Editor Statement

This past September, over six million people across 150 countries took to the streets for a week of climate strikes with an urgent call for energy transformation, environmental justice, new forms of agriculture, and respect for indigenous land and biodiversity. These calls, mainly led by young people, stand in stark contrast to the actions of the Trump administration. The Trump administration has rapidly unraveled the progress of many climate justice organizations by not just fueling the climate-denying rhetoric, increasing the U.S. reliance on fossil fuels, and rolling back the Climate Action Plan and the Paris Climate Agreement, but also preventing transformative visions from gaining power.

New York City has taken some steps against this unraveling. In New York City, the climate strike ended in lower Manhattan, the future site of the Big-U, one of the proposed initiatives to protect the area from sea-level rise. In April, New York City Council passed a set of bills called the Climate Mobilization Act that will require buildings to reduce emissions and improve energy efficiency. On Earth Day 2015, Mayor Bill de Blasio released OneNYC, a report that laid out his strategic vision for tackling climate change in the city, which aimed to align the city with the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals. However, as many of the authors in this issue argue, these actions are limited in scope, not truly equitable, missing environmental justice indicators, and rely on the city’s continuous growth. As Margaret Attword states in the title of the article that inspired this year’s theme, “it’s not climate change, it’s everything change.” We need to focus on the underlying systemic causes of the climate crisis that is upon us right now.

This issue of the Urban Review focuses on the critical role today’s planners and policy-makers must play in developing responses, demands, and actions that tackle the root causes of the climate crisis. The articles within recognize the gaps in New York City’s current plans, spotlight bold visions and efforts of community groups that have been fighting for economic justice, highlight transformative solutions, and leave us with tough questions.

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Photo of coal tar on the surface of the Gowanus Canal. Coal tar at the bottom of the Gowanus Canal releases gases that rise to the surface and create oil-like sheens.

Courtesy of Gowanus Canal Conservancy (gowanuscanalconservancy.org)
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ON OCTOBER 23RD, 2019, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation issued a permit for development within the Graniteville Woods and Wetlands on Staten Island, despite the objections of environmental and community groups. The planned development would turn 18 acres of wetland forest into a BJ’s Wholesale Club, a gas station, and a nearly 1,000 car parking lot. Wetlands, of course, serve as a natural barrier against storm surges and other destructive elements of storms, and the residents of Graniteville explicitly credit these woods and wetlands with protecting their community during Hurricane Sandy.

The approval of the BJ’s project is just one of many bewildering planning decisions from a city and state that ostensibly believe in the science of climate change. In fact, New York City has taken great pride in branding itself as at the forefront of climate crisis response. Yet some of the city’s most bafflingly irrational decisions are couched within the very plans supposedly meant to combat or cope with climate change—such as Bloomberg’s PlaNYC, which contained both admirable goals for carbon emission reduction and an inexplicable prioritization of waterfront development.

If you were to ask Ashley Dawson, a professor at the CUNY Graduate Center and College of Staten Island specializing in postcolonial studies and environmental humanities, to explain all this irrational development, his response would be simple. Capitalism’s need for ceaseless growth incentivizes it, particularly when urban real estate is a primary sink for excess capital. This is precisely the state of affairs described in Dawson’s recent book, *Extreme Cities: The Peril and Promise of Urban Life in the Age of Climate Change*. The ‘extreme city’ is extreme in both its inequality and its vulnerability to climate change—and the former renders the possibilities of the latter even more deadly.

Since writing *Extreme Cities*, Dawson helped found the Climate Action Lab, which recently released, *A People’s Climate Plan for New York City*, aiming to solve the climate crisis and the inequality crisis at the same time. We sat down with Dawson to discuss urban inequality and its relationship to the dangers of climate change, as well as democratic planning and its potential for resolving both.

Interview with Ashley Dawson

Author of *Extreme Cities: The Peril and Promise of Urban Life in the Age of Climate Change*
URBAN REVIEW: So to get started, how have your academic roots and other experiences influenced you to write *Extreme Cities*?

ASHLEY DAWSON: Postcolonial studies, that’s my primary disciplinary formation. Given the struggles of contemporary Global South nations and the ways in which global inequalities have played out particularly over the last half-century, it’s only natural to think about climate change. The countries that were colonized are both least responsible for climate change in terms of per capita as well as aggregate carbon emissions, but they are also already suffering the worst impacts. Of course, they have the fewest economic resources to cope with climate chaos as a result of all of the things that have hit them since they became independent, including neoliberalism and structural adjustment.

