the nature and limits of future imaginaries harboured by people, which are contrasted to the horizons that some economic and political actors use in orienting to the future. Within these imaginaries, small words feature as places of refuge and as hopeful places of intergenerational reparation of spoiled environmental legacies.

3.2.1 Individual Actions: From Irrelevant to Meaningful

While putting different emphases on the importance of individual actions, there was agreement across the contexts that private actions alone are not sufficient, and political mechanisms are necessary. The sense of futility of individual actions grows when politicians and policymaking are perceived as inaccessible and indifferent to environmental concerns. Luigi (Italy) expressed this sentiment clearly: in his view, citizens are excluded from the decision-making fora where environmental policies are shaped, leaving them with extremely limited agency. He described his everyday efforts – such as recycling and conserving water – as 'nothing', underscoring the perceived irrelevance of these actions. Similarly, Kaito, an environmentally active American in his 70s, believed his personal efforts to mitigate climate change were futile. He was convinced that change must involve global politics as California's ambitious climate policies were stymied by different priorities elsewhere.

For others, individual actions vis-à-vis environmental legacies are significant because they are framed as meaningful contributions to incremental change, notwithstanding broader political dynamics. Among the key elements that distinguish the discourse of 'doing nothing' from that of 'contributing something' are the ability to witness some tangible impact of local actions on surrounding communities and undertaking these actions collectively – within small worlds. Ava, in her 40s, reflected on her long-term engagement with a San Francisco Bay Area nonprofit focused on waste removal and recycling. She believes that her actions, alongside those of her peers, have a tangible impact on her community and the local environment. She finds these efforts fruitful – not only the volume of waste materials she has helped to divert from landfills but also the values she has instilled in her family and friends, planting what she described as 'the seeds of sustainability'.

Acting in relation to environmental legacies, '[caring] about something – is (roughly) for it to be worthy of attention and action' (Helm, 2009, p. 250). Care is here understood, following Fisher and Tronto (1990), as 'species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible [including] our bodies, our selves [sic],

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and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web' (p. 40). To find meaning in individual actions amidst uninterested decision-makers and clashing policy discourses, Ginevra (Italy) referenced the Gandhian quote, 'Be the change you want to see in the world'. This ethos became a comforting mantra, whereby individual actions are reframed as practices of environmental legacy-making – small, accessible gestures that reflect and perpetuate care in practice.

Giulia, a twenty-one-year-old student, shared that she habitually collects litter in public parks to make her environment more liveable. She noticed that others sometimes join her after witnessing her actions. For her, this form of care – performed without preaching – is a way of promoting alternative ways of living rooted in commitment to environmental responsibility and collective wellbeing. Similarly, Emil (Sweden) thinks his actions can influence others. He participates in a couple of different environmental associations and considers it important to engage in practical activities beyond his home. Like Giulia, he also does litter picking, especially in a nature reserve where he spends a lot of time. He has noticed there is now less litter after his efforts, and reasons that he might have encouraged others to litter-pick, or to take their litter away now that they notice someone is picking it up. While believing that political agreements are needed on a global scale for any significant change to take place, he also believes it is important to do what one can in terms of practical actions within the small world of the nature reserve.

The Burden of Individual Actions

Conscious consumer behaviours featured prominently among daily environmental actions. These ranged from recycling and using energy-saving light bulbs to buying organic produce and adopting a vegan diet. When reflecting on their environmentally motivated choices, some individuals described a sense of burden. They felt that they carried the weight of caring for the environment and addressing the environmental crisis, while others did not share the same sense of obligation. Current urban infrastructures were seen to support lifestyles that are disconnected from environmental awareness. Frustration was expressed about infrastructures that do not support efforts to make environmentally conscious choices. The constant rhetorical reminders to live sustainably were perceived as inconsistent with corporate practices and greenwashing. Some habits were described as difficult to change, especially when living in a system that accentuates consumerism and the importance of appearances (e.g., posting on social media). Young adults in Italy admitted that limiting travel was particularly challenging. During an interview conducted in

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September 2024, Valentino described himself as 'terrible . . . I've taken about 15 flights since January'. Gino, another young Italian participant, offered insight into why it is hard for young people to change travel habits. Adopting more sustainable practices is seen by his friends as renouncing the opportunity to see places that others will keep visiting: choosing to limit personal impact on the environment is considered a burdensome 'renouncing' of the mainstream lifestyle. Gino wishes the discourse would shift towards more positive, engaging rhetoric of 'contributing'.

Similar sentiments were shared in California about the car-centred urban infrastructure and ubiquitous prompts to engage in consumerism. Iris, a Chinese American woman in her early forties, described her personal journey from being someone who enjoyed consuming a lot to championing sustainable actions. After concluding that the effort and expense required to live a comprehensively sustainable life were too high, she identified clothes shopping as the area where she could make the biggest difference. She reduced her wardrobe and decided to focus on quality items. Pondering broader solutions, she hopes that individuals and communities take more responsibility for sustainable action in the future, but also sees the necessity to introduce policies that enforce change.

