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Planning ahead: Toward a critical, environmental, just, and action-oriented planning theory, practice, and journal

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This essay contributes to the 10th Anniversary Special Issue of *plaNNext* – *Next Generation Planning* by offering reflections and ideas for inspiring a renewed roadmap in planning theory and practice that more systematically incorporates tools and contents from emerging critical disciplines. It emphasizes the crucial contributions that young researchers and planners can make through their work, as well as the potential of a journal led by early-career scholars—such as *plaNNext*—to shape the field.

The paper introduces the contemporary challenges facing planners within the context of the current global polycrisis, i.e., crisis of the ecosystem, society, democracy, and knowledge. Such a polycrisis will be linked to the urgent need for renewal in the field and a rethinking of how planning scholars and practitioners contribute to and engage with societal transformation and existing inequities and injustices.

Drawing on emerging critical disciplines—including critical ecofeminism, critical disability studies, critical environmental justice, critical heritage studies and critical eco-museology, multispecies justice and critical animal studies, critical food studies, and urban political ecology—the essay explores how these perspectives have brought an ecosystemic understanding of the axes of power that drive inequality and injustice. It examines the extent to which these perspectives have already been incorporated into planning studies, the added value of integrating their critical tools, and the potential for planners and policymakers to engage in spatial and practical experimentation with these provocative concepts.

Finally, the essay outlines some ideas for what a journal like *plaNNext* could do for providing a space for innovative theoretical developments while supporting action- and justice-oriented work—both of which are increasingly crucial in today's global context.

Keywords: critical planning theory, urban polycrisis, ecosystemic justice, interdisciplinarity, intersectionality, early career researchers

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Of being researchers and planners in challenging times

The 10th Anniversary of *plaNNext – Next Generation Planning* arrives at a historically significant and troubling moment marked by intersecting global crises—what some have described as a *polycrisis*¹: crises of the ecosystem, society, democracy, and knowledge. At the time of writing, major crises and wars (Ukraine, Palestine, Syria) are unfolding at the borders of Europe, having already resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths and refugees. Institutions of the European Union, and of other parts of the world too, have appeared for a long time unable—or unwilling—to prevent these conflicts and uphold fundamental human rights. The ongoing humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, increasingly described by human rights observers as a case of mass atrocity or genocide (Human Rights Council, 2024a, 2024b), starkly exemplifies this failure.

Meanwhile, across the globe, and in the United States in particular, democratic institutions and civil liberties are under severe strain. Far-right, nationalist, and authoritarian governments are gaining ground in many countries, advancing agendas that undermine decades of hard-won progress in environmental policies, social welfare and civil rights. In contexts where long struggles have achieved protection and equity, those rights are at risk or have been quickly eroded—sometimes within a few months or even just a few days. Public discourse and policy around women's and LGBTQ+ rights are cases in point: reproductive rights are being increasingly restricted, and LGBTQ+ communities are facing renewed threats and discrimination. The ditching of clean energy policies, accompanied by the return to the narrative of the inescapable necessity of fossil fuels, is another key example. For instance, the “drill, baby, drill” campaign in the United States not only delays the transition towards a net-zero emissions' society but also legitimizes the abandonment by other countries of sustainable development goals (among others, Khadka, 2025; Milman & Noor, 2025). This trend is also quite emblematic of how environmental crises are intertwined with social and democratic crises. Less protection and rights for people, especially the most marginalized ones, go hand in hand with less protection and rights for the environment: both become considered as “expendable” (Pellow, 2025) or “redundant” (Armiero, 2019) by certain governments and sectors of the socio-economic (or better financial) global system.

Crucially, these reactionary trends are not isolated. They are often aligned with—and materially supported by—the interests of global financial elites. The current political landscape in, again, the United States, for instance, reflects a disturbing convergence of oligarchic capitalism and authoritarian populism, marking a new and dangerous phase in the evolution of neoliberal governance. Across the world, we are witnessing a normalization of policies that simultaneously enrich the ultra-wealthy (Moran, 2025), criminalize dissent (Di Ronco & Selmini, 2024), target migrants (Altman et al., 2025; Burtin, 2025), and defund equity-focused programs (Nunes, 2025).

This climate has also fueled direct attacks on all forms of dissent—particularly, or perhaps primarily, that which is organized and promoted by universities—jeopardizing freedom and critical thought. The United States, again, is emblematic, with its “witch hunt” against researchers and students involved in the “Free Palestine” movement, many of whom now face blacklisting, surveillance, or funding threats. But similar dynamics are visible elsewhere: public universities and research institutions are increasingly subject to state censorship, while increasingly suffering from public funding cuts and austerity policies. These developments represent a broader assault on the independence of intellectual life and on the institutions that enable democratic deliberation.

¹ This term was coined by the French philosopher and sociologist Edgar Morin (1993) in his book “Terre-Patrie”, then translated in “Homeland Earth” (1999).

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There is a real risk that such erosion of basic rights, human dignity, and freedom—combined with the deepening socio-economic inequality and the multi-decade growth of mistrust in science—will become normalized. It becomes “normal” for billionaires allied with reactionary forces to concentrate unquantifiable economic and political power. “Normal” to exterminate entire populations. “Normal” to blame the most marginalized people rather than interrogate the systems that created their marginalization. “Normal” to deny civil and human rights, putting in place processes of “othering”, i.e. leading to alienation, exclusion, and even dehumanization of the “others”. “Normal” to disinvest in culture and education, while silencing dissent. “Normal” to deny scientific evidence and mistrust scientists, scholars, and intellectuals. And when something becomes normalized, it no longer seems worth resisting and fighting back to create something different. It becomes the *new normality*.