The other strand that influenced me in writing the book is my history as an activist based here in New York City, which is blessed with a profusion of environmental justice organizations rooted in different neighborhoods. Unfortunately, they come out of histories of environmental injustice that go back many, many decades. But there’s been such incredible organizing in low-income, predominantly people of color communities, work that has produced organizations like UPROSE in Brooklyn and The Point in the Bronx. The perspectives of those organizations had a shaping impact on what I had to say in *Extreme Cities*.

The last important thread which shaped *Extreme Cities* was the time I spent around folks like David Harvey, Neil Smith, and Cindi Katz at the Graduate Center. Their work in radical geography and uneven and unjust forms of urbanization influenced me a lot: I wanted to think those issues through in relation to climate justice and the impact of climate chaos and uneven geographies on cities around the world.

UR: How does extreme inequality contribute to vulnerability to climate chaos?

AD: If you were in New York City during the heatwave last July, then I’m sure you remember how unbearably hot it was, and you may also recall that ConEd shut down power to parts of the city. It came out subsequently that ConEd chose to cut power to some of the most heat-vulnerable communities in the city. I’m part of the Public Power New York City campaign, which has been building for the last year, and it got a big push because of the outrage that resulted from what was clearly a racially
biased decision. In places like East New York, people are coping with histories of residential segregation and all sorts of urban inequality in the present, including heavy-handed policing and stop and frisk and criminalization. These communities lack trees, they don't have as much green space, and they have lower incomes and can't afford to pay to run their air conditioners all the time. So residents are extremely vulnerable to all sorts of forms of climate change. Heat is the most tangible, and at the moment, the most deadly form of climate change. The blackout shows how these issues of urban social and economic inequality are going to interact with extreme weather in a way that is deadly to large numbers of people.

**UR:** What contradictions do you see between how capitalism functions in contemporary cities and the possibility of sustainable urban planning?

**AD:** Rich people have been making money hand-over-fist for the last few decades. That money has to be stashed somewhere, and the two prime places they’re putting it are the stock market and urban real estate.

We’ve seen in recent decades this massive speculative bubble in urban real estate in New York City and many other cities around the world. That has been facilitated by planning policies. Under Mayor Bloomberg, nearly a third of the city was rezoned, and that allowed developers to put up massive amounts of new buildings. All of that was touted as good for the city in “green plans” for New York since it was supposed to relieve the housing crisis. But the affordable housing we were promised never materialized. Rezoning and development were an explicit part of PlaNYC, Mayor Bloomberg’s plan for coping with climate change. This plan admittedly had some good provisions, like planting a million trees and creating lots of bike lanes. But the progressive elements of the plan also came with what was a really destructive thing: essentially opening up the coastal areas of New York City to a completely irrational form of development. And New York City is not alone. All around the world, you see construction going on in places that shouldn’t be developed, and it is all driven by the contradictions of a capitalist system bent on ceaseless growth on a limited terrestrial resource base.

**UR:** What strategies and incentives are needed to combat irrational, high-risk urban development?

**AD:** We need to end the rule of capital over the city. Otherwise, the profit motive will keep putting people in harm’s way. In the book, I talk about some of the interesting proposals being put forward, such as the Rebuild by Design initiative in New York City, which has since expanded to other cities. There’s a lot of exciting work being done in architecture, for instance, the work of Kate Orff and her Scape Studio, which is predicated on working with natural systems to create flood-absorbent buffers around low-lying parts of cities. What I find going through many such proposals though, is that, all too often, architecture, and to a certain extent urban planning, doesn’t look at the urban crisis in broad enough terms and is not thinking critically enough about the underlying political economy that is driving ecocidal urbanism. These disciplines are constituted in relation to relatively limited geographical scales, which means the knowledge they produce and their responses to climate change are radically limited.

The other problem is the limited time scales that many institutions have. Politicians think about the electoral cycle of two to four years. Most scientists are thinking about projections up to 2100, which, if you think about it, is really arbitrary. The disciplinary orientations toward space and time come with very specific limits that prevent us from thinking about the consequences of what we’re doing.

