Urban Planning (ISSN: 2183–7635)
2021, Volume 6, Issue 4, Pages 1–3
https://doi.org/10.17645/up.v6i4.4821

Editorial

Towards Green(er) Cities: Contextualizing Green Benefits for Urban Spaces and Contemporary Societies

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Submitted: 19 August 2021 | Published: 14 October 2021

Abstract
There is an expanding understanding of the value and critical need for green(er) cities. It comes at a time when green spaces are depleting on a global scale, in order for cities to host the majority of the world's population. The contest between diverse land-uses is inflating the pressure on already strained resources, intensifying the growing carbon footprint and impairing water quality, and compromising health and overall quality of life. Soon our cities will be far removed from the safe, clean, and liveable environments, as envisioned in planning theory, if we continue with business-as-usual. There is an increasing scientific appreciation of the interrelated role of green land-uses, the value of our environment and its related ecosystem services, which acts as catalyst to realise the objectives of broader sustainability. Although literature is clear on the importance, role, benefits, and impact of green(er) cities, the realisation of the greening initiatives in practice is still limited, and more should be done to embed green(er) thinking as part of mainstream urban planning. Urban spatial transformation is needed to reclaim nature for cities and to enhance the direct and indirect benefits that nature provides to contemporary societies. This thematic issue considered various trans-disciplinary approaches to provide a way forward in the quest of prioritising the notion of green(er) cities, while drawing on a range of evidence-led initiatives.

Keywords
contemporary societies; future cities; green benefits; sustainability; urban spaces

Issue
This editorial is part of the issue "Towards Green(er) Cities: Contextualizing Green Benefits for Urban Spaces and Contemporary Societies" edited by Juaneé Cilliers (University of Technology Sydney, Australia).

1. The Changing Urban Landscape and Interrelated Role and Value of Nature

The environment is changing at a rapid pace, largely ascribed to population growth and increasing urbanisation. As the majority of the global population now resides in the urban landscape, cities have become a central nexus in the relationship between people and nature. While global spatial policies aim to manage urban growth to ensure that the benefits of urbanisation are fully shared and inclusive, most spatial initiatives focus on access to infrastructure and social services for all, with a less significant focus on green spaces provision within the urban fabric. The provision of urban green spaces is well researched and captured in literature, with results pointing to a range of supplementary ecosystem services supporting humanity, including provisioning, regulating, supporting, and cultural services. Concurrently, various case studies have also concluded on the severe impact pertaining to the lack of green spaces in cities and neighbourhoods, often triggering additional negative impacts relating to the intensified urban heat island effect, increased energy consumption, impaired water quality, and ultimately compromised human health and comfort. Recently, the scholarly interest in urban green spaces has peaked with the recognition that urban green space holds the potential to turn the situation around and to enhance urban quality of life. Likewise, research has proven that green spaces and associated green infrastructure planning approaches have the potential to strengthen the social-ecological resilience of cities. There is a new reassessment of

what landscapes should be in terms of form and function, and despite the growing scholarly discourse, the realisation of green(er) cities in practice is still limited, often approached in an ad hoc manner, and frequently side-lined as urbanisation causes land use change and conflict. Trans-disciplinary approaches and evidence-led initiatives that are included in this thematic issue can provide insights and a possible way forward to position and articulate green(er) cities, as it contextualizes green benefits for urban spaces and contemporary societies.

2. Towards Urban Spatial Transformation and Green(er) Cities

Urban spatial transformation is needed in quest towards green(er) cities. The first article in this thematic issue states how cities often rely on short-term incremental solutions to reduce urban infrastructure's vulnerability to natural disasters but emphasised that the focus should rather be on longer-term transformative solutions and collective urban green infrastructure solutions. While incremental urban planning and design approaches such as urban greening, water-sensitive planning, disaster risk management, community resilience, and climate-resilient building and infrastructure contribute to the notion of sustainability, it is the longer-term transformative designs and urban spatial innovations which are required to make our cities more climate-proof and resilient.

