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# Editorial: Social mobilisations and planning through crises

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*Cities are increasingly becoming sites of contestation. Intersecting crises—economic, social, political, and environmental—are shaping urban life and governance.*

The 2007/08 financial crisis triggered waves of austerity that profoundly restructured urban planning, exposing cities and their populations to further vulnerabilities. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated inequalities, highlighting the fragility of urban systems, particularly in securing housing, public space, and socio-economic rights. More recently, global geopolitical crises—wars and conflicts around the world—along with the supply-chain crisis, energy price volatility, and inflationary pressures, have further intensified pre-existing inequalities and territorial conflicts. Finally, extractivism and subsequent limitations of resources, violent conflicts, and climate change made migration the only viable solution for many, resulting in a migratory crisis in many cities. The concatenation and overlap of multiple types of crises characterising our era have been defined as a polycrisis (Lawrence et al., 2024).

In this shifting landscape, grassroots responses and organised urban social movements may play a pivotal role in resisting these multi-level crises. They mobilise against financialisation, gentrification, touristification, evictions, the privatisation of public spaces, austerity-driven urban policies, and the lack of access to basic resources as for decent and affordable housing. These movements also fight for the creation of democratic spaces that foster place-based solutions and prioritise socio-economic and environmental sustainability and justice over economic growth. At the same time, crisis-driven transformations have facilitated the co-optation of resistance efforts into neoliberal planning frameworks, where urban development is increasingly shaped by corporate interests, private capital, and speculative real estate markets. We believe that urban planners and scholars have a primary role in understanding and addressing both theoretical and practical aspects of such rapid changes, analysing the multiple nuances of the polycrisis, and exploring alternatives.

Young academics, in particular, are on the frontlines, sometimes even directly involved with grassroots organisations as practitioners, activists, or engaged researchers. They push the academic agenda by examining the potential of social mobilisations to envision and experiment with solutions to this polycrisis, while navigating the tensions between these mobilisations and financial and governance constraints. For this reason, young academics have been involved in the Early-Career Workshop on Urban Studies held in the Institute of Social Science (ICS) of the University of Lisbon in November 2022, from which this special issue originates. Organised by the Urban Transitions Hub (UTH) with the support of the AESOP Young Academics Network (AESOP YAN), the Early-Career Workshop on Urban Studies brought together scholars working on diverse geographical contexts, facilitating discussions on neoliberal urban policies, grassroots resistance, and alternative planning practices. It encouraged comparative reflections and fostered new research collaborations.

Most of the contributions to this special issue emerged from the presentations and exchanges that took place during the workshop. More specifically, this special issue brings together diverse case studies and theoretical contributions that explore the relationship between social mobilisations and urban planning in times of crisis. The contributions examine how urban movements contest neoliberal urban governance, advocate for the right to the city, and develop alternative urban futures based on solidarity, commoning, and self-management. It includes articles analysing cities from different parts of the world, including Athens, Berlin,

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Buenos Aires, Caracas, and Turin, offering a comparative perspective on how urban struggles and planning policies unfold across varied socio-economic and political contexts.

We identify several crosscutting themes in the articles in this special issue. Several articles focus on planning, crises, and the reinforcement of neoliberal urbanism and policies, while others examine grassroots-led urban initiatives, ranging from the most informal and precarious ones to the most institutionalised. The special issue explores these themes through the lens of diverse case studies with a special emphasis on the politics of urban resistance in housing and public space. Below, we unpack some of these themes and present this volume's contributions.

**Planning, crises, and the reinforcement of neoliberal urbanism**

Neoliberal urbanism has long been justified as the default response to urban crises, with governments implementing market-oriented policies to attract capital while reducing state intervention in housing, infrastructure, and social services. As highlighted by Luisa Rossini in her think piece "*Resisting and reinforcing neoliberalism*" in this issue, these policies have not only exacerbated socio-spatial inequalities but also reshaped the political terrain of resistance, as urban movements navigate the contradictions of contesting while being absorbed into neoliberal governance frameworks. The piece discusses how neoliberal urbanism suppresses conflict through consensus-driven approaches, limiting democratic engagement and doing so has failed to address conflicting forms of insurgent citizenship.