So, we are left with open, urgent questions: What can we do? What is—and can be—the role of researchers and intellectuals in times of crises (or polycrisis), especially when faced with such stark injustice and inequality across the world? How can researchers continue to foster critical thought, freedom, human rights, and democratic action under these conditions?

Much has already been said about the role of intellectuals and scholars. There is a long-standing call to move beyond the “ivory tower” and produce knowledge that responds to real-world issues. For decades, scholars have explored concepts such as post-normal science (Funtowicz & Ravetz, 1993), which involves engaging “extended peer communities” in understanding and addressing the “wicked problems”² and uncertainties of the risk society³. These debates have produced meaningful proposals for aligning scientific knowledge more closely with people’s everyday challenges, through knowledge co-production and community-based models. According to this strand of scholarship, the current times require other epistemologies and methodologies, intersecting disciplines, and opening them to the variety of knowledge and actions that are incorporated into various practices on the ground. In response to this, some scholars—particularly from social sciences and humanities—have embraced a more open political stance, working in solidarity with marginalized communities and challenging dominant knowledge and power structures, in the spirit of Gramsci’s notion of the organic intellectual⁴. Others—often in STEM disciplines—still hold to the idea that scientific knowledge is neutral, and thus scholars must remain neutral themselves, i.e., detached from the socio-economic context and related power relations⁵.

Planning studies find themselves amid the broader challenge of navigating today’s complex and contested terrain. Planning scholars and practitioners play a potentially crucial—but also tricky—role, as cities⁶ offer a powerful lens through which to understand and engage with overlapping crises. The effects of climate change, the disruptive advancement of AI technologies, the erosion of democracy and widening socio-economic inequality, both globally and within local contexts, are especially pronounced in cities. Urban spaces magnify the

² I wrote about this topic in Dall’Omo et al. (2020).

³ *plaNext* also dedicated a volume to this theme, see Privitera et al. (2022) and <https://journals.aesop-planning.eu/index.php/planext/issue/view/15>

⁴ Organic intellectuals are, by definition, proletarians themselves, even if they hold leadership roles among the subalterns. They have often refused to be molecularly co-opted as traditional intellectuals into what Gramsci (1999) calls “the dominant class.”

⁵ Perhaps, it is worth mentioning that Bruno Latour (1987), already at the end of the 1980s, argued and demonstrated that scientific facts are not universally objective but are socially constructed through processes of negotiation, interpretation, and the establishment of networks within laboratories and society. He challenged the idea of science as a detached pursuit of pure truth, instead emphasizing that scientific claims become “hard” facts by eliminating alternative possibilities through scientific practice, training, and the acceptance of scientific orthodoxy.

⁶ I am not referring only to cities and dense metropolitan areas, but any urbanized area and urban settlements.

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contradictions of global systems—but they also serve as laboratories for alternative futures. They are places where institutions and communities can and do experiment with more democratic and just forms of life. Cities are also increasingly recognized as key sites for envisioning and implementing climate action (among the others, Castán Broto & Bulkeley, 2013).

Cities concentrate contradictions; they are contradictions. This is why planning schools have been and should continue to be heterogeneous and plural. Among them, some have actively resisted the dominant power structures, as I will briefly discuss later in this paper. While not everyone may adopt a “revolutionary” (for instance, Swyngedouw 2024, 2025) stance, the urgent question remains: What kind of planning theories and practices can respond to today’s challenges, while analyzing present urban environments and planning for those of the future?

To stay tuned to a changing world, the planning field should also be dynamic, updated, and open to novelties. However, it is also fundamental to ensure that it remains anchored in key principles and values—ones that guide us toward better lives for all—before a new normal takes hold and becomes entrenched.

This volume, celebrating the 10th anniversary of *plaNNext*, already offers powerful directions for such a transformation. Ibrahim (2025) calls for decentering Western understandings of planning and engaging with Southern and humanitarian theories and experiences. I would add to her contribution the importance of rediscovering the humanistic values that, while rooted in Western history and culture, are centered on treating people with dignity and respect, focusing on their needs for happiness, growth, and freedom, and advocating for progressive, rights-based, and secular policies. This is connected to Tulumello's (2025) reflection on the dialectic between past and future in the context of envisioning the next generation of planning. Other publications have indicated some potential future directions for planning, especially in relation to AI and technological advancements (Mehan, 2025; Ache, 2025). Elsewhere in this volume, the authors have been more precisely focused on what a journal led by early career scholars, like *plaNNext*, can do. Hammami (2025) highlights how editorial and scientific production can serve as forms of resistance to the erosion of human rights and dignity. Varış Husar et al. (2025) value the collective knowledge-building processes and the importance of promoting open and accessible scientific knowledge. Privitera et al. (2025) reflect upon journals as spaces for empowering early career researchers, while learning and innovating collectively to experiment with alternatives to the mainstream publishing system.

In this paper, I will contribute to this already rich ongoing discussion by arguing that planning, in its continuous transition and in the current context of polycrisis I briefly outlined earlier, should aim to be critical, environmental, just, and action-oriented, and I will explain what I mean by this.

Critical, environmental, just, and action-oriented: The planning of the future is rooted in the present

While I do not intend to offer a comprehensive agenda for the future of planning, I want to briefly highlight some perspectives that planning theory and practice could further integrate and mainstream. These directions would help the field stay attuned to both conceptual advancements in other disciplines and the rapid transformations of the real world. Interdisciplinarity here means more than borrowing between academic fields—it also implies crossing epistemic boundaries and recognizing the value of embodied, experiential, and community-based knowledge. Planning should not only learn from other disciplines but also from different ways of knowing that challenge traditional hierarchies of knowledge.

