‘Remaining the same or becoming another?’ Adaptive resilience versus transformative urban change

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Abstract
Structural change of cities has long been a central theme in urban studies. Recent manifestations of urban change have been described either as instances of ‘adaptation’, often associated with flexible adjustment and reorganisation, or of ‘transformation’, implying a deeper and more radical scope of change. The conceptual difference between these two ideas, however, remains surprisingly under-theorised and ambiguous in the extant literature. We find both notions casually (and at times even interchangeably) employed in recent debates on ‘resilient cities’. Addressing this conceptual imprecision, our commentary focuses on the structure–identity relationship, coupling resilience thinking with an institutional perspective that has provided the intellectual moorings for recent scholarly approaches to city identity. Through this prism, city identity is firmly conceptualised as a distinctive set of socio-political values; the structure of a city, then, provides the means to realise these values. In consequence, we are able to offer a precise conceptual differentiation between what we here dub ‘adaptive resilience’ and ‘transformative urban change’ as the two facets of change in city contexts: if structural change is accompanied by a shift in socio-political values (and thus a change in identity), we refer to this as transformative; if no such identity shift takes place, this is an instance of adaptive urban change, primarily on the level of structures. We illustrate our argument with the empirical case of the city of Vienna. Overall, our commentary’s ambition is to add nuance, clarity and conceptual precision to the debates on resilience currently raging in the field of urban change.

Keywords
adaptation, city identity, institutional perspective, resilience, transformation, urban change, values, Vienna

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Adaptation versus transformation of cities: The conceptual puzzle in urban change

Structural change in cities – whether affecting organisational forms, institutional arrangements, social network configurations, patterns of relations and interactions among a specific cast of actors, sources of ‘legitimate’ power or the socio-material infrastructure in place – has long been a central theme in urban studies. Within this domain of scholarly inquiry, ‘adaptation’ and ‘transformation’ are the two pivotal frames of reference for current debates on urban change (Elmqvist et al., 2019). While adaptation is associated with incremental adjustment and reorganisation, transformation often corresponds to the notion of deep, more radical and thus potentially disruptive change. But beyond the vague idea that these reflect a different scope of change, the conceptual distinction remains surprisingly under-theorised and somewhat ambiguous, or even contested, in the extant literature. A widely accepted theorisation, in particular regarding their interrelation, has been largely missing (Elmqvist et al., 2019; Wolfram et al., 2019; see also Matyas and Pelling, 2015; Tanner et al., 2015; Wenger, 2017). Furthermore, as the notions of adaptation and transformation both have their roots in the discourse on resilience within the field of social ecology, we find the two constructs casually and at times even interchangeably applied to the context of ‘resilient cities’ (Meerow et al., 2016).

Our commentary aims to resolve such conceptual imprecision in the use of ‘adaptation’ and ‘transformation’ in urban studies. The ambition is to add nuance and clarity to the ‘resilience’ debates currently in vogue amongst scholars of urban change (for instance, in this journal: Beilin and Wilkinson, 2015; Gleeson, 2008; Miller et al., 2020).
Drawing inspiration from ‘resilience thinking’: Change as a matter of identity?

In the original socio-ecological understanding, resilience is defined as ‘the capacity of a system to experience shocks while retaining essentially the same [...] identity’ (Walker et al., 2004, 2006). Building on this notion, social ecologists then aimed to encapsulate adaptation and transformation as different aspects of change under the umbrella term ‘resilience thinking’ (Folke et al., 2010). Accordingly, change within a resilient system is referred to as ‘adaptation’; in contrast, if a focal system becomes untenable (i.e. non-resilient) so that it has to be rebuilt, such fundamental change to the system’s identity is labelled ‘transformation’. In this sense, transformation clearly implies transition to an entirely new system, whereby the old system ceases to exist and becomes a distinct other.

