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Editorial

Social Justice in the Green City

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic and energy, climate, and demographic crises have shown how cities are vulnerable to these impacts and how the access to green and blue spaces has become highly relevant to people. One strategy that we can observe is the strong focus on the resilience discourse, meaning implementing more green and blue spaces in urban areas, such as at previous brownfield quarters. However, social justice implications of urban greening have been overlooked for a long time. The implementation of strategies to improve the quality and availability of the green and blue infrastructures may indeed have negative outcomes as far as housing accessibility is concerned by triggering gentrification processes. Issues related to environmental justice and socio-spatial justice are increasing in contemporary cities and call for a better understanding of the global and local mechanisms of production and reproduction of environmental and spatial inequalities. This thematic issue includes eleven articles with different methodologies, with examples from Europe and North America as well as different lenses of green gentrification. Some articles focus more on the question of costs, benefits, and distributional consequences of various infrastructural options for urban greening. Others, instead, discuss how the strategic urban planning tools and policy processes take into account distributional consequences, with specific attention on participatory processes.

Keywords

climate gentrification; environmental justice; green gentrification; urban justice

Issue

This editorial is part of the issue “Social Justice in the Green City” edited by Roberta Cucca (Norwegian University of Life Sciences) and Thomas Thaler (University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences).

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1. Introduction

The impact of the current multiple crises has greatly influenced cities across the globe. The Covid-19 pandemic and energy, climate, and demographic crises have shown how cities are vulnerable to these impacts and how the access to green and blue spaces has become highly relevant to people (Labib et al., 2022; Pröbstl-Haider et al., in press). At the same time, the globalisation and implementation of new policy directions enabled industrial complexes to move from cities in the Global North towards the Global South. One key result has been the development of large, abandoned brownfield quarters within the cities (Rigolon & Németh, 2020), which represent an important asset for municipalities.

These two different processes open the debate about how post-industrial cities should be developed further across the globe. One strategy that we can observe is the strong focus on the resilience discourse, meaning implementing more green and blue spaces in urban areas, such as at previous brownfield quarters. The creation of such green and blue spaces can reduce the negative impacts of a warmer climate to improve individual well-being, and it can, of course, attract international investors (as the different articles within our thematic issue show). Cities are today at the forefront of such initiatives and strategies since they are simultaneously contexts where most of the environmental problems originate and are visible and are where ecological and social innovation can more successfully take place. Indeed,

municipal and metropolitan governments have a substantial impact on land use, public education, and economic development, and cities are contexts where civil society is often more established. However, social justice implications of urban greening have been overlooked for a long time (Planas-Carbonell et al., 2023). In particular, the implementation of strategies to improve the quality and availability of the green and blue infrastructures may have negative outcomes as far as housing accessibility is concerned by triggering gentrification processes. Issues related to environmental justice and socio-spatial justice are increasing in contemporary cities and call for a better understanding of the global and local mechanisms of production and reproduction of environmental and spatial inequalities. This results in demands for intersectional and relational approaches to justice in urban greening strategies and suggestions for strategies avoiding undesired social effects, such as displacement or an increase in housing costs. The current urban planning thematic issue focuses on how planning processes and policy responses can alternatively act as mechanisms limiting or increasing new social and spatial green inequalities in contemporary cities. Contributions dealing with case studies from different continents focus mainly on two dimensions, which are explained below.

2. Overview of the Thematic Issue

The thematic issue includes eleven articles with different methodologies (qualitative, quantitative, and bibliometric assessment), with examples from Europe and North America as well as different lenses of green gentrification, like food justice or green spaces. Overall, the eleven articles can be distinguished between two main groups. The first group focuses more on the question of costs, benefits, and distributional consequences of various infrastructural options for urban greening. These contributions mainly deal with gentrification processes linked with urban greening practices, processes of spatial segregation connected with the environmental quality of the local environment, and sustainability strategies. The second group discusses how the strategic urban planning tools and policy processes take into account distributional consequences, with specific attention on participatory processes.

The first article, “Green gentrification, social justice, and climate change in the literature: Conceptual origins and future directions” by Cucca et al. (2023), presents the findings of a bibliometric analysis of the current literature about green gentrification in urban areas. The review shows the roots of the term “green gentrification” in the scientific debate and how it evolves over the time, which type of methods were used, as well as how green gentrification manifests itself within the literature. In addition, the article also shows the challenges and conflicts connected with implementing green measures and how to avoid them as well as how to provide potential countermeasures to respond to them.

