

Hearing the Howl Beneath the Hardscape

Sinkholes, Hell Portals, and Earth-mouths

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EARLY ON THE MORNING OF MAY 12, 2016, "a portal to hell," as one neighbor called it, opened on Woodland Terrace outside St Thomas' Church in Charlton, southeast London. The void partially swallowed a parked minivan, leaving it dangling by the front end with room to spare for another vehicle.¹ In the Bronx, New York, on July 18, 2022, a sinkhole on Radcliff Avenue swallowed a parked white van, dropping it 20 feet deep into the pit. The hole measured 15 feet wide and 58 feet long. It was the second major "hellmouth," as one resident called it, on the same street within a year. The first had opened during Hurricane Ida in August 2021.² On Poydras Street in New Orleans, Louisiana, a massive hole opened in front of City Hall on the evening of January 11, 2024, and eventually swallowed the front end of a woman's car while she was on her way to the symphony.³

1 Lianne Kolirin, "Car Swallowed by Sinkhole After London's Rainy Day," *The Times*, May 12, 2016, <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/crime/article/car-swallowed-by-sinkhole-after-londons-rainy-day-6dn8pdb3n>.

2 Tracie Strahan, "Video Shows Moment NYC Sinkhole Swallows Entire Van," *NBC New York*, July 19, 2022, <https://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/bronx-sinkhole-swallows-entire-van/3780290/>.

3 "Massive Hole Swallows Car on Poydras Street," *WWL Louisiana*, January 12, 2024, <https://www.wwltv.com/article/traffic/a-massive-hole-on-poydras-street-nearly-swallows-car/289-6855097a-eab9-4e4a-a1d2-f7e9c89b3851>.

In the Dusit district of Bangkok, Thailand, on September 24, 2025 the land gave way between the Vajira Hospital and Samsen Police Station (Figure 1). The sinkhole continued to open for two days, before stabilizing at approximately 131 feet wide and 164 feet deep. The void sucked three cars and the entire road into the soil flow.⁴ On the afternoon of September 13, 2025, a sinkhole opened on a residential street in the Iztapalapa borough of Mexico City (Figure 2). The back wheel of a Jarritos soda delivery truck snagged on the asphalt. Eventually the entire truck slipped backwards into the approximately 26 feet deep, 39 feet long, and 23 feet wide rupture where it rested vertically for over 20 hours before it could be removed with a crane.⁵

I take in these scenes on my screens. People stand at the void edge in Bangkok as the ground falls away from beneath their feet. I pull my phone close to my face and watch again. I know the ending—the land slips away as they run back to stable ground, and I

4 The Associated Press, "Bangkok Road Collapse Creates Sinkhole, Disrupting Traffic and Prompting Evacuations," *NBC News*, September 24, 2025, <https://www.nbcnews.com/world/asia/bangkok-road-collapse-creates-sinkhole-rcna233358>.

5 MND Staff, "Sinkhole Swallows Jarritos Delivery Truck in Mexico City," *Mexico News Daily*, September 15, 2025, <https://mexiconewsdaily.com/news/sinkhole-swallows-jarritos-delivery-truck-in-mexico-city/>.



Figure 1. Road subsidence between Vajira Hospital and Samsen Police Station, Bangkok, Thailand on September 24, 2025. Photo: Creative Commons/Wikimedia.

scrub the timeline backwards pulling the soil up. I witness their witnessing again. “Move!” I say to my screen like watching a horror movie in 30-second clips. Only the scream line. Sinkhole swallows van. Hellmouth swallows road. Portal to hell opens outside church. Desiccated wetland cracks open and engulfs a fruit-flavored carbonated soft drink delivery truck. Dry land drinking soda and vehicle. The rupture clip ruptures inside of me too. It rips through my sense of stability, and I think of StephenAndrew777’s YouTube comment confession, “I am quite afearred of sinkholes as I am rather heavy, and I will be tiptoeing to and from the beer store from now on.”⁶ Stephen and I both feel the precarity of our own weight on the earth and the risk of collapse pulling us under.

The United States Geological Survey (USGS) defines these kinds of land ruptures opening in city hardscapes (the paved, impermeable surfaces of roads and sidewalks) built on drained wetland systems as human-induced. The phenomenon is not related to the underlying rock formation or conditions within the landscape composition. Instead, land-use and water management practices, such as the diversion of the natural water-drainage patterns, cause this form of land ripping.⁷

In modern cities, built on the premise of human-dictated environments, a thin slab of asphalt or concrete coats the ground. Because of this veil, humans rarely notice when the soil shifts and vacates the area under the slab, visually blocked by the reinforcement until the final moment before collapse. The symphony of the surface-level city, with its perpetual motion, carries on without a thought to the

risk of traversing an opening to the underworld while delivering fruit-flavored soda, walking to the subway, or parking next to a church. When the void underneath becomes too great and the slab gives out, a rupture in the surface of the city hardscape opens. The sinkholes detailed above follow the same pattern.

