Conclusions: Three Modalities for a New Climate Urbanism

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15.1 Introduction

As climate change transforms our societies, it also changes how we interact with our surroundings. Nowhere is this more evident than in urban areas. Climate change is slowly shifting our perceptions of urban safety and risk following the experiences of extreme weather events such as cyclones, hurricanes, storms, suburban wildfires, flooding and heatwaves. Climate migration is now affecting cities around the world. Thus, climate insecurity has shifted from being a concern of ‘exceptional’ places in the Global South to a concern for cities everywhere. If there were any doubt that cities have entered a new phase of environmental insecurity, the COVID-19 pandemic has thrown into sharp focus the fragility of protective infrastructures and prevailing economic systems, and the scale of our exposure to new biological threats. Public health has again become a priority for cities, but in new ways that consider their integration into
multiple circuits, from local personal contacts to global population movements. At the same time, the need to provide a coherent response to climate change and reduce our dependence on fossil fuels entails the reorganization of the built environment with new concepts of mobility, thermal comfort, economic relations and communications to meet the aim of reducing carbon emissions. As shown throughout this book, the manifestations of this New Climate Urbanism are diverse. They reflect multiple geographies and varied biophysical contexts that differentiate climate change responses across countries, regions, and neighbourhoods. However, there is a common trend that is evident across all chapters: the New Climate Urbanism represents a qualitative shift in the way we look at cities in terms of safety, resilience, sustainability and broader development trajectories. The prevailing business-as-usual is gone.

If we accept that the New Climate Urbanism is here to stay, the question is how to ensure that future cities are able to adapt in ways that are inclusive and fair, addressing the needs of the most marginalized and preventing the emergence of spaces of exclusion as manifested in the creation of securitized and ‘green’ urban enclaves. The Sustainable Development Goal 11 aims to achieve cities that are inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable (United Nations 2015). Of these terms, the last three are often considered in the kinds of actions that lie at the core of climate urbanism. However, as the chapters in this book illustrate, climate action in cities can reinforce existing urban social inequalities and exclusions if it does not explicitly aim to achieve social justice.

The various chapters have explored what the New Climate Urbanism might mean in different places and around different domains of climate policy. These contributions highlight the renewed urgency for action in a context where climate displacement, climate poverty, and climate deaths are increasing year on year in the Global North and in the Global South. They show that we need to think carefully about the new forms of environmental injustices generated under the shadow of urban climate policy. The notion of ‘climate apartheid’ is increasingly used (Chap. 3) to capture the sense of a world divided by differential exposures to climate risks and differential access to the resources needed to protect the lives and livelihoods that are under threat.
Moreover, this New Climate Urbanism emerges against the backdrop of other phenomena changing the context of action. Climate migration and displacements will undoubtedly contribute to intensify the tendency towards global urbanization. Climate change will worsen crises of food and water supply and will force us to build more resilient systems of food, energy, housing and water provision. COVID-19 will not only refocus attention on urban public health but will also support more intensive behavioural control. It will perhaps lead us to rethink the design, layout, density and interconnectedness of cities. The search for liveable places will continue, dividing urban areas between the affluent and the dispossessed. Affluence alone, however, will not be sufficient to protect cities from the effects of climate change. Some of today’s wealthier cities might decline as wealthier citizens and economic activities gravitate towards less vulnerable locations or to cities that can manage climate stress through technology (e.g. controlled environments and climatic modification, Marvin and Rutherford 2018).

This book thus constitutes an initial exploration of what this New Climate Urbanism looks like, how it manifests, and what its consequences might be. Whether the New Climate Urbanism promotes actions that work for all is the central question that inspires the contributions of this book. Examples abound about new environmental injustices as cities selectively adapt to climate change and there is a suspicion that the New Climate Urbanism will replicate and perhaps reinforce the prevailing injustices of the twenty-first-century city. There is therefore an urgent and compelling need to explore the potential of New Climate Urbanism to create opportunities for a sustainable and just city, including the potential to link climate change, public health and migration as part of a new humanitarian perspective on cities. The following sections explore some of the expanding areas for a research agenda on the New Climate Urbanism moving forward.
15.2 Rethinking Multiple Pathways to the Future

Take a moment to close your eyes and envision the world, say, 10 or 15 years from now. What you’re imagining, it’s quite likely, is a lot of new technology. In general, I’ve found that when we consider major world problems like poverty, climate change or cancer, we optimistically think about a techno-utopia that solves them. There’s nothing wrong with that, but we have to move away from looking at the future in just this one way. I do everything in my power not to talk about a single future but to talk about futures instead. Open yourself up to considering all kinds of possible scenarios and all kinds of solutions. (Ari Wallach 2017)

No one single technological future will solve the complex questions that we are facing, Wallach explains. Thus, we need to engage with a multiplicity of futures. In a seminal paper on the future of the energy transition in the UK, Rydin et al. (2013) argued for the deployment of a coevolutionary perspective to study possible transitions within existing infrastructure systems. They wanted us to imagine transitions as more than “a discrete series of changes in technologies and associated infrastructure” to examine them instead

as the outcome of on-going interactions between technologies, political and economic frameworks, and between institutions and social practices, during which these different dimensions change or co-evolve together to produce distinct pathways of change. (Rydin et al. 2013)