Social Stratification of Environmental Legacies

Environmental actions are not solely a matter of personal belief or perceived agency but are shaped by structures and resources that enable or obstruct access to sustainable practices. Even among those who view personal actions as meaningful, there is widespread recognition that certain areas and groups face significant barriers due to limited access to resources and affordances, whether financial, infrastructural, or educational. These perceptions are reflected in the literature, where sustainable or conscious behaviours have been framed as expressions of power, privilege, and luxury (Sexton & Sexton, 2014), or as 'ethical' and 'conscious' consumer choices that are gendered (Burningham & Venn, 2025) or culturally and economically exclusive (Johnson et al., 2018).

In Turin, where recycling is both mandatory and relatively common, there are working-class, multi-ethnic neighbourhoods where engaging in such practices is difficult due to the lack of proper recycling facilities or their misuse. Gina, eighty-five, lives in an area where recycling bins are absent or mishandled by people without stable housing, and she stated that she does not recycle. Her daughter, who lives with Gina, noted that recycling in their neighbourhood is practically impossible, and she refuses to drive elsewhere to do it. The structural inaccessibility of proper facilities makes environmentally responsible action

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difficult. Yet a relatively low socio-economic background is not necessarily accompanied by objection to 'mainstream' sustainability culture. Fatima is a thirty-year-old Syrian refugee living in Italy who thinks that environmental policies should have a higher priority compared to social justice issues. She says that it is 'wrong' if people refuse to recycle or throw things in the street. In her view, caring for the environment is not in competition with human needs.

A small number of research participants – mostly those with origins in or contact with the Global South – extended the idea of socially stratified environmental legacies to the global context. Fred, an engineer who had moved to the Bay Area from India, distanced himself from climate change discussions, which he saw as a preoccupation of privileged westerners:

> Let's say Greta Thunberg . . . she sailed from Europe to the USA, for some reason. And she uses fewer clothes and all. . . . But all of that work she is doing . . . people in India and China do it, because they do not have that much money. . . . And all the people who are talking about climate change, they'll be like, 'Oh, *she* is the hero'.

According to Fred, climate change deniers and activists in the Global North have similar lives with similar environmental impacts, while people in the Global South lack resources and opportunities to choose and are not part of the conversation.

3.2.2 Generational Aspects of Environmental Legacies

Amidst ambivalence and contradictions, the element of 'whose future' or 'who will inhabit the future' becomes relevant and provides a link between environmental actions and generational relations. Younger generations can act as instigators of positive environmental legacies within family relations, for instance, by assuming the role of environmental educators. In this way, environmental legacies may be inverted, compared to the downward (older to younger) direction of material legacies. Valentino (Italy) described how his decision to become a vegan sparked new conversations about food ethics at home, eventually prompting his parents and sisters to adopt a vegetarian diet. However, the effects of such intergenerational interactions are not linear or assured.

Confronting ongoing environmental challenges within a generational framing is intertwined with emotions (Sigmer Nielsen et al., 2026; Wettergren, 2025). Facing the 'spoiled inheritance' evokes negative emotions such as hopelessness, fear, and anxiety, as well as feelings of personal and generational guilt. Across contexts, it was rare that (young) individuals would blame older generations for the environmental crisis, instead tending to empathise with their

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limited scope for action. Some older individuals shared regrets over their past lack of awareness and sadness about the situation that they had contributed to creating for younger and future generations (Ayalon et al., 2024).

Addressing negative environmental legacies entails acknowledging them and experiencing a sense of urgency about them (Banwell & Eggert, 2024). Older adults saw environmentally responsible role-modelling as an opportunity to generate and transmit positive environmental legacies. Grazia (Italy) believes that anxiety is necessary not only to recognise environmental degradation but also to act upon it. She became emotional when imagining the world her grandchildren will inherit – a world that is too warm, Italy turned into a desert, a planet stripped of its natural beauty. While anxiety alone is not conducive to action, it can be mobilised through social connections, collective action, and a shift in relationship to the environment – from one centred on accumulation and production to one rooted in care and affective relations. Grazia considers it necessary to confront other grandparents with the emotional weight of their grandchildren's climate future, believing it is the only way to motivate even small-scale action.