In London, heavy rainfall and an aging sewer system rushing through old underground chalk mine voids triggered the portal to hell. A sewer collapsed beneath the street during heavy rain and flash flooding, opening the hellmouth of New York. Likewise, a persistent water main leak, actively undergoing repairs, caused the car-and-woman-eating earth void of New Orleans—a chronic problem location for over ten years. The Bangkok soil flow followed the water paths of a burst underground water pipe, and slid into the cracked construction of the Purple Line subway extension. A failed eight-foot concrete water collector caused the soda-truck-swallowing rupture in Mexico City, one breach in an archaic drainage network cracked by land subsidence from forced desiccation of the wetlands.

When the breach opens in each of these locations, city officials encircle it with orange caution cones, thick plastic barricades, and men in hard hats wearing high-vis vests. If the hole is large enough, a few city workers will drop in using suspension cables and harnesses to investigate the damage to city services. The site transitions into a spectacle, and then quickly into a construction zone. Municipal officials pull out the public-facing figures among them to stand in front of the cameras and reassure the public of the stability of the land they walk on, drive over, and buy. Their jobs depend on the confidence of the tax base to continue performing city on top of the concrete or asphalt layer coating the earth.

This scene plays out in near perfect reflection from Mexico City, to London, to Bangkok. Across continents, landscapes, elevations, cultures, and languages. Artificial

6 StephenAndrew777, YouTube comment on Euronews, “Sinkhole Swallows Van, Bronx NY,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eOLsKgk6hf4>.

7 “Sinkholes,” Water Science School, United States Geological Survey, last modified June 9, 2018, accessed August 1, 2023, <https://www.usgs.gov/special-topics/water-science-school/science/sinkholes>.



Figure 2. A Jarritos soda delivery truck in Iztapalapa, Mexico City, snagged on the asphalt and then fell backwards into the earth rupture on September 13, 2025. Still frame from official municipal video documentation (@Alc_Iztapalapa).



sinkholes open at various points in time and are quickly closed by city maintenance efforts, making it hard to see the connection between the re-occurring phenomenon and human development. Facing the anxiety of the land slipping out from under us, we turn to orange traffic cones, yellow caution tape, and people in hard hats to calm our anxieties. Such theatrics form the human aesthetic of rupture; they tell us what it is, what it means, and when it will be reversed. This aesthetic treats sinkholes as agents of swallowing—cars, trucks, roads, buildings, people, pets.

I search my screens for sinkholes in New Orleans and find a clip of a woman broadcasting live from a sinkhole that swallowed the front of a school bus. The bus was gone, presumably pulled to safety and driven away. She tells the camera that she

dragged the orange traffic cone from down the street to block the pit.⁸ I wonder why there is a shortage of cones and where the officials in hard hats are with their yellow tape. The pit that swallowed the woman and her car in downtown New Orleans had both cones and tape before it ate her. On the live broadcast, with her car front-first into the hole in the background, she confesses to thinking the boards and cones were guides.⁹ The mouth to hell seems to be lined with plastic yellow tape. As the USGS and city officials all over the world acknowledge, these ruptures are caused by

8 FOX 8 Staff, "School Bus Gets Stuck in Sinkhole in Hollygrove," FOX 8 Live, January 9, 2024, <https://www.fox8live.com/2024/01/09/school-bus-gets-stuck-large-pothole-hollygrove/>.

9 "Massive Hole Swallows Car on Poydras Street," WWL Louisiana.

human actions. And yet, the fear that rises inside of me is not for the humans and their water main breaks, but for the land. For the moment the earth cracks open and swallows without warning. The fear is for the moment of encounter with an untamable agency beyond human control or warning.

The ruptures I witness opening on my screens leak inside of me, reach back and pull more stability from my edges. If the mouth of the beast is big enough for a Jarritos truck, how big is the beast? I search for more about the Bangkok sinkhole site and find a clip of men in hard hats holding a cardboard box with straws through the sides.¹⁰ They attempt to explain what happened with the water pipes and the subway and the rains. But the hellmouth gapes open behind them and I remember the video of men in harnesses dropping into the rupture and I can't but laugh at their straws. If humans and our actions induce the rupture to the underland as the USGS tells me, I find clarity in the fear confessed by a Bronx resident on Facebook, "I'm actually scared of this happening in front of our house where that beautiful cone has been sitting for almost a year now over that hole."¹¹ The cone serves as a part of the human aesthetic of rupture, not the preventor of the phenomenon.