Urban planners should be thinking of the city as a whole, and they need to choose sides politically. The question I’ve been working with recently is how urban planning might be responsive to grassroots plans for adapting cities to climate change, which always has an anti-capitalist component since capital is driving irrational development.

**UR:** How would you respond to the notion of “resilience” that predominates much of the current conversation around sustainability planning?

**AD:** The discourse around what to do about climate change runs the danger of making people feel disempowered. When you start looking at the science, as I did, you cannot help feeling overwhelmed and depressed. By contrast, the discourse of resilience gives people a sense of hope, and it often gets used by politicians and cultural institutions to attract people and mobilize people’s hopes for the future. To go back to the previous instance that I gave, Bloomberg’s PlaNYC had elements that gave people a sense of possibility, but ultimately I would argue, it was about a process of competitive city branding.

New York City had to have its PlaNYC, so it could be the first city in the US with a plan for how to cope with climate change. It became part of a capitalist inter-urban, inter-imperial, competitive branding war. Cultural
institutions like museums play that game too. The discourse of resilience can give people hope, and it catches on a lot, and of course, it’s proliferated across multiple different discourses. Everyone wants to be resilient, from people working on urban planning in the face of climate change all the way to Wall Street bond traders and folks in the Department of Defense. That’s part of my criticism of it— it’s proliferated so much that it’s become meaningless. The way it’s become popularized means we’re going to be able to endure whatever is thrown at us, and we as individuals have a responsibility to make ourselves resilient. It just dovetails with neoliberal austerity and with the failure to hold the state to account and make transformational change.

UR: What would a just and democratic relocation program in New York City look like? How can community groups gain power within the planning process?

AD: I’ve recently been working on The People’s Climate Plan for New York City with the Climate Action Lab. Our idea was that what New York City needs is a grassroots-led climate action planning process. We already have a lot of top-down planning. The city has issued various different plans—Bloomberg’s PlaNYC, De Blasio’s OneNYC. What we would like to see is a grassroots planning process that is based in particular communities around the city, that draws on those communities’ wishes, desires, and knowledge of the challenges that they face, and that then provides resources to implement those kinds of plans.

Our argument was that CUNY should be absolutely central to this, because we have campuses all around the city, and they could become hubs for popular planning. They could provide the resources to engage the community and to do research on the struggles communities face in relation to climate change. CUNY campuses could organize community forums, and they have the physical infrastructure to start implementing some of these things: campuses could serve as cooling points during heat waves, and could also set up solar and wind power plants to generate power for the surrounding neighborhoods.

A conversation about retreat would have to come out of that kind of radically democratic planning process. The key thing to do would be to have a process that really engages communities and gives them a sense of buy-in. The actual planning process would have to draw communities in, giving them a sense that they were being empowered by this whole process rather than just being told what to do, marginalized, and displaced by a bunch of bureaucrats.

Perhaps this all sounds utopian, but it’s worth remembering that we’re getting a world of radical transformation whether or not we want it, because the seas are rising. The question is not whether we respond, but HOW we respond.

Over the last year, we’ve seen social movements in New York City push for a lot of policies and get some successes like the Climate Mobilization Act. And organizations like UPROSE are fighting to form solar cooperatives, putting solar panels on top of the Brooklyn Army Terminal because a lot of people in the co-op are renters and can’t afford to own property in Sunset Park. This means that they have to make political claims on local state power.

We have to fight to take over and mobilize the parts of the state that reflect historical struggles or can be pried loose from the more violent, reactionary wings - like the military-industrial complex. But we cannot forget that part is always there and that we always have to struggle against it. That’s really important to keep in mind going forward as we plan for a Green New Deal and a massive ecological reconstruction and the kind of social mobilization which is going to make that happen.

UR: What are the biggest priorities in terms of policies and planning in New York City? What sort of structural changes do you see as necessary to even begin to enact truly sustainable policies?