Drawing comparisons between the situation of different generations, a sense of deterioration concerning both environmental and material aspects emerged across the contexts; progress is construed as less achievable than in the past. Anders (Sweden) worried about the future of his grandchildren, as he thought society had reached its welfare peak. He envisioned a future where his descendants would get by, but economic flourishing would be very hard to achieve. Perceived threats to material and environmental well-being for younger generations were especially prominent in Italy. Paolo loses sleep over what he sees as the ongoing destruction and appropriation of nature by humans and is deeply worried about the future awaiting his daughters. His activism began when the local government initiated the destruction of nearby green areas for urban redevelopment – a crisis that, as he put it, took place 'in my garden'. He places his hope in grassroots, citizen-led action at the local level, even when the results are minimal or non-existent. When asked what drives him to act despite his bleak outlook, he pointed to his relationships with others in the committee and the sense of not being alone. For him, it is about 'doing something' to help build a different future for younger and future generations.

3.2.3 Envisaging Mechanisms of Change

The various interpretive frames mobilised to define meaningful actions are indicative of differing conceptions of what constitutes a viable mechanism for change. Some participants believed that people will not change unless

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compelled to, calling for strong policy-led enforcement or incremental change and continuous engagement in public actions. Others decide to take matters into their own hands and envision small worlds as the places where changes can happen, removed from systemic inertia.

Incremental or Enforced Systemic Change

The individualisation of responsibility – sometimes referred to as responsibilisation – whereby excessive emphasis is put on individual actions as a 'solution' to collective problems, has been described as a strategic tool employed by political and economic actors to deflect their accountability and role in bringing about structural change (Maniates, 2001). By placing the burden on citizens, responsibilisation detracts attention away from powerful interests and reinforces the centrality of consumer behaviour, while fostering a sense of chronic guilt among individuals. Olivia (Sweden) is very reluctant to hold individuals responsible for environmental issues. Although she does not perceive herself as someone who consumes a lot or always needs to have the latest version of certain products, she refuses to think that she, as an individual, is responsible for initiating change. She says one cannot blame people who are following the rules when, in fact, the rules need to change, and emphasises that environmental problems need to be addressed on a structural level.

Others rejected the focus on individual responsibility altogether, viewing it as counterproductive and distracting from the systemic transformations required to achieve profound change. A divergence emerges here between those who advocate for incremental change and those who argue for more radical structural reforms. There were calls for incremental policy interventions – for example, taxation of non-sustainable products – to make sustainable consumption more accessible, as people cannot be expected to make environmentally responsible choices when such behaviours are against their economic interests. Seong, a Korean man in his 60s, argued for greater producer responsibility, tighter regulation, and fiscal nudges that make polluting options less attractive. Tae, a Korean woman in her 20s, stresses the potential of extended producer responsibility and taxes to curb environmentally harmful production, so that sustainable goods are no longer the expensive 'special' choice for consumers. Reflecting on sustainable consumer choices in the United States, Iris emphasises that moral motivation for environmental action is insufficient as most people are not changing their behaviour: 'people aren't gonna do the right thing unless they're forced to'. She envisioned decisive policies that prompt change through customised climate penalties according to income and wealth, those who act sustainably

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benefiting from the fines levied on those who do not. In her view, more comprehensive policies are required to enforce corporate responsibility, given the immense economic resources these organisations have as a cushion against penalties. Julius (US) pointed to the need for fundamental systemic change, away from the predominance of corporate giants that are deeply vested in environmentally destructive modes of production.

Trust in formal decision-making and politics ranged from zero to optimism or belief that, ultimately, the normal mechanisms of democratic politics would yield improvements and perhaps even solutions. The sense of entrapment within 'the system' was a recurrent theme, particularly among those who desired change but felt powerless to effect it. This perceived entrapment sometimes led to a gradual erosion of belief in the effectiveness of activism or public engagement. Violetta (Italy) struggled to see her lifelong commitment to environmental causes and civil associations as a legacy. Having witnessed six decades of institutional inertia, she expressed a deep sense of disillusionment at the limited impact of her efforts. Similar sentiments led others to turn away from engagement, as they no longer believed in the transformative potential of environmental actions or activism. Patricia (US), described how the political climate under the second Trump administration made human crises more urgent and overshadowed environmental concerns, leading her to dismiss environmental causes as a preoccupation of upper-middle-class people who want to make their own surroundings nicer.

In Italy, young people involved in international environmental associations expressed the belief that working within the system offered greater potential for impact than attempting to subvert or reject it entirely. Prominent figures such as Greta Thunberg and global movements like Fridays for Future sometimes came to be viewed with scepticism. Their visibility was acknowledged while noting how quickly their efforts faded from public attention. Among the Swedish participants, some were in favour of taking to the streets and believed that protests can influence decision makers. Others did not believe protests could have any significant impact, and criticised civic disobedience. Tuva, a young Swedish woman who described herself as a climate activist, had grown sceptical towards some of the strategies within the climate movement. She tended to agree with the criticism of how the movement struggles to articulate alternatives to what they are against. She worried that civic disobedience might make non-participants less interested in supporting their cause. She was familiarising herself with traditional parliamentary ways of initiating change, but did not intend to abandon climate activism completely.