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Of the critical in planning studies

The term *critical* in relation to planning theory is far from new. Planning scholars such as John Friedmann, as early as the 1960s and 1970s, and Leonie Sandercock, in the 1990s and 2000s, critiqued mainstream modernist approaches, advocating for more radical and emancipatory perspectives⁷.

Examples of critical planning theorizations and practices include:

- Transactive planning, introduced by John Friedmann (1973) in his book “Retracking America: A Theory of Transactive Planning”, is a “people-oriented” theory of urban planning that emphasizes dialogue and mutual learning between planners and community members. It was a radical break from traditional, quantitative models of planning, which he argued tended to lock society into predictable, self-fulfilling cycles.
- Advocacy planning, which emerged as a reaction to technocratic, centralized models, gave voice to marginalized groups. Planners should act as advocates for specific groups, helping them create their own plans and presenting them as alternatives to the official plans of powerful authorities.
- Radical planning sought to challenge the status quo through grassroots activism, emphasizing personal growth, cooperation, and freedom from authoritarian rule (Sandercock, 1999). For its proponents, *radical* means both the emancipation of humanity from social oppression and the pursuit of a more egalitarian, self-guiding society (Perrone, 2022).

These schools of thought, while developed several decades ago, share a transformative intention: to challenge unjust distributions of power in how cities are made and unmade. However, perhaps because they emerged in a context less evidently shaped by climate change, they do not explore what such critical stances would imply for the environment and our relationship with it.

More recent books have proposed new directions for critical planning theory. They align with the idea that planning theory needs to be recurrently challenged and unsettled to avoid becoming ossified and to remain relevant. This is the case with Allmendinger et al. (2025, p. 1), who from the beginning of the book provocatively state that “urban theory would seem to hold great promise for planning—yet it often seems to fall short of expectations: tolerated by planning academics, endured by students, and ignored by practitioners.” Their work explores new directions in planning theory, interrogates planning’s orthodoxy, and pushes the boundaries of contemporary theory using ideas from both within and beyond planning. Drawing on examples from across the globe, the authors engage with potential alternative ways of thinking about planning and highlight areas that remain underexplored. They pose emphasis on expanding the theoretical and interpretive tools available to planning scholars, including, for instance, decolonial thoughts (Barry, 2025; Jon, 2025), Southern theories (Shrestha, 2025), the role of emotions (Díaz-Padilla, 2025), and a better inclusion of the time dimension (Jensen et al., 2025; Laurian, 2025). Nonetheless, it is worth noting that this book refers to environmental and climate change questions only tangentially.

A similar interest underpins another recent book edited by Perrone (2022), which examines the roots, pathways, and frames of 20th- and 21st-century planning theories, with a focus on some key figures, including Ildefons Cerdà, Yona Friedman, Alberto Magnaghi, Ian McHarg,

⁷ Critical urban theory, as defined by Brenner (2009), nourishes this approach. It differs fundamentally from mainstream urban theory—such as that inherited from the Chicago School or technocratic policy science—by focusing on the critique of ideology, power, inequality, injustice, and exploitation within and among cities.

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John Friedmann, Leonie Sandercock, Doreen Massey, David Harvey, Tom Sieverts, and Patsy Healey. Perrone discusses the three interrelated dimensions—radical, critical, and alternative/insurgent—of transformative planning, emphasizing how they embed an oppositional element:

- Radical: Conflict strategies and probing problems against governmental barriers.
- Critical: Structural change operationalized at multiple scales.
- Alternative/Insurgent: Practices driven by insurgent citizenship, claiming the right to the city.

These two books, therefore, show how planning scholars have offered a compelling, contextual understanding of what it has meant to “be critical.” They illustrate how this meaning has evolved—what being critical meant a century ago—and stimulate to think how that connects to contemporary interpretations. They also propose ways in which planning theory can continue to be critical, primarily drawing from related urban scholarship. Therefore, these two books hold significant value in stimulating theoretical debate and pushing the field toward new frontiers.

I build on this existing work and broaden it by arguing that contemporary planning theories and practices would benefit even further from deeper engagement with critical approaches developed in other disciplines—especially those that unpack the power-based and ecosystemic interconnectedness between society, the environment, and space.

Potential fields are numerous. For example, Southern theories and epistemologies have already spurred what we might call a “Southern turn”, deeply connected to the debates on how to decolonize urban and planning theories and practices. This theme is increasingly relevant in settler-colonial contexts, such as the United States, Canada, and Australia, as well as in former colonies. It is no coincidence that key promoters of Southern studies come from India, South Africa, and South America. The Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP) and the Young Academics Network (YAN) have already embraced this critical stance, expanding beyond Western interpretations of planning issues, as seen in the establishment of the AESOP special group “Global South & East”⁸ and the publication of two booklets of the “Conversation in Planning” series (Mukhopadhyay et al.; 2021; Kumar et al., 2021). *plaNNext* has also played a role in promoting a decolonization of western-centric planning through the publication of an entire special issue dedicated to this theme⁹. This ongoing unsettlement of planning thought seeks to understand the cultural and historical roots underpinning Southern epistemologies, and by doing so, has also opened the door to integrating Indigenous knowledge into Western mainstream planning policymaking, studies, and practices (Barry, 2025; Sandercock, 2004) —an interest aligned with a multi-year rich debate on the value of local knowledge in urban planning processes (among the others, Fox & Margalit, 2025; Corburn 2003; Fischer, 2000).