The second article further emphasises the importance and role of vegetation in climate adaptability, stating that climate-responsive urban design is dependent on urban form, urban structures, and the role of greenery within these settings. Climate adaptivity however calls for the development of normative criteria on how to design the forms of urban settings which integrate vegetation as part of mainstream spatial planning.

The third contribution agrees that the current approaches to make cities green(er) or more sustainable are still linear and insufficient to deal with the growing urban challenges but recognises that bioconvections can be considered the enablers of regenerative circularity. The article illustrates that the adoption of regenerative and circular lenses for the built environment may foster a more holistic development based on "what is good" rather than "what is less bad." The article explores a vision of regenerative and circular development based on five principles: (1) positive impact; (2) systemic and life cycle thinking; (3) circular and just use of resources; (4) bio-inspirations; and (5) inclusive, equitable, and safe urban spaces.

The fourth article explores the concept of urban green infrastructure and the importance of context-specific, user-centred design. Although green infrastructure is known for its potential to mitigate the adverse effects of urban density and the heat island effect, enhancing the ecological and social resilience of cities and their inhabitants, there still seems to be a subjective evaluation of urban green infrastructure. The article explores the contextual, psychological, and social factors which influence people's subjective evaluation of urban green infrastructure, density, and heat stress, and made various planning proposals for effective, context-specific, user-centred design which are set to increase the social and health benefits linked to urban green infrastructure.

Article five explores the economic side of urban green infrastructure, focussing on the economic valuation of urban green spaces. Even though theory underpins the benefits of urban green spaces in delivering ecosystem services and potential economic benefits such as increases in proximate residential property prices, the article identifies that specific planning and design interventions would be needed to underscore the need to protect and curate features that encourage willingness to pay for urban green space proximity.

Similar findings are presented in the sixth article which recommended to reconnect society with nature in cities through close-to-nature design of urban green space. Close-to-nature heuristic design principles are proposed to support future urban green infrastructure, to deliver multiple ecosystem services and delivery on broader resilience objectives. These proposals are based on the investigation into the Essex Climate Action Plan in the UK and its approach in utilising green infrastructure to combat climate change and generate thermal comfort zones in cities.

The seventh article analysed visual landscapes from rural Poland to conclude on the harmonizing spatial alterations that are needed in rural communes.

Article eight explored options to co-create a green(er) future in Dublin and outlined a methodological approach towards community-led greening strategies, which are both inclusive and policy-driven. A process map is proposed that could enable community, local authorities, and other policymakers to engage with community-led coalitions in quest to develop more inclusive and appropriate urban greening strategies.

The ninth article investigated a different "community of practice approach" to plan water sensitive cities in South Africa.

The tenth and final article concludes this thematic issue by illustrating the importance of the interface between urban planning and urban ecology and how the current gap between these disciplines can be minimized.

3. Conclusion

Based on the findings of the articles included in this thematic issue, it is evident that ecological considerations should be an integral part of the thinking and decision-making processes to guide future city planning. Contextualizing green benefits for urban spaces and contemporary societies will imply a shift towards resilience thinking in planning, where spatial planning adequately responds to the increasing economic, social, and environmental vulnerabilities in cities, and halt the rapid

depletion of natural resources and environmental degradation. It calls upon a systems approach to planning contemporary urban landscapes. Transdisciplinary planning would be key to co-create the green(er) cities of the future.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

About the Author

Juaneé Cilliers is head of the School of Built Environment, and professor of urban planning at the Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building at the University of Technology Sydney (Australia). She has professional registrations from both the South African Council for Planners (SACPLAN) and the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA). She is currently appointed as extraordinary professor of planning at the North-West University (South Africa), the chair of the Women in Planning Network of the Commonwealth Association of Planners (https://www.commonwealth-planners.org/cwip-network), and advisor to the board of the International Society of City and Regional Planners (ISOCARP).