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Taking Matters into Own Hands

In response to a sense of powerlessness in addressing environmental legacies at the global or systemic level, some individuals turn towards crafting alternative small worlds where repairing elements of 'the spoiled inheritance' is achievable. These initiatives are marked by a desire to build something lasting – projects that extend beyond the individual and embody a future-oriented, long-term vision. Such small worlds serve as spaces where individuals and communities can enact their vision and cultivate alternatives to environmental disaster and loss. Where trust is minimal or negative, some want to 'take matters into their own hands', for example, by learning and practising permaculture individually or in small communities, protecting parks or other environments, or preparing for situations where systems might start falling apart.

Across contexts, we observed communities actively working to restore and transform damaged legacies, for themselves and for future generations. These small worlds can have a political role by interacting with decision-makers or by refuting the system and representing radical alternatives. Making changes within the existing system was not perceived as easy. To act collectively within the system, one must navigate existing constraints, such as legal limitations, and sometimes compromise. Paolo had joined a movement in Turin opposing the destruction of a natural park due to construction plans. He described the process of building this legacy as long and intricate, as there are very few successes, many steps back, and a lot of work. When asked about their possibility for change, Paolo stated that they are not seeking to change the world: 'It would be enough to change the fate of one park'.

Marco, an Italian professional in his 50s, is part of a socially innovative enterprise. This organisation reclaimed a 'spoiled legacy' – an area of the city formerly mismanaged – and, through community collaboration and democratic decision-making, transformed it into an accessible public space that promotes educational activities and new ways of engaging with the environment. The central space is dedicated to animals and their shelters, embodying the idea of shifting humans away from the centre of attention. The group are working to restore the natural habitat of the river that runs through the area. In this small world, anthropocentric perspectives are challenged in favour of a more-than-human approach. However, such practices do not erase the disillusionment that many feel toward broader systemic inertia. Marco believes that the planet might be better off without humans and acknowledges that change is not occurring at the pace required to address the environmental crisis. Moreover, engaging in these alternative practices does not eliminate contradictory actions or

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ambivalences: Marco admits that he still drives daily and shops at supermarkets – choices that he views with regret.

Rejection of current structures and norms and search for alternative spaces and ways of living, led to crafting small worlds that serve as a refuge and as a model of living otherwise. Two Korean couples who participated in the research were creating alternative microcosms – in one case, a book shop, in another case, a domestic environment that encapsulates ideas of care and conservation. Kang and Joo, both in their 30s, envisage their independent book shop as a legacy for the local community and for people promoting alternative ways of living. They view the bookshop as a haven, a place to learn, exchange ideas, host small events, and practise solidarity. For Sue and Pat, in their early 40s, their home reflects practices of care such as placing seats outside the house for passers-by, handcrafted furniture, and cherished memorabilia from their travels. Sue admits that their lifestyle is facilitated by an inheritance that she received, which enabled the couple to purchase a home and to retreat into a small world where it is possible to counter the 'world gone wrong' by making the small world otherwise – not because the world will change as a result of their actions, but because it is possible to craft better small worlds.

In some cases, 'taking matters into own hands' straddles collective and individualised goals. Sandra is a Swedish woman with a history of involvement in creating communities for people who want to lead an alternative lifestyle in the countryside. She sees these communities as her most important legacy. She lives in the city but is actively planning to move to the countryside to live off-grid in her small cottage, taking pride in not being dependent on systems like the electrical grid or the bank. Both her earlier involvement in creating communities and the planned move to her cottage are related to a lack of trust in politicians' ability to focus on the 'right' things and to act accordingly. While she acknowledges the risk of extreme weather events such as hurricanes, droughts or floods, she is not worried as she has the right skills. Sandra was actively reflecting on a topic we turn to next: the long-term future.

3.2.4 Future Imaginaries: From Bleak to Resilient

While most 'ordinary people' and governments currently appear to have limited capacity to imagine or act vis-à-vis the future, some powerful actors are very interested in the future. Long-termism has emerged as a particular interest or even trademark of certain corporations and prominent techno-entrepreneurial actors that are getting ready for the future, while most policymakers continue to focus on the outcome of the next election, rarely further than a few years in the

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future. Even if these are tactics to divert attention away from what is happening at present (short-term goals), such attempts to colonise the future align with the well-established corporate practice of making long-term plans.

The urban areas included in this study feature many advertisements referring to the future, and campaigns targeted at 'building the future' in various ways, ranging from ambitious construction projects to exhortations to modify one's means of travel in the interest of 'a better future'. Nevertheless, when asked about the future, both young and old participants frequently hesitated. Envisioning the future is difficult, especially in a time of uncertainty; thinking about one's own lifetime, the future of one's children or grandchildren is more manageable. The scenarios outlined below reflect different imaginaries of future generations of humans and non-humans.