Agonistic urbanism, based on Chantal Mouffe's (2013) work, is presented as an alternative, emphasising the productive role of conflict in shaping urban futures. Rather than neutralising opposition, this approach seeks to legitimise and incorporate diverse perspectives into urban governance. The text contrasts agonistic urbanism with neoliberalism's emphasis on consensus and depoliticisation, arguing that embracing conflict as a productive force is crucial for democratic engagement. It also references other scholars, such as Giulia Li Destri Nicosia and Laura Saija (2023), who explore political ontology in planning theory, discussing how institutions can be dynamic and inclusive rather than exclusionary.

The Greek case, analysed by Despina Dimelli in "*Public spaces and neoliberal policies: The Greek case*", illustrates how public space has been restructured through neoliberal logics, particularly following the 2008 global and Greek financial crisis and the austerity measures imposed by international institutions, which severely limited public investment in public spaces, leading to ad-hoc privatisation and the growing role of international investors in urban planning. In Athens, urban regeneration projects tied to large-scale events such as the 2004 Olympic Games have reinforced market-driven urban planning, privileging private sector involvement in public space management, and prioritising tourism and private sector investment. These projects, as Dimelli argues, often fail to address deeper socio-economic inequalities and undermine public control over urban commons.

Similarly, Karl Krähmer in "*The right to the ecological city…*" explores the contradictions of ecological urban transformation in Turin, where sustainability initiatives often lead to ecological gentrification. While environmental justice is increasingly recognised as an essential urban planning goal, Krähmer highlights that bottom-up, community-led urban transformations remain crucial to aligning ecological sustainability with social justice through the case of the *Fondazione di Comunità Porta Palazzo* in Turin. His research contributes to the broader debate on degrowth urbanism and the right to the ecological city, advocating for models of

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planning that challenge growth-oriented development and merge environmental sustainability with social justice.

Luisa Rossini in "*Reclaiming public spaces: Radical alternatives to the exclusionary project of rightsizing policies*" further contextualises these struggles by examining the broader dynamics of *grassroots resistance* against the privatisation of public spaces and the neoliberal logic of "smart shrinking" in Berlin. The case study of the illegal occupation and subsequent legalisation of the *Bethanien* hospital in Berlin is presented as emblematic because it showcases how grassroots urban resistance can challenge exclusionary urban policies and offer viable alternatives to privatisation. It exemplifies how bottom-up self-management strategies, rooted in principles of degrowth and horizontal subsidiarity, can counteract neoliberal urban policies that prioritise market-driven development and privatisation by successfully proposing an alternative governance model based on self-management and collective ownership.

**Informality, precarity, and grassroots urbanism**

A key theme across multiple contributions in this issue is the role of informality and grassroots mobilisation in resisting urban exclusion and displacement. Marcin Wojciech Sliwa in "*Imitation of planning…*" examines informal housing in Buenos Aires, where tenure insecurity and economic instability have pushed residents to engage in bottom-up urban planning strategies. The study examines "informal settlements", showing how residents and community leaders strategically imitate formal planning, operating within a hybrid space of legal ambiguity to gain perceived security from eviction and secure housing rights. In doing so, this bottom-up urban planning challenges the notion that planning is exclusively a top-down institutional process. The study critiques traditional planning approaches, which often exacerbate rather than resolve insecurity in informal settlements. Moreover, it analyses how, in centrally located areas like *Villa 31*, gentrification becomes a new threat once tenure is formalised. While governments frame upgrades as urban integration, residents fear displacement due to rising real estate values.

In a different context, Stefan Gzyl in "*Caracas, Departure City: Urban planning after emigration and collapse*" explores the case of Caracas, Venezuela, where mass emigration due to political and economic collapse has led to the reconfiguration of vacant domestic spaces. Unlike most studies that focus on migration's external impacts, this research examines how the departure of millions of people reshapes the urban landscape. The study frames Caracas as a *departure ci*ty, where vacant properties left behind by emigrants become sites of economic and social reconfiguration. As state institutions fail to regulate urban development, local actors—architects, entrepreneurs, and residents—are reshaping the built environment through informal and opaque processes. Gzyl describes the tensions between bottom-up urban adaptation and the absence of formal governance, showing how crisis-driven transformations open both opportunities and risks for grassroots agency in urban planning.