This is a perspective that has greater purchase in sustainable development and environmental politics (e.g. Leach and Scoones 2010) than in urban planning. Opening rather than closing our imagination to multiple future pathways is imperative to sustain urban life in a climate-changed world. Such analyses resonate with futurists’ work, whose role is to open up our ability to imagine alternatives beyond techno-utopias (see Wallach’s quote above, and Hajer and Pelzer 2018). The closing down of the human imagination in the face of impending disaster seems to be as restrictive as comprehensive planning schemes were for the planners and
urban managers of the past. Castán Broto and Westman (2019: 2) have argued in relation to urban climate futures, “there is no single vision of that future. Imposing such global visions in one single locality would be akin to impose ill-fitting solutions to problems that may not exist.”

Paradoxically, our imagination seems to fail us precisely in the search for utopia, a state of seemingly unending possibilities. This book has analysed both the search for imaginative responses to climate change and existing attempts to settle debates on a fixed range of models that will define urban futures. With hyperbolic claims about how they can make or break climate futures, cities have raised expectations with regards to their ability to transform themselves in response to the climate crisis. These expectations may well be beyond current possibilities, but attempts to address climate change in cities do exist, and they take various forms. Many are motivated by a ‘climate opportunism’ that fails to address the root causes of the climate crisis and instead perpetuates narratives of endless growth fuelled by resource extraction. In doing so, these approaches reinforce intersecting economic, social, ethnic, gender, racial and spatial inequalities. But those are not the only responses we see emerging. In the next section, we highlight three different modalities of climate urbanism that have emerged throughout this edited book. We have called them ‘reactive,’ ‘entrepreneurial,’ and ‘transformative’; they coexist and at times contradict each other.

15.3 Three Modalities of a New Climate Urbanism: Entrepreneurial, Reactive, Transformative

Looking into current and future developments, it is possible to envisage that the New Climate Urbanism will contribute to legitimizing authoritarian forms of governance to expand and protect the capitalist economic functions of cities. This ‘entrepreneurial’ approach to climate urbanism raises critical questions for future research, including how current decarbonization and climate adaptation pathways in cities reproduce neoliberal and resource-intensive forms of urban development. Linda Shi
(Chap. 4) stresses how current analyses of ‘climate urbanism’ actually identify the legacy of logics of uneven urban development, resource extraction, and climate gentrification that emerged before climate change became a challenge of urban policy. This competitive urban protectionism is consistent with ideas of urban entrepreneurialism and neoliberal spatial competition, now imbued with a new climatic dimension. ‘Entrepreneurial’ climate urbanism is associated with the deployment of neoliberal principles of urban management to address climate change in urban areas. Indeed, current approaches to climate action in cities show that various interests, from local governments to IT companies, real estate actors, businesses, or development banks, see climate change as an economic opportunity. Entrepreneurial climate urbanism sees climate action as an opportunity to spur ‘green’ economic growth, as shown by Corina McKendry’s analysis of Colorado Springs climate-friendly policies (Chap. 9). In the literature, climate gentrification is a growing concern that comes to add to parallel analyses of how green policies are creating new forms of exclusion and oppression in contemporary cities (Anguelovski et al. 2018). A focus on climate-friendly ‘entrepreneurial’ strategies can help climate urbanism research to challenge approaches that dilute climate action within ‘business as usual’ urban boosterism.

However, much of the climate urbanism that has emerged so far is not purposively entrepreneurial, but rather it is reactive, characterized by the defence of the existing economic status quo within the narrow horizons of economic competitiveness. As Joshua Long, Jennifer Rice and Anthony Levenda (Chap. 3) demonstrate, this reactive approach to protecting core economic functions is not socially neutral. It is leading to new forms of ‘climate apartheid’ as wealthy property interests are protected at the expense of the less affluent. In Chap. 8, Eric Chu explored how the concept of resilience has gained traction as a way to direct economic resources into evidence-based planning interventions in two Indian cities. His analysis shows how resource constraints in cities make them more dependent on short-lived, external funding to implement climate action, limiting its transformative potential and relying on technocratic-led processes that favour the protection of economic activities in the short run. In Chap. 9, Marta Olazabal shows that a wide range of adaptation plans around the world do not have the evidence on climate risks needed for
robust planning. Lack of evidence hinders the ability of local governments—and that of other actors—to anticipate and react to climate change impacts over different timescales, locking cities into short-term reactive responses. Sustainable and socially inclusive approaches to climate change are unlikely to emerge from reactive responses to climate stresses and shocks in cities. Climate change requires distinct ways of thinking about urban management and progressive pathways in order to protect the vulnerable and dispossessed.