Divided Futures

Timescales involved in imagining environmental legacies rarely extended beyond the participants' own children's or grandchildren's lives. The younger family generations' lives typically are seen as unfolding within relatively sheltered parts of the world that are obliquely contrasted to less secure existence 'elsewhere' (as noted in Section 3.1). The major environmental catastrophes that may happen in future generally do not include imaginaries of one's own family's younger generations. This perceived distance in time and space does not translate into positive future visions: environmental degradation is seen as a growing risk, and sadness is expressed for the (distant) future generations who will face harsher conditions.

Futures often are seen as stratified by social class and economic possibilities, both between and within countries. Luigi and Anita listed adverse future scenarios, such as 'rising sea levels, melting glaciers . . . no more water, and desertification', which privileged people will be able to escape. In contrast, envisioning a better future and sustainable development within existing social systems was more common among those who embraced technological solutionism. The idea that 'technology will save us' resonated among some in the San Francisco Bay Area, renowned for technological innovation, but also for its environmental protection policies. Jeremy, an accountant in his 20s, could imagine a 'shining example of . . . a sustainable city that is just beautiful and walkable and full of opportunities for all types of people'. Others shared similar views on innovation and economic opportunities but admitted that the solutions would likely be available only for the better-off. They expected social and environmental crises to aggravate in under-resourced communities in the years to come. Hence, visions of the future are divided: anticipating

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a promising future for some and increasing marginalisation and exposure to hazards for others.

While most Swedish participants took a careful or critical stance when considering the role of technology in efforts to counteract negative environmental effects, Joel, who identified technology and outdoor activities as his main interests, saw great potential in technological development to tackle energy-related problems. He had recently become a father and said that one must stay optimistic if one decides to have children. When envisioning the future, he imagined great technological developments that would lead to less energy consumption, but he also worried about rising populism and a growing risk of conflicts: in the event of an armed conflict on Swedish territory, focus would shift from environmental concerns to mere survival.

Will There Be a Future?

While the future often presents as uncertain and even frightening, people continue to live in the small world of personal hopes and family plans. Having or planning to have children could be seen as a form of optimistic projection towards the future, even when expressing concern about environmental destruction. Young Italian participants expressed awareness of the environmental impact of each birth, yet most also wished to become a parent. Anticipating that many people might ask 'what kind of world are you bringing them into?', Valentino thought that this 'argument doesn't hold, at least not in Europe . . . maybe it won't be the best world ever in 20 years, but my great-grandparents had my grandparents during the Second World War'. He envisages severe problems elsewhere ('not in Europe') and notes that there have been hard times in the past, so his generation should not give up on creating positive change, which includes raising a new generation of more responsible citizens.

Conversely, there are those for whom 'leaving nothing' was an aspiration that extended to not having children. In line with South Korea's ultra-low fertility, several Korean participants did not have children or did not intend to have any. While the complex reasons for this are beyond this book's scope and focus, people reflected on the intense pressures to succeed economically as well as the belief that fewer people are, in fact, a good thing for the planet. Jeong, a Korean researcher in her 20s, is not inclined to have children because she believes the environment will become less suitable for children in the future and having children is likely to harm the environment Kyung, a single, childless woman in her mid-40s, stated that she aspires to leave behind as little as possible, a sentiment that was partly grounded in her own burdensome experience of inheriting a family business. She also attested to little interest in posterity,

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believing that each generation has its own issues and interests, a view that was also expressed by Lee (Korea), a single, childless woman in her early 60s.

Lack of trust in humanity's ability to ensure a liveable future led some younger participants in Italy to envision, and even wish for, a crisis, whether social, environmental, or both. Ginevra predicted that 'something will happen' – a major crisis that will compel humanity to transform existing systems based on the appropriation and overconsumption of nature, noting that this sentiment is common among her peers. This is echoed by Jasmine (Italy), who recounts that her two children – both nearing the age of twenty – often say, 'there is no future', expressing the belief that something catastrophic will occur before they reach middle age. Eva, a young Swedish participant, struggled to imagine the future; she even wonders whether her generation will have any future at all. Due to this uncertainty, she found it difficult to plan her own future and had concluded that the most important thing is to counteract 'the bad that will happen', a statement that reflects both fatalism and resolve. She considered this a huge undertaking that is not feasible for any individual alone. As an active member of an environmental association, Eva hoped that more people would get involved.

Dynamic and Ambivalent Futures

The future of humans was sometimes distinguished from the future of the planet and its non-human life forms. Salma, a nineteen-year-old student from a wealthy neighbourhood in the San Francisco Bay Area, emphasised the Earth's resilience. She anticipated that the Earth could return to its previous equilibrium despite the environmental damage caused by humans. Rya, an Asian American woman in her 60s who has worked in various environmental organisations for decades, also highlighted nature's resilience, where humans allow it. Her view was based on observing regrowth in an area previously devastated by wildfires. Despite her long environmentalist career, she had no hope that humans would develop adequate answers to the global climate crisis, placing her hopes in the regenerative power of nature instead.

