

Discussion paper (Oct. 2024)

Resources of urban future-making

Fabian Namberger, Thilo van der Haegen, Joachim Thiel

Within today's wide-reaching urban transformations, professional urban actors are central to urban change. These actors include planners, administrators, and decision-makers in state institutions, experts and specialists of the private sector, and organizers and activists in civil society; their relative agency, and the agency of their respective organisations, differs tremendously. One of the factors determining the agency of different kinds of urban actors is the *resources* – both material and immaterial – that they can mobilize for pursuing both short-term goals and long-term ambitions. While, for instance, globally operating companies are well positioned to shape common expectations of the future via visually compelling urban imaginaries, potent lobbying practices, and AI-powered analytical insights (Beckert, 2016; Cugurullo et al., 2023), local urban actors usually lack such enabling capabilities. In short, resources – and with them, agency – are distributed among various kinds of built-environment professionals in fundamentally uneven ways.

Material resources: Providing materials for urban futures

The forms of resources that individual, institutional, and collective urban actors are able to leverage vary considerably. Here we may think, first, of those resources providing the necessary material base *for* urban futures. These include 'natural' resources such as water, air, and various sources of energy helping to fulfil basic human needs of warmth, hygiene, and recreation in the city of the future (Ballesterio, 2019; Gandy, 2022). Similarly, the maintenance and remaking of the city's built environment and large-scale infrastructures will require the supply of old and new construction materials such as sand, cement, timber, or steel that are not always easily at hand and whose conditions of extraction and transport have come under close scrutiny in recent years (Ciccantell, 2019; Cowen, 2014).

From the beginning to the end of these global networks, the supply of human labour power remains a decisive resource in the material realization of urban futures, as global divisions of labour are being reconfigured along existing analogue and new digital geographies (Altenried, 2022; Tsing, 2009). Finally, the 'digital metropolis' not only relies on enormous magnitudes of energy consumption to run data centres or charge electric vehicles, but is also driven by the global extraction of rare earths and precious metals needed for the production of microchips, batteries, and other devices of the AI-powered city (Crawford, 2021; Cugurullo et al., 2023).

Immaterial resources: Making decisions about urban futures

Second, urban actors mobilize a whole spectrum of immaterial resources in decision-making processes *about* urban futures. Scholarly work on the production and circulation of urban imaginaries – including real-time urban mappings, digital twins, hand-drawn cartographies, and many other representations of space – highlight the hugely disparate capabilities of individual actors in disseminating their visions of the future both from the bottom up and from the top down (Jasanoff and Kim, 2015; Montserrat Degen and Rose, 2022). Likewise, awareness *of* and analytical insight *into* formal and informal knowledges, globally circulated urban policies, and best-practice examples mark rapidly evolving arenas of diverging space-making powers and urban oversight (McCann, 2013; Borén et al., 2020).

Such unevenly distributed resources of influence are further criss-crossed by different identities along the lines of gender, sexuality, ‘race’, and more, critically structuring actors’ agency in shaping urban futures (Oswin, 2015; Kern, 2021). Moreover, the resource of time signals another prevalent factor of present-day space-making. Within the fast-paced rhythms of accumulating urban crises on the one hand and the much longer *durées* of geological earth time on the other, the ability of urban actors to intervene in urban space along hugely different *tempi* and time scales has gained crucial importance (Chakrabarty, 2018; Verne et al., 2024).

Therefore, marked by their relative proximities *to* and variable distances *from* material as well as immaterial resources, urban actors find themselves situated today in a contested force field of spatial polarisations, temporal non-synchronicities, and social inequalities, and their relative agency is decidedly shaped by uneven access to the resources to make urban futures. Scholars thus need to critically analyse how resources, and access to them, shape by whom which urban futures are made, and to what end.

Lines of inquiry

Starting from this complex situation, this call for papers addresses the need to seriously think through the many ways in which various types of resources increase, widen, or amplify the agency of professional urban actors in the context of wide-reaching urban crises. In doing so, we want to open up three main lines of inquiry.