In more detail, the term ‘panarchy’ has been coined in social ecology to forge a conceptual link between adaptation and transformation (Gunderson and Holling, 2002). According to this model, resilience in complex social systems may be viewed as a dynamic process running across abstract stages or hierarchical levels, referred to as ‘scales’. A system’s primary scale constrains what happens on the secondary scale; in turn, change on the secondary scale (i.e. ‘adaptation’) may either bring stability (i.e. ‘resilience’ in a narrower sense) or trigger subsequent change (i.e. ‘transformation’) on the primary scale. It is in this way that transformation, from the view of resilience thinking, clearly goes beyond the limits of incremental adaptation. Rather, it is a ‘cascading’ (Holling et al., 2002) or ‘scaling up’ (Pelling et al., 2015) process of change that affects a system’s primary scale.

Identity, portrayed as a system’s primary-scale variable, therefore marks an Archimedean point that enables social ecologists to distinguish ‘adaptation’ from ‘transformation’: when ‘essential’ features of a system remain stable throughout a process of change, scholars speak of adaptation; when altered, such change is referred to as transformation.

Lost in translation: What is ‘identity’?

Unfortunately, this seemingly rigorous distinction between adaptation and transformation turns out, on closer inspection, to be rather nebulous. As so often, the devil is in the detail. Even within the field of social ecology, an answer to what makes a system ‘the same’ (‘idem’ in Latin) over time and space, and therefore accounts for its identity, appears far from simple (Cumming and Collier, 2005). This is evident when identity is used as the key factor in defining resilience. Without a clear conceptualisation of identity, we are in danger of creating a circular argument: resilience is routinely characterised as the capacity of a system to retain its identity, while identity is referred to as a constant level of resilience.

Unsurprisingly, things get even more complicated when the concept of resilience is applied to urban settings: what exactly is essential or distinctive about a city to account for its identity? This conundrum is surely one reason why the focus on identity in social ecology was dropped entirely when the concept of resilience was introduced to the field of urban studies: it seemed unwise to build concepts about change on the rather vague notion of the ‘identity’ of social systems.

In establishing resilience thinking, Folke et al. (2010) seemed well aware of the manifold issues that result from applying their
concept to social entities such as cities, spec-
ulating that identity and distinctiveness are
here rooted in deep, primary-scale variables
such as ‘worldviews’ and ‘core values’.

The institutional perspective:
Unpacking ‘city identity’

Studies conducted on cities such as New
York, Boston, Barcelona or Berlin have
indeed found particular social and political
values widely acknowledged by the people
living there, persisting over a considerable
period of time and often despite (ongoing)
disturbances (Bell and De-Shalit, 2014).
Such distinctive sets of values constitute
what scholars refer to as a focal city’s ‘ethos’,
‘character’ – or, simply, its ‘identity’ (e.g.
Jones and Svejenova, 2017).

This argument is deeply rooted in an
institutional perspective whereby the identity
of collective social actors (such as organisa-
tions or other social entities) is defined as
the result of an organisation’s infusion with
specific values; turning an engineered techni-
cal arrangement of building blocks into a
social organism ‘infuse[d] with value beyond
the technical requirements of the task at
hand’ is referred to as ‘institutionalisation’
(Selznick, 1957: 17; see Phillips et al., 2016).
In other words, through the flowering of
values, an organisation morphs into an insti-
tution in its own right.

Originally, such institutional thinking
focused on corporations and public organi-
sations, yet it can equally be applied to
social entities such as cities. In this sense, the
‘city as an institution’ (Kornberger et al.,
2021; Meyer et al., 2021) can be understood
as a vehicle for the realisation of distinctive
sets of values engendered by organisational
forms, institutional arrangements, social net-
work configurations, sources of ‘legitimate’
power and the socio-material infrastructure.
All of these represent value-laden urban
structures that express normative views of a
focal city’s purpose rather than random and
neutral products of contextual contingen-
cies. In this understanding, the sustaining of
identity in the face of disturbance is viewed
as the defining problem of institutional life;
the incorporation of fragile values into more
stable structures is intended to safeguard
these against exogenous disturbances such
as external shocks, jolts or crises and endo-
genous disturbances such as the rise of illegi-
timate interests or value ‘drift’ (Kraatz et al.,
2020). We argue, therefore, that scholarship
on city identity which adopts an institutional
perspective provides a sufficiently precise
conceptualisation of identity as a construct
separate from – yet interconnected with –
the structural features of a city. Specifically,
identity can be understood as a distinctive
set of socio-political values, while the struc-
tures of a city provide the very means to
realise these.