Imagining alternative ecological and social futures has become a field where Indigenous knowledge has grown in relevance and recognition, and Indigenous communities have become a critical source for approaches that challenge the dominant Western visions of the future (Cheok et al., 2025). Carmelita, a Mexican American *indigena* in her 30s, reflected: 'I don't know if I'm an optimist or a pessimist . . . I don't think there's this perfect solution . . . either individually or long term'. She had thought about starting a farm, concluding that there are no safe places, as mountainous areas are prone to fires, while the lower Bay Area is susceptible to flooding. As a self-described 'opti-pessimist',

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she outlined two scenarios: a negative one where the status quo of environmental destruction continues and the global climate crisis accelerates, and a better one where communities focus on finding solutions that mitigate the climate crisis. Carmelita attributes her confidence in finding solutions for the future to her farming background and her Indigenous community that has survived in difficult conditions for centuries.

In a similar vein, Chomchom (US) argued against human hubris when thinking about her capacity to act. She described the long journey humans have taken to understand the consequences of industrialism, and the urgent need to address these consequences, which easily leads to defeatism. She found solace in the migration of the monarch butterfly, based on an observation during a hike:

> [These] butterflies [travel] all the way up to Canada and all the way to Mexico . . . they don't do that in one lifetime. They do that in two or three . . . four generations to make one route . . . My ancestors [didn't think they] would make it, and we're still a lineage of our ancestors . . . I think this is helpful and comforting that perhaps it's not our generation, but . . . multiple generations.

Conceptualising change in this way offers a way out of an impasse through multigenerational long-term thinking.

3.2.5 Conclusion

In a future shaped – or colonised – by the persistence of current power dynamics, the burden of imagining alternatives often falls on individuals who are simultaneously confronted with the perceived futility of such imaginaries in view of their limited agency. Facing uncertain futures, individuals turn towards small worlds, whether it is their region they believe will avoid or withstand climate events, their close community where shared values prevail, or even an off-grid lifestyle chosen out of disappointment with the external world. Refuge is found in small, comforting worlds comprising ecological protection and restoration projects, educational activities and local initiatives: spaces where alternative futures are crafted through personal effort and commitment. In these spaces, hope is not abstract but enacted and embodied in daily, often demanding practices that challenge dominant narratives and cultivate new relations with the environment. The creation of diverse small worlds emerges not as a perfect solution, but as a form of grounded, relational action within a complex web of tensions. These small worlds offer spaces and social relations through which environmental legacies can be remedied, reimagined, and enacted – however modestly – in the face of global challenges. While engagement within small

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worlds supports a renewed sense of individual and community agency, it can also accentuate fractures within already polarised societies. Were they to become linked, small worlds could in principle cohere into connected worlds with shared goals, but thinking and acting within small worlds can also engender divisions and undermine the potential for larger-scale action and shared understanding.

4 Conclusions

4.1 Connecting Material and Environmental Legacies

This book has introduced the concept of legacies with a view to illuminating material-environmental relationalities and entanglements constructed through daily practices that resonate with the biggest global challenges of our time: socioeconomic inequalities, environmental degradation, and climate change. The term legacy-making has been employed to refer to future-oriented actions and ideation concerning the material and environmental effects that humans leave behind with direct or implicit reference to their own and their generation's eventual demise. Human legacies, as conceptualised here, are made by people in their everyday surroundings – small worlds – yet they are also connected to shared, global practices and processes. To elicit and conceptualise the intertwined material and environmental legacies that pass between co-existing generations, we have drawn on empirical data that were generated in Gothenburg in Sweden, Turin in Italy, Seoul in South Korea, and the San Francisco Bay Area in the United States, focusing on how people within and across these contexts are thinking and acting in relation to their legacies, and how these micro-level processes connect to the global challenges of wealth inequality and environmental crises.

Opportunities for intergenerational interaction have expanded with longer life spans, widening the scope for legacy-making. Sections 2.1 and 2.2 outlined how material legacies, such as wealth and assets, are growing in volume and shaping both individual life courses and environmental crises. A theme that resonates across the research contexts pertains to the burden of giving and receiving material legacies. Givers of substantial legacies worry about the consequences for the receivers, and receivers of inheritance and bequests often feel burdened by the task of managing the inherited assets and items. While material legacies generally feature the older (kinship) generations as givers and the younger ones as receivers of material legacies, the generational 'give and take' is more evidently multidirectional in environmental legacy-making, discussed in Sections 3.1 and 3.2While people across the four contexts avoided stereotypical references to generational culpability or victimhood,

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there are generational aspects to how people relate to environmental legacies. Understanding environmental change is framed as a life course process, highlighting the interplay of time and generational perspectives. Generational positioning vis-à-vis environmental legacies is dynamic and relational, shaped by experiences and relationships across a lifetime.