Human-induced cavities in the land exist as the direct result of economic systems that require the parceling up of land into a commodity for development. Diverting water and draining substrates was the first order of business for any further construction to be possible in a water-logged location. Investors had to stabilize the soils against natural

10 Channel News Asia, "What Caused the Massive Sinkhole in Bangkok," Facebook video, September 25, 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/ChannelNewsAsia/videos/what-caused-the-massive-sinkhole-in-bangkok/2171971826633267/>; "Sinkhole Rescuers Narrowly Escape Death Seconds Before More Collapses," *The Sun*, YouTube video, September 25, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fXWj4-lbKOo>.

11 Bronx resident, Facebook comment on News12 New Jersey, "Bronx Sinkhole" video, <https://www.facebook.com/News12NJ/videos/bronx-sinkhole/1098042287483307/>.

rhythms of flooding, and pushed the water into the restricted flow patterns of drainage ditches and canals. Then came the concrete and asphalt layers to seal up the city from soil. Under the hardscape, the desiccated wetlands below London, New York, New Orleans, Bangkok, and Mexico City wither and contract as the body of the substrate shrivels like a mummy buried in a sarcophagus. With a hardshell physically and visually covering the shrinking, voids created by leaking pipes or stormwater drains can take many years before becoming large enough to appear on the surface.

The woman broadcasting live from a cone-less hellmouth in New Orleans felt compelled to drag the high-vis plastic marker down the street in her dress clothes because, without the cover of the human aesthetic, she was left with only the rupture—with a view into the mouth of a beast. News articles and live broadcasts coming from all corners of the world tell me that sinkholes swallow things. Eating car, and home, and person. But mouths open to speak as well as to eat. Stripping away the human aesthetic of rupture and seeking an ecological one instead, I wonder at what sort of communication could be happening as this land rips. Without the cone or the yellow plastic tape, we are left with what the media theorist Sean Cubitt calls the howl of nature.¹²

The portal to hell that opened outside St Thomas' Church in Charlton, London, opened on a street a stone's throw from Gilbert's Pit, a site riddled with medieval chalk-mine voids, known as deneholes, from which lime was extracted for agricultural use.¹³ The Thames, which flows less than a half a mile to the north, once moved through marshland several times wider than it runs

12 Sean Cubitt, *Finite Media: Environmental Implications of Digital Technologies* (Duke University Press, 2017), p. 179.

13 British Geological Survey, "Deneholes," <https://www.bgs.ac.uk/geology-projects/sinkholes-research/deneholes-2/>.

today. Beneath the contemporary street, heavy rains like those of 2016 still move through the water-bearing chalk formation—the geological body that once fed the marshland of the Thames before desiccation and development.¹⁴

In the Bronx, Radcliff Avenue was laid out in 1913 on the subdivided grounds of the former Morris Park Racecourse, itself built in 1889 on the Bear Swamp, the Bronx River wetland that had been progressively drained and filled as the city pushed northeast.¹⁵ The street grid was stamped over the swamp, the racetrack, and then the swamp again, each layer adding distance between the asphalt surface and the water moving underneath it.¹⁶

In New Orleans, Poydras Street is one of the oldest roads in the city, first laid out in 1788 on the natural levee of the Mississippi—the highest and driest ground available. The infrastructure beneath the street was installed to manage a city built on the drained backswamp. Water pumps pull rainwater upward and out of terrain that sits below sea level. The water main below Poydras had a chronic leak with more than ten years of known failures at that site.¹⁷

Samsen Road in Bangkok runs parallel to the Chao Phraya River. Prior to the 1960s, this

transportation corridor was a canal and part of the integrated flood management network. Beginning in the 1960s, the canals that had made Bangkok the Venice of the East were systematically filled in and paved over to make roads, eliminating the natural drainage system that had allowed the delta to absorb and move water for centuries.¹⁸ Samsen Road follows the line of that older water city, and the soft alluvial clay beneath has sunk more than one meter in the worst-affected areas since large-scale groundwater extraction began in the 1950s.¹⁹