- The first explores the material resources needed *for* the creation of new urban futures. We are interested here in the uneven global geographies of ‘natural’ resources such as water, sunlight, land, or air, as well as the shifting trajectories of both long-used and increasingly scarce materials that make the existence of future cities possible in the

first place: cement, sand, timber, oil, rare earths, metals, rubber, vegetation, and more. How are these materials being extracted, processed, and transported? What are their routes along global supply chains and logistics networks that often lead from extractive sites in the Global South to metropolises of the Global North? And what kinds of human labour are needed to keep these global networks going and to transform piles of raw materials into solid urban environments?

- The second line of inquiry zooms in on immaterial resources leveraged in decision-making processes *about* urban futures. Our focus is on formal and informal urban knowledges, imaginaries, analogue and digital representations of city space, maps, policy mobilities, and other intangible resources that are used to influence the shape of urban futures. We invite papers that respond to questions such as: How do different types of immaterial resources increase the relative agency of certain urban professionals in situations of political decision-making and urban future-making? What is the role of established and new representations of space (imaginaries, maps, models, digital twins, and more) in influencing decisions about urban futures? Which cities are included *in* or excluded *from* privileged urban networks of policy mobility, knowledge exchange, and other circulating resources in the context of urban future-making?
- Third, we want to explore the differential positionalities of space-makers vis-à-vis resources themselves. Depending, inter alia, on social dimensions of identity and inequality, geographic location (local vs. global, centre vs. periphery), and diverging time frames (long-term historical conjunctures vs. short-term decision-making), individual, collective, and institutional urban actors find themselves in varying proximities to both material and immaterial resources that shape their relative agency. Against this background we wonder: Which urban actors enjoy privileged access to certain resources? And to what effects do they use and leverage that access? Conversely, how are restrictions in access to resources experienced, negotiated, and perhaps even partly circumvented by more disadvantaged (groups of) urban actors?

References

- Altenried, M. (2022) *The digital factory: The human labor of automation*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Ballesterio, A. (2019) *A future history of water*. Duke University Press, Durham, NC.
- Beckert, J. (2016) *Imagined futures: Fictional expectations and capitalist dynamics*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

- Borén, T., P. Grzyś, and C. Young (2020) Intra-urban connectedness, policy mobilities and creative city-making: National conservatism vs. urban (neo)liberalism. *European Urban and Regional Studies* 27.3, 246–58.
- Chakrabarty, D. (2018) Anthropocene time. *History and Theory* 57.1, 5–32.
- Ciccantell, P.S. (2019) Ecologically unequal exchange and raw materialism: The material foundations of the capitalist world-economy. In R.S. Frey, P.K. Gellert, and H.F. Dahms (eds.), *Ecologically unequal exchange: Environmental injustice in comparative and historical perspective*, Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- Cowen, D. (2014) *The deadly life of logistics: Mapping violence in global trade*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Crawford, K. (2021) *Atlas of AI: Power, politics, and the planetary costs of artificial intelligence*. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.
- Cugurullo, F., F. Caprotti, M. Cook, A. Karvonen, P. McGuirk, and S. Marvin (2023) Introducing AI into urban studies. In F. Cugurullo, F. Caprotti, M. Cook, A. Karvonen, P. McGuirk, and S. Marvin (eds.), *Artificial intelligence and the city: Urbanistic perspectives on AI*, Routledge, London.
- Gandy, M. (2022) Urban political ecology: A critical reconfiguration. *Progress in Human Geography* 46.1, 21–43.
- Jasanoff, S. and S.-H. Kim (2015) *Dreamscapes of modernity: Sociotechnical imaginaries and the fabrication of power*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Kern, L. (2021) *Feminist city: Claiming space in a man-made world*. Verso, London.
- McCann, E. (2013) Policy boosterism, policy mobilities, and the extrospective city. *Urban Geography* 34.1, 5–29.
- Montserrat Degen, M. and G. Rose (2022) *The new urban aesthetic: Digital experiences of urban change*. Bloomsbury, London.
- Oswin, N. (2015) World, city, queer. *Antipode* 47.3, 557–65.
- Tsing, A. (2009) Supply chains and the human condition. *Rethinking Marxism* 21.2, 148–76.
- Verne, J., N. Marquardt, and S. Ouma (2024) Planetary futures: Über Leben in kritischen Zeiten. *GZ Geographische Zeitschrift* 112.2, 151–71.