As discussed in Section 3.1, environmental relationalities range from 'nature out there' to 'the here and now' that includes humans. The more-than-human is often present when people account for their own ways of relating to 'the environment'. Although the severe effects of negative environmental legacies were generally associated with distant places, some manifestations of negative environmental legacies (such as microplastics) were considered proximate and embodied. A response to the widespread sense of powerlessness in addressing environmental legacies at the global or systemic level, Section 3.2 explored the turn towards communities and spaces where acting towards the 'spoiled' environmental legacies is achievable. These initiatives are marked by a desire to build something lasting – projects that extend beyond the individual and embody a future-oriented vision, sometimes oriented to survival. Among those who do relate to the long-term future, a range of imaginaries exist, from dystopian to perhaps surprisingly optimistic. These imaginaries or anticipations are amenable to further examination alongside evolving national and international policymaking concerning the rights of future generations and non-human entities.

We can now revisit the concept of small worlds that encapsulates the practices that are situated within the private, familial, community, and other 'small' settings that are meaningful and accessible for individuals engaged in material and environmental legacy-making. The refrain 'it's a small world' resonates here because material and environmental legacy-making across the contexts discussed in this book are fundamentally connected through human practices (c.f. Shove, 2023). Despite cultural, economic and societal differences, we live in a small world undergirded by commonalities in the organisation of production, consumption, and diverse other practices (Buzan, 2004; Meyer et al., 1997), including central features of legacy-making. Small worlds also refer to the family and friendship circles within which most material legacy-making (giving and receiving of inheritances and bequests) happens. The concept of small worlds of environmental legacy-making encapsulates the idea that, in view of the vastness of ecological crises, individuals focus on local, tangible elements of their environments that are accessible and meaningful. Small worlds serve as spaces where communities and individuals can cultivate alternatives to narratives and realities of environmental disaster and loss. This points to a shift in perspective where individuals find solace and empowerment in their

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immediate surroundings, but also calls for further thinking on whether actions across small worlds can cohere into something larger.

4.1.1 Burdens of Small Worlds

The world of material legacy-making is almost always confined to the familial and personal small worlds, as bequests and inheritances are channelled to people close to the giver. Where direct descendants are not present, there is a tendency to direct material legacies to nearest kin, formal or chosen: nephews, nieces, siblings and other relatives, chosen family, or friends. Bequeathed objects typically relate to the small domestic world, reflecting personal and family histories marked by cultures of consumption that are often construed as generational. Seemingly private practices of material legacy-making engender inequality writ large as they unfold within the small worlds of kinship networks, which are growing smaller still with demographic changes.

A notable feature of the small worlds of legacy-making is that they entail different types of burden. Counterintuitively, leaving and receiving large material legacies is frequently described as a burden. Where material legacies are subject to intense consideration, they are framed as burdensome: in circumstances where the material security of heirs is guaranteed, concerns arise about the adverse effects of security on their independence and agency. Such concerns are heightened as 'beanpole' families become more common, with only one or very few prospective heirs with multiple sources of bequests and inheritance from grandparents, parents, stepparents, childless aunts and uncles, among others.

While certain keepsakes and heirlooms are welcome, especially when they are connected to positive memories and relationships, inheriting household objects is considered a burden by many, as it necessitates time and effort in disbanding and recycling items that might have been important to the previous owner but carry no significance for the receiver, except perhaps as reminders of excess consumption and negative environmental legacies. Material legacies in the form of objects that need to be disbursed present a particular burden for people who are mindful of the ecological implications of a lifetime of consumerism and emptying out households that reflect this.

Environmental legacy-making takes place within the small worlds of gardens, parks, neighbourhoods, natural settings, community groups and initiatives, and involves carving out microcosms where the sense of doing the right thing in relation to the environment prevails, in contrast to a wider world that is perceived as out of control and crisis-ridden. Environmental legacy-making is experienced as burdensome where a growing disparity between intense

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personal efforts and political indifference and societal trends towards excess becomes evident. Some are preparing for the worst in the form of collapsing ecosystems or deteriorating political order, envisaging a world so small that individual survival strategies become necessary, yet most participants in this research were seeking to remedy the 'spoiled' environmental legacies by caring for the human and the non-human elements in their environments and communities. In this sense, the small worlds are interconnected through the hope for better environmental legacies interspersed with disillusionment and frustration.

Much of what people do in relation to their environmental legacies, therefore, can be encapsulated by evoking the idea of small worlds of close, like-minded individuals seeking to make lives better for younger or future generations of humans and non-humans in response to the difficulty of imagining a liveable future for themselves, their descendants, and future generations. Engagement in such actions reflects the 'big world' presenting as uncertain and crisis-prone. These legacy-making practices can be construed as indirect interactions with larger structures or *doing what one can*. While creating circumstances and relationships that comfort them, people strive to engage in processes of making the world otherwise.