AD: Public power is the most important one. As the IPCC has said, we need to decarbonize the grid in the next decade, or the planet is going to become uninhabitable. In local terms, this means that we absolutely have to take the grid out of the hands of ConEd, which continues to be an obstacle to shifting away from fossil fuels. The shift to renewable energy should be part of a city-wide industrial, economic, and social transformation plan that includes sweeping efficiency measures. How can we have energy efficiency and the creation of zero-carbon housing stock rolled out in a way that is socially just? How is the city going to plan that? We face such challenges and obstacles, and it is clear that the dominant idea that the market is going to solve all our problems is bunk. Even though we currently have a mayor who was elected on a social movement platform of diminishing inequality in the city, he has continued to rezone the city, and he has supported the ridiculous development of Hudson Yards. The real estate interests, the developers, and big capital are still running the show in the city, so there has to be much
more mobilization if we are going to win the kind of transition I’m talking about.

On a broad level, we need non-reformist reforms, to quote Rosa Luxemburg. The danger of a lot of the kinds of reforms that we were talking about previously in relation to architectural plans or urban plans is that they ultimately dovetail with neoliberalism. The LEED-certified buildings being put up in Hudson Yards right now are an example: the place is in a flood zone! Hudson Yards is the dream of New York elites: they’ve been trying to make it happen since the 1970s. It’s been massively supported with billions of dollars from the city’s coffers. Meanwhile, we’re hiring more and more police to be in the subway stations to crack down on fare evaders. It’s enough to cite those two extremes to get a sense of the orientation of political power in the city despite the mobilization of social movements. We need to make sure that whatever reforms we put in place are very aware of that larger political economy, and fight like hell to make sure that they are pushing toward genuine transformation.

UR: What general advice would you give to students pursuing urban planning and policy in the era of extreme cities?

AD: Go for it! It’s such an incredibly important moment for radicals to be engaged in these struggles, and it’s good that people are going into this profession. We need to recapture a sense of the city as a site of radical solidarities and social possibilities. Against the tradition of top-down, technocratic urban planning, we need to lift up alternative traditions, the kind of community-based plans which inspired the People’s Climate Plan for New York City.

In terms of concrete advice to students in Urban Planning and Policy, I would say remember those plans, connect to social movements, amplify the voices of the ordinary people of this city, and think about how people on the front lines of climate change in urban settings are the best experts to consult in current and future struggles for the right to a better city.

Notes


4 Ibid.

Planners for a Green New Deal
Planning for Decarbonization

The Green New Deal is one of the first responses that begin to address the climate emergency at the scale that is needed. Building on the work of the grassroots environmental justice movement and bringing together economic, environmental, and racial justice concerns, it provides a progressive vision and calls to action for rapid decarbonization while advancing a more equitable future for all of us. As formulated by groups like the New Consensus, it proposes mobilizing massive federal resources to address the climate crisis and the inequality crisis together, ensuring a just transition by linking decarbonization to a jobs guarantee and a public spending program. Within our current political and economic context, this proposal represents a dramatic break and upending of the neoliberal status quo. To effectively take on these vested and powerful interests will require new tools, narratives, and models of (re)distribution and planning.

While a Green New Deal demands a fundamental transformation in our policies and economy, the physical environment occupies an important, interconnected, and often overlooked point of intervention. Decarbonization needs to be materialized in the infrastructures of our everyday lives. The move toward decarbonization must be leveraged as part of a larger process that ultimately redefines and reclaims the substance of “the public.” Central to this transformation are the principles and practices of democratization, decommodification, and decolonization. Focusing on the built environment provides an opportunity for embedding and embodying systemic transformations across sectors on a collective scale. It opens up new possibilities and strategies for collectively reorganizing society. However, this process demands that those working with(in) the built environment break from the limits and rationale of the current neoliberal status quo and radically reconceptualize and reorient our practices of planning. From the current dominance of growth-fueled, profit-driven urban development, we need to prioritize and invest in the building blocks of collective low carbon living and redistribution of resources through our built environment based on social needs. There are vital things to learn from the people and projects already articulating, advocating, and enacting these principles and practices.

We need a Green New Deal for planning

The science is clear: to reduce the most catastrophic impacts of climate change, we need drastic and immediate action to cut emissions and radically decarbonize. As stated by the 2018 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report, “limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees would require rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society” including land, energy, industry, buildings, transportation and especially how these elements meet and overlap. As Naomi Klein writes, addressing climate change will require “changing everything.” Cities provide tangible and demonstrable scale to imagine the “concrete” and transformative dimensions of these changes. Yet — as someone studying urban planning — the scale and necessity of this reality seem almost entirely missing from our current models of planning. With the threat of human extinction looming on the horizon, where are the planners and, perhaps most importantly, the models of planning that respond — and plan — accordingly?