The second article, written by Klaus Geiselhart and David Spenger (2023) and entitled “Environmental microsegregation: Urban renewal and the political ecology of health,” focuses on environmental health inequities in urban areas, using the example of Erlangen in Germany. The article shows how disadvantaged groups are negatively affected by various environmental burdens within different urban developments, such as urban renewal, where low-income households are less privileged in terms of the distribution of environmental goods and bads. This distribution often occurs on a very fine micro-scale level, with the outcome that high-income households are gaining from these new developments more than low-income households.

The third article, “‘Passive’ ecological gentrification triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic” published by Dani Broitman (2023), focuses on the current urban challenge of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on urban dynamics and green gentrification processes. In particular, the pandemic resulted in a stronger need for more accessible green spaces, and the article assesses if this situation actually influenced housing prices within the Netherlands. Broitman introduced the concept of “passive ecological gentrification” as an event such as Covid-19 acts as momentum for gentrification processes. This concept actually helps to assess the potential threats of post-Covid policies for urban areas.

The fourth article, “A new phase of just urban climate action in the Rocky Mountain West” by Clara Stein and Corina McKendry (2023), assesses the potential green gentrification processes between Denver and Salt Lake City, which are planning to implement measures to reduce carbon emissions. In particular, both urban spaces are lacking affordable housing, but, at the same time, both cities are planning to implement various climate-mitigation measures. The article shows the historical development of both policy strategies and how they might come together to provide a more sustainable and fairer city.

The fifth article, written by Willi Bauer (2023) and entitled “Reframing urban nature-based solutions through perspectives of environmental justice and privilege,” assesses the importance of linking the realisation of green spaces and providing a fair city. The qualitative literature review actually shows the linkages and importance of understanding nature-based solutions, environmental privilege, and potential green gentrification and how to provide a just green nature-based solutions strategy.

The next article, published by Maria Karagianni (2023) and entitled “Making Thessaloniki resilient? The enclosing process of the urban green commons,” addresses the challenge of reaching the goal of resilience and its unintended effects. The article shows how the resilience concept is driven by the current neoliberalism discourse and its impact on the urban planning decision-making process of the Greek city of Thessaloniki.

The seventh and last article from the first group, written by Hendrik Sander and Soren Weißermel

(2023) and entitled “Urban heat transition in Berlin: Corporate strategies, political conflicts, and just solutions,” addresses the topic of the urban heat transition in the German capital. The city of Berlin is actually planning to implement various strategies to provide a transformative process, but, at the same time, this planning strategy might encourage the existing social inequality within the city. The article shows how the policy strategies of Berlin try to reduce the negative consequences but fail, to some extent, to address this new potential threat.

The eighth article and the first from the second group, published by Crilly et al. (2023) and entitled “Building equality: A ‘Litmus test’ for recognising and evidencing inequalities and segregation in the built environment,” focuses on the challenge of multi-dimensional and spatial inequalities in urban areas. Crilly et al. (2023) used different primary and secondary data sources and a novel methodology to understand the different aspect of urban inequalities and how to improve the current planning decision-making process to reduce the spatial inequalities.

The ninth article, “Food and governmentality in the green city: The case of German food policy councils” by Alena Birnbaum and Petra Lütke (2023), shows within a multi-level assessment the challenges of food councils based on the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact and their local implementation and implications for inhabitants.

The tenth article, by Ahn et al. (2023) and entitled “How context matters: Challenges of localizing participatory budgeting for climate change adaptation in Vienna,” addresses the challenges of implementing a participatory budget to select and implement climate mitigation actions in several Viennese districts. The idea of the participatory budget was implemented in 2017 with the goal to engage and to encourage citizens to take an active role in climate urban planning policy. The article uses a mixed-method approach to show the motivation and constraints of using such a concept within a multi-level perspective.

The last article, “Fiduciary activism from below: Green gentrification, pension finance, and the possibility of just urban futures” by Jessica Parish (2023), opens the debate on climate urbanism. The objective of climate urbanism is, on the one hand, to reduce the vulnerability of the critical infrastructure within urban areas and, on the other hand, to reduce the strong negative impacts on already marginalised individuals and households. This development is extensively driven by the current financial and economic crises, where different pension funds, like Canadian pension funds, encourage this social inequality within cities. The article shows how different groups tried to act to address this problem.

3. Conclusions

A well-established literature shows that in the face of climate change challenges, the creation of and access to green and blue spaces are crucial for the improvement of

our cities. However, often low-income householders are excluded from such access, and the implementation of green and blue spaces can create an additional threat of displacement from uplifted urban areas for low-income households. Green gentrification has become a major threat to our cities that needs to be addressed by public policy and planning processes. Overall, the thematic issue shows how important it is to include both sides of the coin (provide green and blue spaces and avoid potential negative trade-offs) by addressing and including in the process the voice and needs of marginalised communities, through the provision of affordable housing and participation in decision-making processes.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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