In Iztapalapa, Mexico City, the sinkhole opened in a borough built entirely on the bed of a lake that was forcibly drained beginning in the early seventeenth century, when Spanish colonial engineers destroyed the Aztec hydraulic infrastructure that had responded to the water fluctuation of the Mexico Valley for centuries. The drainage projects took over three hundred years to complete, and in their wake, Mexico City has sunk approximately ten meters in the last century as the former bed of Lake Texcoco desiccates and compresses. The failed concrete water collector that swallowed the Jarritos truck in 2025 was one crack in an archaic drainage network built to do the work that the lake once did on its own.²⁰

The earth-mouths at each of these sites opened after centuries of interruption and destruction of the ecosystems that once made the locations desirable for human settlement. The rips in the land pull forgotten histories to the surface, and the surface into the past realities of the landscape. The rupture is not just a damaged spot in the city infrastructure;

14 W.V. Bartlett, "The River and Marsh at East Greenwich," *Transactions of the Greenwich and Lewisham Antiquarian Society* (lectures delivered January 1960 and December 1963), republished at <https://greenwichpeninsulahistory.wordpress.com/2013/08/09/the-river-and-marsh-at-east-greenwich-w-v-bartlett-1960/>.

15 "Bronx History at the Bronx Library Center: The Morris Park Racecourse," *The New York Public Library*, March 14, 2019, <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2019/03/14/bronx-history-morris-park-racecourse>.

16 NYC Parks Natural Resources Group, "Historical Wetlands of the Bronx River Watershed" [map], 2007, https://www.nycgovparks.org/sub_about/parks_divisions/nrg/bronx_river_epa/BxR_watersheds_wetlands_mapping/Historical_wetlands/map2_revised.pdf; Welikia Project, *Historical Ecology of New York City* [interactive map], New York Botanical Garden Urban Conservation Team, <https://www.welikia.org/map-explorer#13.26/40.83974/-73.8701>.

17 Richard Campanella, *Draining New Orleans: The 300-Year Quest to Dewater the Crescent City* (Louisiana State University Press, 2023), p. 73.

18 Kathleen E. Ahamed-Broadhurst, "Understanding Canals in Bangkok Using Historic Maps and GIS" (master's thesis, Harvard University, 2017), p. 42, <https://dash.harvard.edu/entities/publication/ab878d4f-odd4-4463-9b2f-53ba35df275c>.

19 N. Phien-wej, P.H. Giao, and P. Nutalaya, "Land Subsidence in Bangkok, Thailand," *Engineering Geology* 82, no. 4 (2006): 187–201.

20 Barbara Mundy, *The Death of Aztec Tenochtitlan, the Life of Mexico City* (University of Texas Press, 2015).



Figure 3. Unopened earth-mouth on Cristóbal Colón, in Mexico City on February 1, 2024. Photo: Katie Fisher.



Katie Fisher looking into an active sinkhole, gaged with cones and boards, in New Orleans on November 6, 2025. Photo: Abbie Powers.

it is a moment of ecological communication. From a human perspective, sinkholes open quickly and with little to no warning. From the ecological perspective, however, landscapes that took millennia to braid together as healthy wetlands systems took only centuries to unwind the stability of the soil beneath. By the time the mouth opens to speak a response, the human view has moved on by multiple generations and nearly forgotten what the landscape looked like prior to the concrete, asphalt, and buried water pipes. No living human remembers the full flow width of the Thames, the Bronx River wetland, the unaltered natural levee of the Mississippi, the full Chao Phraya River system without canals, or the floating city of Tenochtitlan. Grasping the ecological aesthetic of rupture requires a different scale of time, pace of movement, and syntax of meaning.

Walking down Cristóbal Colón on the west of Alameda Central in Mexico City, I spot a missing corner of a sidewalk tile and turn on my phone light to check the hole and reassure

myself (Figure 3). The light casts down from the street level and into a cavern. The sides catch the dull yellow hue, but the bottom never tells the color back to me and I'm bent over a hellmouth straining to adjust my eyes to the underworld. Failing to find the floor, I feel the ancient Texcoco lakebed pulling at me from below. The boundary between myself and the constant fluctuation of the natural world held by a thin slab of sidewalk tile. One rainstorm away from catastrophic failure. An earth-mouth not yet cracked open, it mumbles its grammar to me, and I think back through its 500 years of desiccation, dismemberment, and development. The earth-mouth calls me into its shift of scales that mark not days but eons. I witness this earth-mouth not on my screen but with the light of my phone. Pulling my head up to acknowledge the snag I've become in the crowd. I stand up in shock and silence. I wonder when this earth-mouth will speak, and what it will take for the humans of Mexico City, of London, of Bangkok, of New Orleans, of New York, to hear the howl of nature. ㏹