City identity as fulcrum for
adaptive resilience versus
transformative urban change

This institutional perspective not only offers
a more practical conceptualisation of city
identity – it also firmly connects it to resil-
ience thinking. The basic argument here is
that a city’s institutionalised cultural (infra-)
structures are instantiations of the very
values that imbue them with meaning and
purpose. The dualism that conceptualises
structure and identity in terms of a means–
end relationship is pivotal to the endeavours
of institutional scholars from the 1990s
onwards to theorise organisational change
(Greenwood and Hinings, 1993; Hinings
et al., 1996). Here, structure and identity are
features of interconnected yet hierarchically
ordered levels that play out – akin to our
notions of adaptation and transformation –
in instances of ‘incremental’ or ‘radical’
change (Amis et al., 2004; Greenwood et al.,
2002). This idea can be linked back to
Gunderson and Holling’s (2002) panarchy model, developed in the field of social ecology. Both approaches build on asymmetric relations between variables on different levels (or scales), together forming a coherent ‘whole’ of a social entity or system. Combining these, we conclude that identity emerges from institutionalised and enacted/lived (infra-)structures which, in turn, are infused with distinctive values and serve as means to realise them – and that (a change in) identity is the key point of reference for distinguishing adaptive from transformative change.

This view of identity as a fulcrum allowing us to differentiate ‘adaptation’ from ‘transformation’ is equally useful in urban settings. As long as a city’s identity, constituted out of a distinctive set of socio-political values, remains intact, we can say that the incremental change of urban (infra-)structures is adaptive; in other words, the city is resilient to change. Yet, when a city’s identity is substantially altered, this radical change is described as transformative.

It is important to note that, in contrast to simple hierarchies, the ‘panarchies’ involved here are neither static nor do they suggest a top-down sequence. Rather, they imply the possibility of change from below and above (Holling et al., 2002): while adaptive change of urban (infra-)structures may eventually scale up and affect a city’s distinctive socio-political values and thus identity, equally, manipulations of a city’s identity and underlying value set can enforce subsequent change on its (infra-)structures in order to maintain the necessary coherence of identity and structure.

While an urban identity might shape and constrain developments at the structural level, this identity also accommodates variety, that is, the same set of distinctive values can be realised by different (infra-)structures. Therefore, urban structures (as the ‘secondary-scale’ variable) do not account for city identity. In a similar vein, a city’s contingencies may place existing structures under pressures that they cannot absorb – the untenable structures may then be altered while the city’s identity is maintained. Such structural shifts can be interpreted as adaptive change that constitutes a certain degree of resilience. And yet, substantial changes to a city’s (infra-)structure certainly have the potential to erode its ideational foundation by triggering change on the identity scale. This is the case when external or internal contingencies successfully champion a structure that does not accord with the city’s identity: the existing values lose their defining power, and the city’s identity drifts towards a different value set.

Against these multiple considerations, we suggest the following two conceptualisations of change in the urban setting, namely adaptive resilience and transformative urban change. While the first describes a city that sustains its identity while undergoing structural change, the second denotes structural change that entails drifting socio-political values. Under transformative change, therefore, the city leaves its previous trajectory and, to a certain extent, changes its identity; in this sense, it essentially becomes another.

**Illustration: Vienna as a ‘resilient’ city – and the risk of transformation**

After this rather abstract discussion, we wish to illustrate our conceptual arguments by considering the city that we probably know best: Vienna, our hometown. While what follows is only a brief sketch to make our arguments more accessible, we feel it vividly demonstrates their relevance.

