Editorial

Reimagining Urban Futures: Perspectives on Cultural, Environmental and Digital Transitions

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Cities have become central arenas in confronting today's most pressing environmental and societal challenges, including climate change, biodiversity loss, socio-territorial inequalities and the disruptive impacts of technological innovation. With over 55% of the world's population now living in urban areas (with a projected 68% by 2050, according to the United Nations), cities play dynamic socio-ecological systems a defining role in shaping the well-being of both current and future generations. This reprint, entitled "Urban Transitions and Dynamics: Cultural, Ecological, Digital and Degrowth", emerged from growing academic and policy-driven demands to investigate cities as laboratories of transition, innovation and justice, as well as the need to explore how urban territories are being reconfigured in light of new environmental, technological and socio-political imperatives.

In recent years, we have witnessed a proliferation of concepts seeking to capture the new trajectories for urban sustainability. Notably, notions such as the 15-min city [1,2], circular urban economies [3,4], digital transitions [5,6], urban sustainable development [7,8], degrowth actions [9,10], and positive energy districts [11,12] have gained traction in both academic and planning discourse. Meanwhile, the implementation of major infrastructures—whether high-capacity transport corridors, intermodal complexes or "anchor" museums—has provoked ambivalent urban transformations. On the one hand, such projects stimulate local economies and attract fresh investment; on the other, they can exacerbate socio-spatial inequality by displacing vulnerable populations in the face of rising property values and housing costs. This dynamic intersects with touristification, which, although often driving the early stages of rundown neighbourhood rehabilitation and heritage preservation, ultimately generates mounting tensions between residents and visitors. This places immense pressure on the accommodation market, inflates the cost of living and gives rise to the "gourmet aestheticisation" of public spaces, turning squares and streets into segmented consumer venues. The gradual privatisation of these spaces—often justified in the name of security or visitor comfort—further commodifies everyday urban life, undermining social sustainability and the right to the city.

These frameworks share the ambition of reframing urban development around equity, low-carbon infrastructures and collective well-being. At the same time, critical voices have problematised the operationalisation of these paradigms, highlighting the risks of exclusion, technological determinism or reproducing old spatial injustices under new guises [13,14]. Moreover, there are growing concerns about the instrumentalization of these sustainability paradigms, whereby concepts originally rooted in social justice and environmental

transformation are co-opted by market-driven actors or used as legitimation strategies for continued capital accumulation. This includes risks of greenwashing urban developments that maintain extractive logics under sustainable rhetoric or of social washing initiatives that claim community participation while reinforcing existing power structures, lifestyle brands or market niches that serve affluent populations while marginalizing vulnerable communities [15]. Such appropriations hollow out the transformative potential of these frameworks, converting visions for justice into instruments of capitalist accumulation.

Taken together, these emerging frameworks offer a rich analytical vocabulary and an ambitious normative horizon for guiding contemporary urban policy. The 15-min city, for instance, reconfigures the relationship between time, space and everyday life, promoting spatial equity through decentralising essential services [1,16]. Circular urban economies challenge the linear, extractive logic of conventional urban growth, encouraging regenerative cycles of production, consumption and waste management [10]. Meanwhile, degrowth perspectives introduce a necessary critique of the unsustainable foundations of urban development, inviting a revaluation of sufficiency, care, and non-market values in urban planning [17].

While enabling greater connectivity, data-driven management and new service models, digital transitions also raise crucial concerns regarding surveillance, digital divides and algorithmic governance. Similarly, positive energy districts exemplify how technological innovation can be leveraged to achieve energy autonomy and carbon neutrality at the neighbourhood scale; however, their implementation often requires new forms of institutional cooperation and citizen engagement. The success of these models thus hinges not only on technological feasibility but on their capacity to be embedded within inclusive and democratic planning processes.

In addressing the multifaceted crises cities face today, these concepts are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary. Their relevance lies in their potential to reshape planning paradigms and inform integrated strategies capable of navigating socio-environmental complexity. For planners, policymakers and researchers alike, the challenge is to interpret and adapt these ideas to diverse territorial realities, ensuring that they serve as tools for emancipation rather than instruments of exclusion or commodification.

The relevance of this reprint lies in its ability to bridge empirical insights and theoretical reflections on contemporary urban transformations. The nine chapters included explore diverse geographies and analytical lenses, engaging with issues such as green productivity, environmental well-being, digital transitions, new urban governance mechanisms, and the impacts of tourism and cultural dynamics on city centres. Together, they contribute to ongoing debates regarding how to foster more just, sustainable and resilient cities through integrated cultural, environmental, digital and post-growth approaches.

This endeavour was motivated by the recognition that the current wave of urban transitions demands a rethinking of spatial planning and territorial governance. As Guest Editors, our interests were both academic and political: to offer a platform for interdisciplinary dialogue and to inform better public policies that respond to territorial specificities while fostering urban sustainability and social cohesion. The diversity of cases and methods represented—from evaluating the impacts of high-speed rail to analysing in situ urbanisation through digitalisation—attests to the richness of this field, as well as the need for plural, context-sensitive understandings of urban change.

The nine contributions can be grouped into three thematic clusters. The first focuses on environmental transitions and well-being and includes papers by Zheng et al., Zhang & Zhou, and Hu et al. They propose new frameworks for integrating environmental indicators and green innovation into urban planning. The second thematic cluster addresses digital transitions and economic resilience, with contributions from Shi & Lu, Li et al. and Li

& Song exploring how digitalisation reshapes urban systems, labour geographies and economic adaptability. The final theme includes place-based studies that examine cultural, infrastructural and tourism-led transformations in urban centres and includes works by Fernandes et al., Tian et al., and Chi & Han.

This reprint is primarily aimed at academic audiences working in the fields of geography, urban and environmental engineering, architecture, sociology, development studies, political economy and related disciplines. Its interdisciplinary scope and methodological diversity are especially relevant for scholars analysing the interplay between urban form, socio-technical systems, governance mechanisms and sustainability transitions. The collected articles provide both conceptual depth and empirical substance, making them valuable resources for those researching urban dynamics and spatial justice in an age of environmental urgency and technological change.

At the same time, this volume is intended to inform the work of practitioners and decision-makers involved in urban planning and governance. It is particularly directed at municipal planners, technical staff and local government leaders who face the daily challenge of implementing sustainable policies in diverse and often complex urban contexts. By offering grounded insights, comparative examples and critical perspectives, this reprint aims to support the formulation of more effective, equitable and context-sensitive public policies.

We invite readers to engage critically and constructively with the contributions presented here. The pathways towards more sustainable and inclusive urban futures are plural and contested, but they require collective imagination and empirical grounding. We hope that this Special Issue provides inspiration, tools and prompts for researchers, planners, policymakers and citizens committed to rethinking urban life in the face of environmental and social emergencies.

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