While Southern theories and decolonial studies are crucial to critical, environmental, just, and action-oriented planning, I will focus on other critical fields from which planning theories (including research) and practices (including policy and design) could significantly benefit, and which have not been sufficiently explored yet.

⁸ <https://aesop-planning.eu/thematic-groups/global-south-east>

⁹ <https://journals.aesop-planning.eu/index.php/planext/issue/view/11>

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Of the critical, environmental, and just in other fields

(Critical) Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism is both a political movement and an intellectual critique that emerged amid diverse perspectives linking feminist thought with ecopolitical issues such as toxic production and waste, Indigenous sovereignty, global economic justice, species justice, colonialism, and dominant masculinity. Early ecofeminist thinkers highlight the interconnections between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature (e.g., Mies & Shiva, 1993). They argue that the domination of women and other marginalized identities, and the degradation of the environment, stem from the same patriarchal, capitalist, and neo-colonial ideologies that sustain hierarchies of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and species. The first phase of ecofeminism attributed to women a closer connection with nature due to their biological functions (menstruation, childbirth, breastfeeding) and sought to promote so-called feminine principles of care and cooperation over masculine ideals of abstract rationality. More recent ecofeminists, such as queer ecofeminism (Gaard, 1997) and critical ecofeminism (Gaard, 2017) have criticized such assumptions as too essentialist (Buckingham, 2015), and, by building on the anti-dualist ecological feminism¹⁰ of Plumwood's (1993, 2002), embraced a critical lens that highlights how patriarchal, capitalist, colonial, and other systems of power and discrimination are intertwined with ecological destruction.

Queer and critical ecofeminism offer a rigorous, intersectional framework for advancing both social and ecological justice. By intersectional, I refer to the concept developed by Black African American feminist thinkers (such as Kimberlé Crenshaw) to describe a set of theoretical and organizing principles that highlight the entangled relations of power along the lines of gender, class, and race. Intersectionality was initially mobilized to “interlock” simultaneous systems of oppression, particularly those impacting the lives of Black queer women (Taylor, 2017) and has since expanded into a broader framework for analyzing the multiple axes of oppression shaping our socio-ecological systems. More recent interpretations present intersectionality not as a mere “additive” combination of essentialized categories, but as a critical praxis—one that enables coalition-building and the dismantling of oppressive systems across a wide spectrum of social justice movements and decolonial projects (Di Chiro, 2021).

Feminism, although marginal, has received increasing attention from geographical and planning scholars (e.g., Pojani, 2022; Kern, 2020) and in urban policy and design, giving birth to the so-called feminist urbanism¹¹. Critical ecofeminism has not yet emerged in planning studies and practices, but it has already generated some interesting works. Several innovative publications question what a city inspired by ecofeminism would look like and introduce reflections and proposals on water accessibility, public health, and social care services (Dengler et al., 2024; Triguero-Mas et al., 2022). Others elaborate ecofeminism-inspired urban and ecological design proposals (Bayas Fernández & Bregolat i Campos, 2021; Newalkar & Wheeler, 2017).

More effort is needed to introduce critical and queer ecofeminist approaches to planning policy

¹⁰ It is worth noting that ecofeminism is anti-dualistic and critiques binary, oppositional ways of thinking like mind/body, culture/nature, or man/woman—which create a hierarchical system of domination, with the presumed “superior” term (e.g., mind, culture, man) oppressing the “inferior” one. Ecofeminism seeks to dismantle these dualistic systems by recognizing the interconnectedness of humans and nature, and women and men, rather than simply reversing the hierarchy.

¹¹ Among the others, see the website <https://genderedcity.org/>; the following articles and reports: CHANGE, Data-Pop Alliance, & Open Data Watch. (2024); Palifrovska (2024, November 2); Day (2021).

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and urban design. A queer intersectional and critical ecofeminist approach could further challenge the exclusionary, male-dominated city design while elaborating climate and environmental urban justice solutions. It does so by going beyond a mere women-centric interpretation and has the potential to stimulate planning theories, policies, and designs that intersect wider gender-based priorities with multispecies-related issues. The same features of cities that made them unsuitable for women's needs are also not apt for non-heteronormative people and non-human species. All of these groups are marginalized in mainstream cities. Designing critical ecofeminist cities aims to create urban environments that are more inclusive for women, queer folks, other species, and, ultimately, for everyone.

(Critical) Disability Studies

Critical disability studies constitute interdisciplinary fields that conceptualize disability as a social, political, and cultural construct rather than a purely medical condition. While disability studies often focus on the social model and the political inclusion of people with disabilities, critical disability studies emphasize a more complex, interdisciplinary analysis that challenges societal norm privileging able-bodiedness and examines how institutions and structures marginalize disabled people, thereby producing disability as a category of exclusion. By centering on the experiences and expertise of disabled individuals, critical disability studies promote activism and systemic change to challenge ableism, foster inclusion, and achieve equality (among the others, Ellis et al., 2025).

Crip studies are a more radical, specific approach within these fields and use the reclaimed term "crip" to challenge norms and emphasize a radical politics of disability, particularly by merging it with queer theory (Kafer, 2013). Crip studies emphasize an activist and transgressive stance, challenging the idea of "normal," and focuses on the intersections of disability with other identities like gender and sexuality. A key concept formulated within these studies is cripistemology, which emphasizes ways of knowing rooted in disability experience, highlighting the epistemic value of lived realities. For example, the notion of "Crip Time" challenges normative temporal structures, recognizing that disabled people experience and interact with time differently (Samuels, 2017; Ljuslinder et al., 2020). Both critical disability studies and crip studies seek to disability justice, i.e., they highlight the transformative role of disability politics, cultures, and communities to collectively dismantle ableism and build, through cross-movement solidarity, more accessible and socially just societies.