Planning can be understood as a method of allocating
Image from Common Wealth’s ‘Green New Deal City of 2030’, part of their ‘Roadmap to a Green New Deal’ series
limited resources. Too often, this means compromising between various needs to steward increased property values. As Sam Stein writes, “A planner’s mission is to imagine a better world, but their day-to-day work involves producing a more profitable one.” Yet the value of urban planning is that it can take a comprehensive perspective of the workings of our everyday lives and of our cities. For the Green New Deal, planning provides a lens to see policies and projects spatialized and to leverage the strategic opportunities of “place” and the built environment, particularly as a medium of building and anchoring community wealth. In turn, the framework and coalition of the Green New Deal provide urban planners a must needed chance to advance a real model of sustainability and equity that is necessary for a habitable collective future.

Planning is a tool. It is concerned with the material dimensions of our cities, the often invisible infrastructures and processes that undergird our everyday life. Too often, it is a tool for the consolidation of power and resources, cementing segregation and reinforcing inequality while ensuring the smooth functioning of capital and extraction of profits. Planning has led to deep spatial and environmental inequities, particularly along racial lines — from poisoned drinking water and increased asthma rates to staggering wealth gaps and growing pressures of gentrification and displacement. Unless confronted head-on, climate change will continue to perpetuate and exacerbate inequalities as “a crisis of unevenly experienced and systemic injustices.”

In the current paradigm, economic growth defines social well-being, and typically corresponding environmental impacts. This model serves to filter profit to the top rather than build collective wealth from the ground up. Investments occur where private profit can be easily captured, not where social benefits are widely distributed. As NESRI writes, “Our economy, democracy, and climate have been warped by the concentration of wealth in a few hands driven by policies that fuel speculation rather than generating the infrastructure, goods, and services that families and neighborhoods need to thrive.” To confront this, planners must break from the confines of the neoliberal model and firmly assert the core principles that should uphold our shared prosperity: people over profit. Everyone deserves clean air, water, and an environment that supports their personal and community well-being, not just those that can pay for the privilege.

In a landscape shaped by centuries of exploitation and extraction, any change must be redistributive and realized materially in the world around us. To ensure a sustainable and equitable future for all of us, we need to advance a model and practice of planning based on the equitable (re)distribution of resources and regulating the built environment to meet people’s real needs. As a society, we need to invest in public infrastructure, goods, and services that provide the foundation for our basic human rights and shared prosperity. At its heart, this must be a process that connects to a reclaiming and democratizing of “the public.”

Planning for Decarbonization: A Framework

Like the framework provided by the Green New Deal, planning practices must recognize how inequality and climate crisis are deeply intertwined. As Naomi Klein writes, the climate emergency “demands collective action on an unprecedented scale and a dramatic reining in of the market forces that are largely responsible for creating and deepening the crisis.” The New York Renews coalition notes, “We believe that fighting climate change requires that we center values of justice and equity, both as an ethical imperative and strategic advantage.” Decarbonization is a scientific necessity, but recognizing the deeper underlying issues of the climate crisis requires the moral and political necessity of a more comprehensive and interrelated project of democratization, decommodification, and decolonization. Without confronting these broader forces at play, we will continue to perpetuate the same systems of extraction and crisis. These dynamics can be seen concretely at the scale of the city.

Urban sustainability, narrowly associated with green infrastructure projects like LEED certification or greening the city, fails to address the true potential and paradoxes of creating a more sustainable city. Too often, making sustainability improvements in neighborhood conditions leads to gentrification and displacement. Landlords capitalize on rising rents, and low-income tenants are forced out, despite their contributions to improving their neighborhoods. In a world where real estate dominates, property owners can effectively capture and privatize the social value of the city and any public investments that are made through their increasing property prices. This arrangement is a central paradox of planning for public benefit when “the return on urban land privatizes the value generated by public goods (policing, roads, sewers, transit, and education) and social goods (urban scenes, street culture, neighborhood effects).” This contradiction points to the necessity of “democratizing the green city”
and explicitly linking social justice concerns in any form of public investment.