In a recent interview published in the *Financial Times* on Vienna’s unique, century-long policy of public and social housing provision, a top municipal official remarked on one of the city’s core values,
namely to ensure ‘the highest quality of living for everyone’.3 The persistence of this value is confirmed by Vienna’s top position in global city rankings: since 2009, the Austrian capital has occupied first place in a list compiled by Mercer and was also named by the Economist as the world’s most liveable city in 2018 and 2019.

The roots of this remarkable achievement can be traced back to the late 19th century when Vienna’s mayor, Karl Lueger (later credited with the city’s rapid modernisation), introduced the idea that civic life requires the coordinated establishment of an urban infrastructure, including suitable organisational structures to provide necessary public services (Novy et al., 2019a). In 1919, the first social-democratic mayor of Vienna, Jakob Reumann, proclaimed that the city should become one ‘that enables a liveable existence for all its residents [die allen ihren Bewohnern ein lebenswertes Dasein ermöglicht]’ (Bauer and Trautinger, 2019: 4).4 Thus was born the idea of Vienna as a ‘city for everyone’. The establishment of an adequate socio-material infrastructure, with public and social housing at its very core, also shaped policy-making in the so-called ‘Red Vienna’ of the 1920s and early 1930s – and not without success, as Nobel Laureate Thomas Mann noted in 1932: ‘It is astonishing and extremely admirable to see the exemplary hygienic, aesthetic and social developments achieved here, which have not been surpassed by any city in the world [Es ist erstaunlich und in höchstem Maß bewundernswert, was hier vom hygienischen, ästhetischen und sozialen Standpunkt an Vorbildlichem geschaffen und von keiner Stadt der Welt übertroffen wurde]’ (Bauer and Trautinger, 2019: 4). From 1919, the city authorities developed the Gemeindebau programme of social housing and apartment blocks (built, owned and operated by the city). After the disruption of the Second World War, the programme was immediately resumed in the post-war years; the city of Vienna’s stock of municipal housing has now grown into one of the largest in Europe. To date, the city government allocates an annual budget of €600 million for new buildings and renovations (Hammond, 2018).

Over the last seven decades, the system of public and social housing has been frequently reorganised to cope with novel challenges. In recent years, for instance, the city administration has reacted to the global diffusion of the idea of New Public Management as well as novel technologies and environmental pressures by introducing new ownership structures. These include more ‘entrepreneurial’ arrangements such as semi-public housing cooperatives, smart living initiatives and social housing developed by municipal non-profit enterprises, that is companies subsidised to build low-rent homes. Today, some 60% of Vienna’s residences are in the form of public and social housing, with the city directly owning one-quarter of the housing stock.

Nevertheless, some commentators have seen Vienna’s identity at stake, with the danger of these up-scaling adaptive changes leading to transformative urban change. The gist of the argument is that structural adaptation in reaction to neoliberal pressures favouring marketisation might undermine the integrity and stability of Vienna’s identity. By further excluding economically less privileged groups, private economic interests could threaten Vienna’s core socio-political values. Indeed, some scholars believe this process to be already underway (Novy et al., 2019b). While adaptive change and flexible structures were previously welcomed as ways of fostering resilience and maintaining the city’s identity, this alternative perspective
portrays such adaptive resilience as a potential trigger for transformative change. Not least as a reaction to such a threat, since 2019 the law requires that two-thirds of homes in any large new developments must be reserved as public or social housing.