While there is research on how to make cities, including urban infrastructure (Ehrensperger, 2022), more accessible and liveable (Hamraie, 2024), and just for all their inhabitants, urban environments still privilege able-bodiedness, creating hidden geographies of urban ableism even when promoting sustainable solutions (Addlakha, 2020; Hamraie, 2020). Emerging research is questioning how to move beyond merely visible disabilities to also include invisible ones (van Holstein, 2020). However, what this attention to more or less visible disabilities implies from urban and environmental planning and design perspective remains underexplored, representing an interesting field for further research and experimentation.

(Critical) Environmental Justice

Critical environmental justice is both a scholarly and activist framework that critiques the limitations of traditional environmental justice approaches by going beyond the mere distributive, procedural, and recognition dimensions of environmental justice, and interrogating the underlying systems of power, inequality, and colonialism that generate and perpetuate environmental harm. Pellow (2025) identifies four pillars of the critical environmental justice framework:

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- Intersectionality: Moves beyond single-axis analyses (e.g., race or class) to examine how multiple forms of oppression—such as gender, sexuality, ability, and species—intersect and compound environmental injustices.
- Multi-scalar analysis: Examines environmental problems across both spatial and geographical scales: from local bodily impacts to global climate change, connecting these glocal dynamics¹² to one another. It also considers temporal scales, incorporating historical dimensions such as colonialism, as well as transgenerational legacies of environmental injustices.
- Critique of state and capital: Challenges the assumption that government agencies and liberal reforms can adequately address environmental injustice, arguing that these institutions often reproduce systemic inequalities.
- Indispensability: Counters the logic of expendability that devalues certain human and non-human populations, asserting the inherent worth of all beings and ecosystems for a collective, sustainable future.

Environmental justice has been extensively discussed and integrated into urban sustainability (Agyeman, 2005, 2013) and urban planning debate (Kotsila, 2023). Examples are the debate around environmental justice in the nature-based solutions (Tozer et al., 2023; Anguelovski & Corbera, 2023; Cousins, 2021) and green gentrification (Cucca et al., 2023; Anguelovski et al., 2022). Instead, critical environmental justice framework has been applied in several fields of research (Schlosberg et al., 2024), including prisons (Privitera & Pellow, 2025; Privitera et al., 2024), but has not yet been the object of a deeper discussion in the planning field.

(Critical) Heritage Studies and Critical Ecomuseology

Critical heritage studies is an interdisciplinary field that interrogates cultural heritage as a social, political, and cultural phenomenon. Unlike traditional heritage studies that focus on preservation, critical heritage studies adopt an analytical approach, questioning the power dynamics and social justice implications of how the past is selected, interpreted, and managed in the present. Critical heritage studies conceptualize heritage as a political process, emphasizing that heritage-making is not an objective recovery of the past but a dynamic, contested activity. Critical heritage studies have often been connected to urban planning and resistance, for instance in Volume 1 of *plaNNext*¹³.

A related area, critical ecomuseology, questions the foundational assumptions of both traditional museums and early eco-museum models. Ecomuseology is a community-driven approach to preserving and interpreting heritage in its local environment for sustainable development (among others, Rivière, 1985), while critical ecomuseology is a more specific and advanced form that uses critical heritage studies to analyze the power structures and social impacts within ecomuseums. Critical ecomuseology builds on ecomuseology by questioning existing power dynamics, colonial histories, and the societal effects of museum practices, moving beyond the basic community-centric model. It examines the political and social roles of heritage institutions and advocates for community empowerment, social justice, and decolonization in cultural heritage management. There are a few examples of research merging critical ecomuseology and heritage studies with planning through community-based planning (Pappalardo, 2023).

¹² Such glocal dynamics have been developed also by Swyngedouw (1997, 2004). Furthermore, reference to a more glocal and multiscale understanding of environmental justice and urban planning and design can be found in Krähmer (2022).

¹³ <https://journals.aesop-planning.eu/index.php/planext/article/view/3/2>

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According to both critical heritage studies and critical ecomuseology, time and memory are as non-neutral as they are intermeshed with power relationships. They not only provide analytical tools for examining urban heritage but also frame it as something that can be collectively re-appropriated and aligned with sustainable development principles.

Multispecies Justice and Critical Animal Studies

Multispecies justice is a transformative framework that redefines justice to include the flourishing of all Earth beings and the relationships that sustain them. Moving beyond anthropocentric models, it addresses interconnected social and ecological crises, framing harm to animals, plants, ecosystems, and even non-living matter as fundamental injustices.

Critical animal studies complement this perspective by challenging anthropocentrism and the systemic exploitation of nonhuman animals. Critical animal studies combine scholarship with activism, advocating for total liberation—the emancipation of humans, nonhuman animals, and the Earth from all systems of domination.

Urban planners have recently started to engage with multispecies studies more directly (among others, Fieuw et al., 2022). For instance, the urban planning scholar Metzger (2015, p. 40) argues that “myriads of creatures and existences are speaking to us all the time,” and Despret (2005, quoted in Houston et al., 2018) argues that we, humans, have a responsibility to listen properly to their voices. Based on this perspective, Houston et al. (2018, p. 198) propose two key challenges for planners:

- (1) How can multispecies relationships be ethically and politically considered in spatial land use planning decisions?
- (2) How can socially and environmentally just planning meaningfully engage nonhumans in deliberative practice without reducing nonhumans to objects or symbols of urban political struggle?