4.1.2 Enmeshed Material and Environmental Legacies

The 'material' and the 'environmental' become intertwined through legacy-making practices. As material legacies are accumulated and passed on, some of their environmental legacy implications are obvious: greater material wealth entails higher consumption of resources in the form of larger housing, multiple properties, consumer goods, and internationally connected lifestyles where maintenance of family, friendship and professional networks involves frequent travel. Material legacies are constitutive of major inequalities, including the unequal freedom to choose one's lifestyle or sector of employment, as inheritance and bequests enable choices such as switching from corporate to environmentally conscionable employment, working less, and so on.

The connections between material and environmental legacies often are implicit, unspoken, and sometimes contradictory or paradoxical. Individuals enhancing the security of the small world of their families might be investing in environmentally damaging industries to secure their financial well-being and prospective material legacies – which also allows spending time in nature and personal environmental engagement. Sustainability-informed consumption choices in everyday life may be enabled by unsustainable employment or investments.

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Material and environmental legacies can become enmeshed in ways that are contrary to outcomes intended by humans. Seemingly solid material legacies, such as houses, become vulnerable in view of environmental degradation and disasters, illustrating both the effects and limits of human agency. Material legacies serve as markers of environmental change as the value of assets is liable to fluctuate or decimate due to environmental disasters and changes such as sea level rise and wildfires, and as a result of shifts in attitudes, consumption and economic structures towards less consumerism, more ecological products, and greener industries.

Environmental legacy ideation can have major implications for material legacy disbursal, perhaps most strikingly where the decision against having children, motivated by concern for the environment and bleakness of future anticipations, means that material legacy-making will not involve direct descendants. Environmental legacy ideation prompts some individuals to act on their material possessions in a manner that influences their subsequent material legacies, for example, selling a large family home and moving to a smaller, more energy-efficient one in mid-life after children have moved out. Legacy-making practices connect the material and the environmental, rendering the two intertwined.

4.1.3 Reimagining Legacies

Small worlds can serve as incubators for innovative practices that challenge the status quo. Community gardens, local conservation efforts, and collaboratives emerge as examples of forging alternatives that help to address immediate environmental concerns and cultivate a sense of agency and empowerment, illustrating that collective action can yield meaningful change.

However, inhabiting small worlds can lead to occupying divergent realities, growing distance from those who think otherwise, and even disinclination to concern oneself with the global scale of issues. This is not a moral critique but rather something that calls for further reflection. Uncertainty fosters the turn towards small worlds, and inhabiting small worlds might ultimately make it harder to address global structures and problems that already appear too enormous and complex. It could be argued that instead of small worlds, the need for ‘big’ ideas and large-scale collective action is greater than ever, but can shared transformative ideas emerge and be implemented from within small worlds? Are the small worlds going to get smaller as people look for meaning and safety? Or do the small worlds nevertheless represent the ‘best of possible worlds’ with potential for eventually cohering around alternatives such as prioritising care for the more-than-human?

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We do not live in an ordinary juncture of human or planetary history, but rather one invested with particular significance. Humanity's relationship with timelines is challenged by environmental destruction. Comforting as they might be, notions of circular time and imaginaries of nature 'bouncing back' become untenable in view of mass extinction of species (Lacher et al., 2025) and Earth system tipping points (Lenton et al., 2025). The legacies we create are interwoven with larger sociopolitical and ecological realities. In recognizing this interconnectedness, we can begin to reimagine our roles as stewards of collective and planetary legacies (Timonen et al., 2025). The concept of collective legacies invites us to consider how our practices contribute to a shared future. In this sense, legacy-making becomes an ongoing conversation that bridges generational divides and cultivates a sense of belonging that extends beyond the confines of kinship or locality towards politics and practices of care that consider the well-being of future humans and non-human entities (Timonen et al., 2026).

The concept of legacies, therefore, serves as an intellectual tool for questioning and rethinking our relationships with each other, with our environments, and with time. Legacy-making compels us to confront our material and environmental entanglements while inviting us to reimagine our role as custodians of the future. If humans were able to view themselves as generators of a deeper temporal context, this perspective could lead to altered intergenerational dynamics and relationalities between the human and the non-human. Understanding the future within such broader and deeper perspectives could bring about different ways of thinking and acting in relation to the creation of material and environmental legacies. Engaging in future-oriented actions and creating legacies amidst socioecological crises calls for different ways of approaching what we leave behind and, fundamentally, a new conception of what it means to be human.

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We hope that this Element will be of interest for researchers and students of many subjects including but not limited to sociology, anthropology, social and political theory, science and technology studies, family and ageing studies, social and public policy, and environmental studies ranging from environmental humanities to interdisciplinary approaches.

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For the small-vast, annihilated-enduring world of the Kuolajärvi Forest Sámi: we live on.
V.T.

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