This book explored what more socially ‘transformative’ approaches to climate urbanism could look like. Socially transformative climate urbanism relates to the growing efforts by multiple actors and citizens to align climate action within a broader framework of empowerment, social protection and resource redistribution to reshape urban societies’ relationship with nature (Enora Robin, Linda Westman and Vanesa Castán Broto, Chap. 2). Most research on urban climate policy to date has focused on ‘the Global North’ and the capacity of local states to act and to leverage resources for climate action. Expanding the geography of climate urbanism research brings a wider focus on other forms of governance that are more fragmented and complex as discussed by Sikku Juhola in Chap. 5. Furthermore, in Chap. 12, Andrew P. Kythreotis and Theresa Mercer explore the potential of new forms of collaborative educational strategies to support intergenerational learning and empowerment. This raises questions as to how future research on climate urbanism can be integrated into pedagogical practices that spur collective action and intergenerational learning in order to transform cities. But the manners of transformation are highly variable. For example, this book discusses the role of community-driven projects in the production of socially just and transformative climate urbanism. In Chap. 13, Long Seng To discusses the example of community projects in Nepal and Malawi as innovative forms of governance to support adaptation to climate risks, building on local knowledge(s) in the context of decentralized governance. The question of transformation, in future climate urbanism research, should thus attend to the capacity of non-state actors to spark change. Jenny Pickerill in Chap. 14 reflects upon her long experience of studying eco-communities, showing how these collective modes of organizing housing and infrastructure provision provide opportunities to
change broader cultures, our relationships to resource limits, nature and society. She also stresses that eco-communities can only be part of a much broader range of actions for rapid and large-scale transformation. Indeed, a key challenge for climate urbanism research will be its capacity to reframe the relationship between ‘the urban’ and climate change in a way that can spark transformative action at different scales of governance. In Chap. 6, Westman and Castán Broto start to explore these issues by looking at whether and how urban imaginaries are integrated into international climate policy. In Chap. 7, James J. Patterson brings to the fore the complexities of institutional change when thinking about transformative action. In doing so, he stresses the need for future research on climate urbanism to combine prescription (what should be done in principle) with a better understanding of processes of change, remaking the rules-in-use, and understanding the consequences of deliberate action within different institutional and historical contexts. In Chap. 11, Luna Khirfan highlights the transformative potential of urban design thinking in understanding and shaping urban responses to climate change, showing how the micro-scale of urban planning impacts directly on the health and well-being of citizens.

The New Climate Urbanism constitutes a new mode of being for urban areas, a mode of being that forces urban actors to connect to a wider global context of environmental change. The different contributions presented in this book offer initial reactions to this qualitative change as a new way of thinking urban life, and consider its implications for the reproduction of urban life. The three modalities of climate urbanism discussed here—entrepreneurial, reactive, and socially transformative—reflect the deep contradictions at the core of actions making up this New Climate Urbanism.

15.4 Conclusion

Inherent to the New Climate Urbanism is the necessity of a global urban climate perspective that recognizes the differential challenges and capacities of cities to respond and adapt to a climate-changed world. As ever
with climate change, acting now to support cities to adapt will help mitigate some of the future impacts of climate change, and that includes the strategic management of urban growth and decline, displacement and migration. The book has highlighted powerful tendencies for climate change and climate action in cities to reinforce dynamics of exclusion. However, there are also opportunities for governments, citizens and organizations to think differently about the design and management of cities and the distribution of resources in a finite world. All the contributions of this book were written before the COVID-19 pandemic of 2019–2020 but the key messages of the book resonate with the changed perspectives brought about by the coronavirus. Both COVID-19 and climate change highlight the importance of coordinated action at national and local scales, but also the need to move beyond the laissez-faire market-led approach to social protection. COVID-19 became a global crisis because governments had failed to hear the warnings of a threat to human life that had long been recognized and predicted. COVID-19 discriminates by health and living conditions, environmental factors and differential access to resources and infrastructures that could help to maintain human life and livelihoods. Climate change will unfold over a longer period of time than COVID-19 but in the post-COVID-19 landscape we have an opportunity to rethink social life and urban futures in ways that integrate climate change and a deeper concern for human-nature relations.

An emerging theme that will no doubt find echo in future research relates to the drivers of change that can help mainstream climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies across sectors, stakeholders, and scales of governance. Will the New Climate Urbanism consolidate into a homogeneous model, or will it create space for alternative models to adapt to the changing needs of urban areas and their citizens? A central concern emerging from the dialogue among the scholars in this book is whether the New Climate Urbanism will empower vulnerable communities to partake in the design of future climate action within and across cities. Can anyone deliver alternative models of climate urbanism that include vulnerable groups and that address the entrenched inequalities that create vulnerabilities in the first place? Alternative modes of thinking and acting, perhaps grounded in feminist and postcolonial theories,
decolonial praxis, and other deliberate attempts to think beyond the mainstream, may help us to move beyond a critique of neoliberalism to understand processes of radical and incremental change, and to explore how climate action can support the emergence of new urban worlds in the age of climate change.

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