Building on these challenges, participatory designers are questioning how to expand the notion of participation towards the voices and interests of other-than-human actors (Akama et al., 2020; Haldrup et al., 2022; Lindström & Ståhl, 2019). These new participatory design processes challenge the consolidated and mainstreamed human-centric participatory process and instead entails a re-imagination of the city beyond human exceptionalism, as the recent publication of the “ladder of multispecies participation” demonstrates (Førde, et al., 2025). A few experimental applications of multispecies urbanism¹⁴ have been conducted by collectives of architects, artists, and activists¹⁵.

While some works have looked more closely at how urban policies reflect multispecies justice (Kohli, 2025), others have explored the impact of multispecies agency on governance (Privitera & Cykman, 2025), providing fresh insights into how humans can play a role as mediators or translators of other species' needs within cities. Researchers have also advocated for the incorporation of multispecies conviviality and stewardship while designing urban ecosystem services (Privitera & Funsten, 2024), nature-based solutions (Raymond et al., 2025), and green infrastructure (Rupprecht, 2020).

In short, while multispecies and critical animal studies are increasingly entering the planning academic debate, they remain largely under-experimented in practice, especially in urban development and design. Consequently, their potential critiques and contributions have been discussed and theorized only to a very limited extent.

¹⁴ See: <https://whoiswe.nl/pdf/solomon-multispecies-urbanism.pdf>

¹⁵ See: <https://landezine.com/debra-solomon-multispecies-urbanism/>

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Urban Political Ecology

Urban Political Ecology examines the intertwined political, economic, social, and ecological processes shaping urban environments. Rejecting the nature–city divide, UPE views cities as socio-natural hybrids (Swyngedouw, 1996) produced through labor and capital investment.

Key concepts include:

- Socio-ecological metabolism: Cities as metabolic systems with resource flows (water, energy, food) governed by political and economic interests, often producing environmental inequalities.
- Uneven development: Capitalist urbanization creates unequal landscapes, exposing marginalized communities to environmental hazards while privileging affluent areas.
- Extended and planetary urbanization: Urbanization is a global process, linking cities to distant resource extraction, agriculture, and waste disposal, blurring urban–rural boundaries.

Characterized by several phases and strands (Gandy, 2021; Heynen, 2014; Keil, 2003), urban political ecology has become a consolidated field of research¹⁶ that critically engages with the environmental crisis and climate change through the lens of inter-scalar (or better, glocal) power and political relationships (Swyngedouw, 2004). Urban political ecology's scholars have deconstructed the salvific green city idea, unveiling how it can easily be translated into discriminatory development processes, such as green gentrification and renovictions. The more recent call for a "situated urban political ecology" (Tzaninis et al., 2020) emphasizes everyday practices (Loftus, 2012) and embraces a scholarship of presence (Kaika, 2018) aimed at promoting a more nuanced understanding of power as diffuse and relational (Lawhon, 2012). This new phase seeks to integrate issues of race, gender, and location and encourage a reconceptualization of environmental justice beyond the typical North–South divide. Urban political ecology has produced a few applied studies, such as Yiu (2025), who examines how community-based planning for sustainability and heritage operates within a high-density urban landscape in Hong Kong. Similarly, Silva et al. (2024) identify ways in which key insights from the critical social sciences—particularly urban political ecology—can be mobilized to support water sensitive urban design practices.

Yet, despite providing essential critical tools, urban political ecology still lacks systematic engagement and experimentation with urban planning practices and projects, and further explorations could bring innovative approaches.

(Critical) Food Studies

Critical food studies interrogate the social, political, and cultural dimensions of food systems, moving beyond nutrition or culinary arts to address structural inequalities. For instance, scholars in this field have highlighted that efforts to localize food production and consumption may not automatically yield just or sustainable food systems if racial, colonial, class, and gender issues are not systemically addressed (Agyeman et al., 2016).

Core themes include:

- Food justice: Tackling inequities in access to healthy food, particularly in marginalized communities.

¹⁶ One sign that urban political ecology is increasingly establishing itself as a consolidated field is the launch of the journal *Urban Political Ecology* (<https://journals.sagepub.com/home/upe>).

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- Food sovereignty: Advocating for communities' rights to define their own food systems, resisting corporate control.
- Globalization: Examining the impacts of global trade and industrial agriculture on local foodways.
- Alternative food movements: Initiatives like Slow Food and urban agriculture as resistance strategies, while acknowledging their potential limitations and role in gentrification.

There is an interesting academic debate, rooted also in several concrete experimentations, regarding the design of urban edible landscapes (Gorgolewski et al., 2011), with emphasis on an edible urban “morphology” (Parham & Abelman, 2018). Other studies delve into the multiple urban, social and ecological values of agroecology, especially of urban food forests (Cykman & Privitera, 2023; Riolo, 2019). Some researchers have also looked at the intersection between edible landscapes and ecological infrastructure and nature-based solutions, as a way to promote urban conviviality between species (Rupprecht, 2020; Privitera & Funsten, 2024). Building on an emerging literature on multispecies commons (Haldrup et al., 2022), agroecology initiatives have been framed as multispecies commons that trigger experimental forms of multispecies reflexive governance (Privitera & Cykman, 2025).

The action-oriented

By examining the crosscutting characteristics of these fields of study, we can highlight several shared foundations. They critically engage with power relations, are grounded in anti-oppressive and anti-racist principles, and apply an intersectional lens to analyze how categories of difference shape the world. Moreover, they explore socio-ecological relationships in a multi-scalar way—ranging from the micro to the macro, from the personal to the systemic and political, and from the local to the global. Through scrutiny of existing forms of injustice and oppression, these fields unmask the direct consequences or indirect legacies of colonial, racist, patriarchal, ableist, and capitalist systems, while envision alternative systems that are anchored in a deep respect for dignity, human (and more-than-human) rights, care, solidarity, and compassion. Their aim is to empower powerless people and advancing emancipation.

