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Editorial: Bridging gaps – urban planning for coexistence

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Framing the debate: bridging gaps in planning

Today, urban planning attempts to address trans-scalar issues while dealing with the increasingly complex socio-environmental, economic, and cultural challenges that demand specific, innovative, sustainable, and inclusive solutions. The 18th AESOP Young Academics Conference, titled *Bridging Gaps: Urban Planning for Coexistence*, was organized and hosted by a group of PhD candidates at the Polytechnic University of Milan (Politecnico di Milano) in March 2024. The conference was conceived as an open platform, designed specifically by and for early career researchers to engage with these challenges. It aimed to address the theoretical and practical gaps within urban planning, seeking ways to transform them into constructive dialogue and interdisciplinary collaboration opportunities. In a world shaped by environmental crises, urban-rural tensions, socio-economic disparities, and the diverging relationship between academia and practice, the conference offered a unique and safe space for young academics, including master's and doctoral students, postdoctoral researchers, and other early career scholars, to critically rethink urban planning as a tool for coexistence. Participants explored new ways to address these challenges and bridge the identified gaps in the planning discourse through their research, methodologies, and case studies.

Coexistence, the broader theme of the conference, was approached as a dynamic and multifaceted concept, including the relationships between urban and rural environments, different species, academic disciplines, and planning methodologies and practices (Jreij et al., 2025). The idea of coexistence recognizes the urgency of aiming for sustainable interactions among diverse actors, whether human or non-human, institutional or informal, spatial or conceptual. The conference was structured into five thematic tracks and three roundtables, each addressing a different but interconnected aspect of urban planning. In addition, the three roundtables facilitated in-depth discussions that bridged the thematic divides: the first linking sustainable urban-rural transitions (Tracks 1 and 2), the second one exploring the academia-practice relationship (Tracks 3 and 4), and the third focusing on Track 5's overarching framework and its implications for the discipline. Track 5 served as an umbrella theme and encapsulated the broader discussion on coexistence, integrating insights from the other four tracks.

The relevance of this theme is timely in the current academic and practical landscape. As cities and regions navigate the growing pressures of climate change, sociopolitical instability, and economic inflation, discussing planning for coexistence becomes an urgent necessity. Moreover, this changing context requires new frameworks for planning education and for young academics (Variş Husar et al., 2023). The 18th AESOP Young Academics Conference discussions underscored how planning must evolve to address these challenges, fostering inclusivity, adaptability, and resilience. The conference served as an experimental space for such discussions, bringing together young researchers from diverse geographical backgrounds to question the status quo, propose new frameworks, perspectives, and methodologies, and highlight overlooked topics and themes in planning discourse (Jreij et al., 2025).

This special issue seeks to put some of the topics discussed and initiated during the conference into the spotlight. It aims to highlight some key themes, debates, and, in some cases, findings while also providing an opportunity for the young researchers to develop further the ideas sparked by the event and publish their work. By bringing together a selection of papers presented at the conference, this issue hopes to tighten some gaps in urban planning research, spark new discussions, and encourage a more reflexive and engaged approach to planning for coexistence. Ultimately, the goal is not to reflect on the conference's

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outcomes but to contribute to a broader and timely dialogue that challenges the boundaries of urban planning and envisions a more inclusive and sustainable future.

Current debates and emerging gaps in urban planning for coexistence

The current debates in contemporary urban planning are linked to complex problematic challenges that include social and spatial segregation and a lack of accessibility of city services (Moreno, 2024); urban traffic congestion and air pollution (Xu et al., 2024); environmental degradation (Newig & Fritsch, 2009); urban biodiversity loss (Lazzarini et al., 2024; Nilon, 2023) and depletion of natural resources (Atutxa et al., 2024). These issues are deeply intertwined with various gaps in both the theory and practice of urban planning, which influence local authorities' policy priorities and, more broadly, hinder institutional capacity to effectively address citizens' needs, particularly in disadvantaged communities, where local needs often become "lost in transition" (Hysing, 2015).

In the context of local communities' need to have a voice in the planning process, a significant challenge lies in effectively leveraging public participation to support the socio-ecological transition of cities (Sauer et al., 2015). Furthermore, public spaces play an important role in promoting social inclusion and community cohesion (Mehan, 2024). At the same time, participatory processes may become exclusionary arenas, where powerful stakeholders dominate decision-making while less resourced actors struggle to have their voices heard. The primary challenge, therefore, is to ensure both accountability and inclusivity in participatory spaces, interpreting these as open collaborative grounds for multi-stakeholder interaction where also the potential conflicts arising should not be perceived negatively but rather recognized as a natural and constructive part of stakeholder interaction and engagement (Durham et al., 2014).

While participatory arenas significantly impact the determination of just planning processes, it is equally essential to foster participation within local administrations to engage various sectors in the policy-making process. This special issue highlights another practical gap: the sectoral nature of territorial planning structures and mechanisms, whose fragmentation often makes it difficult for plans and planning policies to drive transformation across different policy sectors in an integrated and cohesive manner (Mahmoud et al., 2025).