These cases underscore the contradictions of informality—while it provides resilience strategies for marginalised communities, it also exposes them to new vulnerabilities, particularly when informal urban practices clash with state policies or elite interests.

**Politics of urban resistance: Bottom-up planning practices and the right to the city**

Several contributions in this issue argue that resistance against neoliberal processes of public space privatisation and the privileging of private interest-led projects for gentrification and

touristification is being carried out by grassroots movements. Rossini's, Dimelli's, and Krähmer's articles all explore how such conditions have materialised in different urban contexts, demonstrating that resistance and adaptation to crises continue to shape urban life and planning practices worldwide.

Beyond housing, struggles over *public space* and *commoning* have also intensified. The *reconfiguration of public spaces* in cities such as Athens, Berlin, and Buenos Aires demonstrates the *contested nature of urban governance*, as local communities push back against privatisation while experimenting with *alternative forms of collective management.*

Both *Rossini's article on Berlin and Krähmer's article on Turin* analyse the concept of *urban degrowth*, questioning dominant paradigms that link urban development to economic expansion and arguing for alternative frameworks based on *sufficiency, localism, and participatory urban governance.*

The common theme of bottom-up planning practices challenges exclusionary urban policies by reclaiming spaces through self-management, informal governance, and legal ambiguity is shared by the Berlin (*Bethanien* case), Buenos Aires (informal settlements), and Caracas (emigration-driven urban transformations) articles. These cases reveal how grassroots urbanism resists privatisation, negotiates legitimacy, and creates alternative governance models, while also facing risks of co-optation, gentrification, and neoliberal absorption.

The five case studies explore the right to the city, highlighting grassroots resistance to neoliberal urbanism. In Berlin, activists reclaimed *Bethanien* shows how horizontal subsidiarity can create self-managed spaces. Buenos Aires' settlements demonstrate grassroots planning as a means to access urban rights, while Caracas' emigration-driven transformations highlight informal adaptation in the absence of state intervention. The case of Athens highlights how neoliberal urban policies have transformed public spaces into market-driven assets, limiting their accessibility to citizens, and Turin introduced the right to the ecological city, linking sustainability with social justice. Across these cases, public space remains contested, and bottom-up governance offers alternatives to exclusionary planning. Together, they reveal urban space as a site of struggle, where communities actively shape their environments against privatisation.

**Towards alternative urban futures?**

This special issue highlights the multiple and interconnected ways in which urban social movements engage with crises, resisting processes of *dispossession, gentrification, austerity, and urban exclusion*. The cases presented here demonstrate that *crises are not only moments of rupture but also of transformation*, providing opportunities for *new urban imaginaries and political identities to emerge.*

It stems from the phenomenon that moments of systemic crisis and power vacuum can create space for negotiation and recalibration, reopening the debate between competing visions since particularly during periods of systemic capitalist crisis, "a period of institutional searching and regulatory experimentation ensues in which diverse actors, organizations, and alliances promote competing hegemonic visions, restructuring strategies, and developmental models" (Brenner & Theodore, 2002, p. 356).

At the same time, urban mobilisations face ongoing challenges, as co-optation, institutional constraints, and financial pressures continue to shape the possibilities for resistance. The

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contributions in this issue call for a critical reassessment of urban planning paradigms and advocate for solidarity-driven, bottom-up approaches that centre social justice, commoning, and the democratisation of urban governance.

As global crises deepen, the role of *urban social movements in shaping alternative urban futures* becomes increasingly urgent. While resistance takes different forms across contexts, this special issue underscores a shared commitment to *reclaiming the city as a space of collective life rather than a mere site of capital accumulation*. By doing so, this issue seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on urban crises, social mobilisation, the right to the city, and planning by shedding light on the tensions, contradictions, and possibilities within contemporary urban struggles. We aim to provide new theoretical perspectives through empirical research and case studies, inviting the academic community to expand the body of knowledge further and exploring avenues for enabling broader mobilisations in times where it might matter the most—including through embedded and reflexive research and scholarly activism.

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## Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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