They also value the margins—including marginalized communities of humans and other species—as a space for envisioning and proposing alternative ways of being, existing, and relating to each other. Perhaps most importantly, they frame environmental degradation primarily as a social issue, and more precisely, they identify environmental inequalities as forms of social inequality.

While spatial dimensions are not always central in these fields, space and the urban are nevertheless present in meaningful ways. The urban is understood as the result of intermeshed socio-natures shaped by power relations at a glocal (global-local) level. It is a space produced through layers of colonialism, racism, ableism, capitalism, and patriarchy—and a site of resistance, where people often push back against dominant powers, including the state and capitalist interests, and experiment with alternative systems. The previously presented fields of study raise theoretical and epistemological questions, and, in a few cases, are rooted in close collaboration with activism and social movements. Some of the critical fields mentioned above have already been integrated into certain areas of planning theories, nevertheless, they continue to represent a minor area of investigation; yet they hold groundbreaking potential.

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I believe that the practical application and experimentation of these theories could prove truly transformative—this is precisely where urban planning could play a crucial role. Urban planning theories and practices could draw from these studies and experiment with concrete, real-world applications, and perhaps even suggest related policy changes. My argument is twofold: on the one hand, planning theories could integrate some of these key insights into the critical toolbox to analyze and scrutinize urban environments in both interdisciplinary and intersectional ways. On the other hand, planners and designers could begin to experiment with applied, spatial translations of these theoretical ideas.

The planning discipline is uniquely positioned to pursue practical experimentations with the critical theoretical concepts developed within the aforementioned critical fields. Planning scholars and practitioners deal with the complex, lived realities and they are well-equipped to navigate not only interdisciplinary knowledge, but also to explore what it means to act on it in practice. This is not only a matter of interdisciplinarity but also of intersectionality. A foundational question to consider, therefore, is: What do awareness and understanding of intersectional forms of injustice, domination, and inequality imply for planning and urban design theories and practices, beyond simply providing tools for critical analysis?

Below, I offer some examples of questions that emerge from the intersections between the emerging critical fields and planning theory and practice, to better illustrate what I mean:

- What does it mean to promote urban policies or designs informed by both “Crip Time” and critical ecofeminism?
- How might we design a park according to anti-oppressive, anti-racist, and ecofeminist principles, while also embracing multispecies justice—where not only humans, but also plants and animals, benefit?
- What does it mean to design a space based on the principle that everyone is indispensable and interdependent?
- What would it imply, spatially, to envision a neighborhood grounded in anti-policing and mutual care?
- What might a critical heritage-inspired urban policy look like, especially in settler colonial contexts?
- How can we plan mobility—especially public transportation—through the lens of critical food studies?¹⁷
- How can a city be designed to embed the principles of ecomuseology, perhaps by incorporating the narrative tools often used by radical environmental humanities scholars?

And so on—I could continue posing more questions like these, each exploring the intersections between the critical frameworks mentioned earlier and spatial planning and design. These, and other potential questions, are open challenges that have not been tackled systematically yet.

I do not believe that all scholars and practitioners must immediately adopt these approaches—but we should begin to critically engage with them and incorporate them into graduate

¹⁷ For instance, one of my students from the course “Food, Environment, and People”—which I taught last year at the University of Toronto—envisioned and designed bus stops in underserved suburban areas of Toronto and used both the platform roofs and benches to integrate edible and growing spaces. The goal was to provide food for people (and other species) in areas with some of the highest rates of food insecurity in the city. Needless to say, such equity-driven greening would also have offered heat refuge during the summer. Of course, I am aware that in practice, such experiments pose a range of challenges, including those related to daily maintenance and the need for broader cultural shifts. But it is precisely through the practical application of these ideas that we can better understand the challenges that arise and identify areas that require further development.

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education and training. This should not replace mainstream approaches but rather complement and expand them.

As for implementation, I am aware of the critiques of “being critical” itself (Sanyal, 2008), and of the paradoxical tension between understanding a problem and acting on it. In other words: while “we must think far-futures, we also need to act now” (Laurian, 2025, p. 217). The real added value of urban planning lies in its grounded, action-oriented approach, and its capacity to translate theory into meaningful practice.

Integrating these innovative theories supports the idea of “planning for social transformation” rather than “planning for social maintenance” (Friedmann & Huxley, 1985). After all, “planning theory has to do with the relation of knowledge to action” (Friedmann & Huxley, 1985, p. 37). There is substantial room to connect social equity and environmental concerns through a spatially informed, intersectional approach. While critical perspectives from other fields have provided valuable tools for understanding the complex web of power dynamics and injustices underpinning our society, they rarely challenge power structures directly. Similarly, less explored in these fields are the mechanisms that could be put in place to support a genuine redistribution of power. In this sense, anti-extractivist and anti-oppressive research approaches are particularly instructive, as they aim to foster reconciliation and redistribute power, rather than merely describing inequality (Potts & Brown, 2005). This aligns with a more egalitarian vision of socio-environmental transformation, and with the idea of “organizing hope” and “envisioning alternatives” (Sandercock, 2023)¹⁸, starting from “reimagining the soul of urban planning” (Sandercock, 2024).