Some researchers have attempted to bridge these gaps between theory and practice using several approaches and methodologies (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The main challenge lies in developing a transdisciplinary framework for urban public policy (Creutzig et al., 2024) that can build bridges between academia and public administration, making sure that research can positively influence policy-making processes, as well as bring together technical, social, and scientific knowledge directly relevant to municipal policy. Indeed, in both cases, stakeholder collaboration is crucial and allows for the contribution of different, sometimes contested, goals, interests, values, and models in the process (European Commission: Directorate General for Research and Innovation, 2023). Emphasis on forms of partnership as vehicles for mobilizing the collective governance capacities of local actors is highlighted by Bulkeley et al. (2021, p. 7), who pointed out that "moving forward requires building capacity for a range of actions from public engagement to partnerships, equipping urban actors with the tools and resources to [...] generate outcomes that are transformative for people and places".

In this context, the opportunity to overcome silos and fragmented urban planning lies in inclusive co-creation and co-planning processes, where all stakeholders from various policy sectors within the public administration share responsibility for policy implementation

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(Mahmoud, 2024), while also fostering collaborations with civil society and the private sector. Indeed, multi-level modes of territorial governance between the local communities and institutions, civil society, academia, and local authorities are critical in overcoming the discrepancies related to policy provision, implementation, and monitoring (Bulkeley et al., 2019).

Contributions of the special issue

This special issue brings together four papers that examine urban planning through the lens of coexistence. By addressing spatial, social, and environmental dimensions, these contributions highlight the limitations of existing planning paradigms and present novel methodologies for fostering more inclusive and sustainable urban futures.

The first paper, by Luís Carlos Martins Mestrinho de Medeiros Raposo, examines the role of the seascape in shaping the public acceptance of offshore wind farms in Portugal. By showing how conflicts emerge when stakeholders with strong ties to the sea are excluded from decision-making, the paper stresses the importance of recognizing the agency of the seascape itself as a relational actor. It calls for energy planning approaches that engage more directly with the place-based non-human dimensions of space.

Two papers investigate questions of climate resilience and sustainability transitions. Lucia Chieffallo develops a heterogeneous data processing method that integrates climatic and non-climatic information to support urban planners in addressing heatwaves and has been tested in the Italian municipality of Lamezia Terme. Her approach illustrates how combining multiple data sources can strengthen adaptation planning by identifying priority areas and defining tailored responses. Mirjam Sophie Mauel and Elisabeth Beusker focus on the German context of serial retrofitting, analyzing it through the multi-level perspective to assess its transformative potential for the building sector. Their contribution shows how industrial prefabrication and standardized components could accelerate the diffusion of low-carbon housing solutions but also emphasizes the political and institutional support needed to make this innovation mainstream. Together, these two papers highlight the promises and challenges of system-based and technical approaches to resilience, raising questions about how to better connect them to social equity and participatory governance.

The final paper, by Seyed Alireza Seyedi, Saeid Khaghani, Rouhollah Mojtahedzadeh and Asma Mehan, offers a historical perspective by tracing the architectural evolution of British-owned oil company towns in Iran from 1901 to 1951. Their analysis of Abadan and Masjed Soleyman shows how colonial urban models, from bungalow housing to garden city principles, produced racially and socially segregated environments. This paper demonstrates how the legacies of colonial planning continue to shape socio-spatial inequalities today and invites reflection on the need for historically aware approaches in contemporary planning.

A central question or recurring theme emerging from these contributions is how planning can reconcile top-down strategies with bottom-up, community-led initiatives. While several papers advocate for greater inclusivity and participatory approaches, they also point to institutional, political, and structural barriers that limit such engagement. This conclusion raises important considerations for future research and practice: How can planning methodologies better integrate diverse knowledge systems, including indigenous and non-human perspectives? What mechanisms facilitate more effective collaboration between policymakers, researchers, and local communities? How can historical insights be mobilized to design more equitable and context-sensitive planning interventions?

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Closing remarks on planning for coexistence

Recent scholarship points out the importance of integrating social justice into urban climate change planning. For instance, studies have documented that urban climate initiatives often inadvertently exacerbate social inequities, particularly when neoliberal ideologies guide planning processes. Such evidence emphasizes the need for planners to adopt frameworks that prioritize equity and inclusivity (Varış Husar, Mehan, et al., 2025; Varış Husar, Tulumello, et al., 2025). At the same time, the politics of expertise in planning are being redefined, as long-dominant technical and comprehensive approaches are increasingly questioned by demands to value the lived, everyday and insurgent knowledge of communities and marginalized groups (Holston, 2008). This shift signals an important move toward democratizing planning and grounding interventions in the realities of diverse actors.

The articles in this issue resonate with this ongoing transformation. They remind us that resilience cannot be understood solely through technical solutions, but must also be rooted in social relations, cultural contexts, and historical trajectories. They show that while innovative tools, systemic approaches, and technological advances can strengthen planning, they will only achieve their full potential if combined with participatory, equitable, and historically conscious practices.

As such, this special issue contributes to widening the scope of planning scholarship by bringing in perspectives that connect local struggles to global transitions, technical innovation to cultural meaning, and historical critique to future-oriented practice. Its insights are relevant not only for academic debates but also for policymakers, practitioners, and community actors who seek to bridge gaps in planning theory and practice.

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