This brief sketch of the history of public and social housing in Vienna reveals a remarkably persistent vision to provide continued access to the ‘highest quality of living for everyone’. The continuity of this ‘Viennese way [Wiener Weg]’ indicates that the city has long established itself ‘as an institution’ (Kornberger et al., 2021; Meyer et al., 2021). Vienna’s core identity has become defined by a set of values best represented by the motto: a ‘city for everyone’. Accordingly, diverse urban (infra-)structures provide the means to realise these values in various policy fields – not just in housing but also in health and social care, public transport and culture (Leixnering et al., 2020). And it seems that the city has indeed proved rather resilient in this respect. On the one hand, politicians and administrators have fiercely resisted all structural shifts towards the liberalisation or ‘marketisation’ of the public and social housing sector, as advocated under a New Public Management mantra. Such ideals run counter to Vienna’s core identity. On the other hand, the city’s (infra-)structures have proved rather flexible and malleable over time, for instance with acceptance of new organisational forms of municipal housing providers, managerial steering tools as well as institutional arrangements with private-sector real estate developers. This has involved innovative configurations within social networks, patterned interactions among key actors in the field, as well as novel socio-material infrastructure. All such changes have, however, been geared towards serving the guiding rationale of being that ‘city for everyone’ by adequately reacting to shifting contingencies over time. Such flexibility impressively demonstrates the city’s capacity for adaptive resilience – the capacity to change in response to actual or potential disturbance while safeguarding the core ‘identity’.

Nevertheless, the history of Vienna also shows that transformative change may be triggered on the primary scale. We can highlight a period in which the city’s identity was radically transformed, namely between 1934 and 1945, following the rise of the Austro-Fascist Federal State [Ständestaat] and, more specifically, the country’s annexation by Nazi Germany in 1938. Thereafter, the capital’s identity as the ‘city for everyone’ quickly eroded, giving way to an authoritarian and totalitarian concept of extreme exclusion and systematic racism. It was, however, not the case that the values of ‘the city for everyone’ were suddenly abandoned but rather that these were crowded out by a radical redefinition (in the eyes of the authorities as well as local citizens) of who counts as ‘everyone’. Soon after the annexation, all kinds of urban (infra-)structure became ‘synchronised [gleichgeschaltet]’ with those of Nazi Germany; this had the familiar brutal consequences for many citizens such as the once-thriving Jewish intelligentsia, political opponents on the left and various marginalised groups (Flügge, 2018). Such transformative change on the primary scale is certainly among the most radical and disastrous that can be imagined. It is important to note that this primary-scale shift of identity was reflected by a sufficient number of people who did not (or were unable to) defend or acknowledge the previously dominant socio-political values. And yet, after the end of the Second World War and during the years of Allied occupation until 1955, Vienna managed to revive and more or less uphold its pre-war trajectory of the ‘city for everyone’. This re-transformation was not least the result of a fundamental ‘shock’: the terrible experiences between 1934 and 1945 made it obvious that the very
values on which these regimes were built were misguided if not perverse; such realisation, in turn, contributed to the collapse of an untenable identity. Hence, we can say that a shock helped to unleash the ‘attention, understanding and commitment’ (Reese, 2006) that were paramount for an effective restart and rebuilding.

In addition, it is worth highlighting the way in which the external perception and judgement concerning Vienna’s identity (i.e. its ‘image’) greatly impacted the city’s historical trajectory and internal identity. For instance, when Red Vienna became subject to fierce opposition from the conservative federal government in the late 1920s, such external disapproval of the city’s identity crucially helped to strengthen rather than weaken the underlying value set. This attack on Vienna’s identity mobilised heavy support across the city, eventually resulting in an armed conflict between Austro-Fascist and socialist forces in 1934. Even two decades after the end of the Second World War, Vienna’s external image was still scarred by the relatively brief episode of totalitarianism. Paradoxically, such divergences between the external perception and the city’s internal identity have in some instances provoked the city to take an active role in events such as the Prague Spring of 1968, when Vienna’s well-organised welcoming of thousands of refugees from behind the Iron Curtain can be clearly interpreted as a public self-assertion of its meanwhile resurrected pre-war identity.