This is why I believe that planning studies and particularly practice should give more space to community-based and action-oriented research that deliberately and actively cultivates power and proactively challenges the status quo. Given that planning is both a scientific discipline and a practice, the possibilities for meaningful intervention are numerous. I believe that community organizing — i.e., community-led strategies to identify shared problems, build collective power, and take coordinated action to achieve social, political, or economic change—has much to offer in this regard. It not only would be interdisciplinary and intersectional, but somehow also “undisciplined”, a term that has been used to refer to the desire to engage with issues in the non-academic world (Robinson, 2008)—issues that do not primarily emerge in disciplinary journals or academic discourse alone. An important characteristic of this style of interdisciplinarity is a very strong focus on partnerships with the external world—partnerships that go beyond treating partners primarily as audiences and instead involve these partners as co-producers of new hybrid forms of knowledge.

Again, I am not suggesting that all research must become “undisciplined” and action-oriented, given that a similar statement would risk reducing planning studies to being meaningful only when action-oriented, but I do see tremendous potential in research that is not only rooted in real-world problems, but also supports the mobilization and self-organization of communities, especially the most marginalized ones, and builds alliances between them, institutions, and other actors to resolve those problems.

Action-oriented planning research is not merely about distributive or procedural justice; it is about disrupting existing power dynamics. Otherwise, we risk the very critique many scholars have already raised: that of reproducing injustice through tokenism and consensus-building that leaves structures of domination intact.

¹⁸ *plaNNext* has dedicated an entire volume 8 to the theme of “Making space for hope”, as you can see in the following link: <https://journals.aesop-planning.eu/index.php/planext/issue/view/8>

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Is this easy to achieve? Certainly not. But in today's global context, scholars may only survive either by acquiescing to current power elites, or by resisting and reorganizing both the systems of knowledge and the practices they support. Rethinking how we live in the world is becoming a matter of survival strategy. In times of socio-ecological and democratic crises, planners can think, plan, and design an urban future whose primary principles are precisely the survival of deep ecological and democratic values. What I am saying now is also related to another fundamental "task" for the next generation of planning, which is that planners should also be willing to advocate for socially just visions of cities—visions that are radical but not unrealizable. This allows planning to align itself with widely shared values such as democracy, the common good, and equality. Both resistance and envisioning are necessary strategies.

In short, the discussed critical studies reveal unjust power dynamics, raise awareness, and denounce inequality—but they do not, by themselves, transform or destabilize power. Only by building and redistributing power can we truly challenge the systems that perpetuate injustice.

plaNNext: The promise of navigating the intersections

In times of ecological breakdown, rising inequalities, and democratic backsliding, the role of scientific journals cannot remain neutral, nor passive. Journals are not just repositories of knowledge. They are pieces of a larger puzzle—tools for organizing hope and mobilizing knowledge and justice across generations. They hold power: the power to shape what is heard, what is published, who is cited, and ultimately, who is believed to be scientifically valid.

We are facing a crisis not only of climate or inequalities, but also of trust in knowledge itself. Scientific institutions are increasingly underfunded and politicized. Climate denial and fake news spread alongside heatwaves and floods. In this landscape, to publish is no longer a neutral act. It is a political one. Suppose the current polycrisis is crises of the ecosystem, of the society, of the democracy, and of knowledge. In that case, a journal can be a space where such polycrisis is narrated, beyond some mainstream dominant voices, analyzed and scrutinized by adopting an intersectional and interdisciplinary perspective.

The journal of tomorrow—the one we need—must be brave and committed. It must stand in solidarity with those whose voices have long been marginalized and challenge the supremacy of shareholder-driven knowledge. "To change everything, we need everyone"—and we need everything, including scientific journals.

A truly transformative journal does not simply disseminate information. It unmask existing injustice, cultivates alternatives to the competitive logics. It embraces slow academia, relational care, and the value of open knowledge as a form of publishing equity and justice. It breaks open the ivory tower and cross-pollinates with radio, zines, Instagram, community forums—platforms where knowledge lives, breathes, and mobilizes (Privitera et al., 2025).

Such a journal would not shy away from normative commitments. It would be committed to urban justice and equity, climate action, and the right to the city. It would welcome pluralism. It would recognize that no single method, no single discipline, and no single voice can answer all the questions we face.

We must move beyond despair. We must use journals as spaces to debunk fake narratives and news, and tackle complexity.

As planning scholars, we must ask: *Planning for whom? Knowledge for whom?* Planning is—or should be—a humanistic discipline: one that uses technique not to dominate, but to care and to heal.

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In this context, the mission of *plaNNext* becomes more urgent than ever. In another piece of this volume (Privitera et al., 2025), we reflected on how *plaNNext* was born and developed over the years, keeping this characteristic of being a friendly and non-hierarchical, horizontal space to self-organize, learn about academia, urban planning, working in an international and intercultural group, and networking, but also a space to “freely” share and develop fresh ideas, and why not, a place to experiment with them. As a journal committed to creating a peer and safe space for early-career researchers to engage in planning themes and intergenerational dialogue (Varış Husar et al., 2025), *plaNNext* stands as an experimental platform that has the potential to challenge mainstream narratives and fake news, to imagine alternatives to the current publishing system and knowledge production system, and to foreground voices and practices rooted in justice and care.

plaNNext should incentivize and welcome research that is innovative and, when possible, action-oriented and aimed at impacting the urban environment. A journal that does not fear trespassing disciplines, but welcomes moving through them, navigating the intersections between several fields of knowledge, being aware that “there is no thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives” (Lorde, 2007, p.138). Not only interdisciplinary but also “undisciplinary”, which entails challenging the way academia works, by disobeying it and being deeply connected with the real-world problems. In short, *plaNNext*, by doing so, will support the next generation of planners in building cities—and futures—that are more just and more livable.

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