Indeed, the city’s identity and its underlying set of values have proven considerably stable and institutionalised over time. This does not imply, however, a lack of opposition or even contestation. On the contrary, various crises have severely strained urban structures, in particular the waves of refugees that arrived not only during the Prague Spring but also in the early 1990s from the former Yugoslavia or as part of the European Refugee Crisis in 2015. Such events triggered heated debates about how Vienna could and should react, thereby once again undermining a central pillar of its identity (for instance, the municipal council elections in 2015, fought over by the incumbent social-democrats and right-wing populists, were dubbed the ‘Battle for Vienna’ by political commentators, openly alluding to the historic Siege of Vienna by the Ottoman Empire in 1683). And yet during each of these challenges, the majority of local residents defended – despite all odds, some may argue, given the political climate – the city’s traditional identity, safeguarding the underlying set of values (e.g. Kornberger et al., 2018, 2019).

The nature of urban change: A matter of values

In concluding, we wish to return to our core conceptual argument. A number of scholars have claimed that what we refer to here as ‘adaptive resilience’ and ‘transformative urban change’ are value-neutral concepts, that is neither inherently ‘good’ nor ‘bad’ (Chelleri et al., 2015; Elmqvist et al., 2019; see also Matyas and Pelling, 2015; Wolfram, 2019). Nevertheless, we believe there is a strongly normative aspect to urban change; indeed, at times even a moral aspect, as illustrated by the case of Vienna. In broader academic discourse, adaptive resilience seems highly desirable in order to conserve the status quo; yet there may be equally good reasons for a more radical transformation towards an envisaged (utopic) state of affairs (Pelling, 2011; Tanner et al., 2015; Wenger, 2017). For instance, some recent scholarly work has (re-)applied the normative framework of ‘sustainability’ to urban change, deeming any change as ‘good’ which either maintains or facilitates the development towards sustainability (Elmqvist et al., 2019; Wolfram, 2019). Yet, researchers find it
difficult to create a normative or moral framework for ‘sustainability’ in regard to social entities. As with identity, such a framework would imply judgement of the underlying set of values (Davoudi, 2012). Here we seem to be lacking a clear concept about the locus of values within urban change.

In the final analysis, our approach suggests that urban identity is all about values. Whether adaptive resilience or transformative urban change of a given polity is referred to as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ depends on normative judgements about the very values that express its identity. The persistence of a particular set of values will only be regarded as desirable when these are broadly shared across the polity; if not, transformation will be seen as positive and desirable (and vice versa). As our illustrative case of Vienna demonstrates, critical events as well as external perceptions and judgements of identity can put the underlying set of values at risk; such pressures can either result in decisive support, that is ultimately in adaptive resilience, or the abandonment of values, that is transformative change.

In their editorial to a special issue of Urban Studies on ‘governing for urban resilience’, Beilin and Wilkinson (2015) note that scholars and practitioners alike ‘grapple with how “resilience thinking” contributes to change’ and ask whether it can provide ‘a significant difference’. Our answer is a clear yes! We are convinced that a serious dialogue and exchange at the intersection of resilience thinking and organisational institutionalism adds much-needed nuance, clarity and conceptual precision to the multifaceted debates on resilience currently raging among scholars of urban change. In this way our commentary has aimed to provide a more precise conceptual approach to the adaptive resilience of cities and transformative urban change. Without doubt, additional work is still needed on how to empirically capture and measure such change. However, we hope that our discussion constitutes a useful and fruitful springboard for future debate on the topic.

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Notes
1. Although merely a side note, etymologically we find such use of terminology a bit confusing, as ‘trans-formation’ (from ‘forma’, Latin for ‘shape’ or ‘expression’) quite literally implies a change in visible characteristics (as suggested by ‘adaptation’). However, with ‘identity’ (at least in the social sciences) referring to deeper and more fundamental features that per se cannot be directly observed, a change of identity requires ‘expression’ – that is, ‘forma’.
2. This notion of city identity invites an obvious link to the idea of the ‘resilient city’. Cities attributed a certain threshold of ‘resilience’ have become, in fact, ‘institutionalised’ in their own right; such ‘relative permanence’ has long been seen as a key feature of institutions (Hughes, 1936). These cities have developed a distinct and stable identity that ‘shields’ them from environmental disturbance.
3. For the interview with Wolfgang Müller, deputy municipal director of the City of Vienna, see Lawford (2019).
4. All translations are by the authors.
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