As Daniel Aldana Cohen writes about, urban sustainability projects can more accurately be seen along axes of green to gray and democratic (public/collective) to luxury (private/individual). These axes represent, for example, the differences between public parks and private green space and public transportation and electric cars as forms of green and gray sustainable infrastructure. While private projects that focus on individual consumers, such as LEED-certified luxury apartment buildings or electric cars, are often heralded as cutting edge sustainability, the actual impacts rarely take into account critical questions of scale and scope, not to mention the carbon-intensive lifestyles and consumption patterns of the urban elite. Public sustainability projects can be recognized as green infrastructure projects like habitat restoration, but by and large, are overlooked as forms of gray infrastructure that provide an important foundation of urban sustainability. While less glamorous and sorely under-resourced, dense public housing with access to public transit provides its residents with some of the lowest carbon footprints in the city.11 Taking a more holistic view of urban sustainability illustrates the often overlooked potential of gray and public forms of infrastructure as the building blocks of a truly low carbon environment on a collective scale. It also widens the coalition of groups involved. As Cohen points out, “Housing and labor groups are also low-carbon champions, even if they say little about it.” 12

The city provides a model of collective infrastructure and collective social reproduction that can create impacts at scale. As Margaret Kohn theorizes, the city is a commonwealth, “a concentration of value created by past generations and current residents which everyone has a stake in.” Yet, this social value of the city conflicts with the profit interests of private property owners. Mike Davis calls the “cornerstone of the low-carbon city...the priority given to public affluence over private wealth.”14 Urban planning has a role to play in centering democratic values at the collective scale, especially as it deals with infrastructure and the institutions that we rely on in our everyday life. Investing in and democratizing the “public” is central: “Building public affluence — goods and services that are universal, foundational, decommodified — can reorient the economy toward focusing on the creation of universal forms of security and capability.”15 This
foundation aligns the struggles for the right to the city, especially around the core pillars of shared city life, with that of a low carbon urbanism. As Cohen notes, “It’s by expanding collective consumption — in housing, transit, services, and leisure — that we can democratize and decarbonize urban life.”

Decarbonization necessitates a conceptual reorientation for planners that radically reimagines the functioning of our cities. Decarbonization will require a massive transformation in our built environment and everyday life. We must invest in the infrastructure — both social and physical — that is critical to support and ensure this transition. Rebuilding, expanding and democratizing our public infrastructure—from schools and libraries to swimming pools and housing, to solar and energy grids — provides not only thousands of new jobs, but also represents the building blocks for a low-carbon, high quality of life that is accessible and meets the needs of everyone, but particularly those most marginalized and vulnerable. By embracing and leveraging the framework of the urban commons, we can advance a transformative model of decarbonization.

The GND Realized: Remaking the Public

The Green New Deal does not begin or end with legislation; people are already doing the work of the Green New Deal. Grassroots environmental justice projects like the Northern Manhattan Community Action Plan and community solar in Sunset Park are confronting the extractive economy and advancing alternatives that build community power. Municipal efforts across the world have mobilized inside and outside strategies, serving as an example of possible political alternatives that democratize institutions, putting people & the commons at the center of the political agenda, changing the current political culture & thereby fostering real systemic change in politics. Building on this, the Green New Deal represents a mobilizing framework that unites these kinds of projects to reach a whole new scale, demanding new forms of institutions and partnerships.

Efforts in the UK have laid out what a “Green New Deal City of 2030” could look like, breaking down and connecting efforts across sectors from energy systems to finance systems, transit to workplaces, and housing. Framed within a transformative vision of society and a reassessment of the very social and economic fabric of the city, the project reflects: “In the place of private accumulation, we began to focus on shared public affluence and new ways of stewarding, nurturing and caring for life.” The framework laid out by the We Make This City campaign, which connects unions and environmental justice groups across the country, is a similar model of this at the scale of our everyday built environment. Their campaign website states, “We are fighting for community-controlled, public infrastructure that builds community wealth and health and puts power into the hands of the people who live and work in our communities.”

These place-based efforts illustrate the connections between the social and built environment. They address the underlying issues of unequal power in our society and reclaim everyday infrastructures as part of a broader project of remaking the public and democracy. Centering community health and wealth, these projects model infrastructures at the collective scale that provide a tangible basis for reimagining and implementing the building blocks of a low carbon society that allows for real human flourishing. Drawing from and building upon these examples, the following core principles that should be at the heart of planning for transformative decarbonization and an equitable low carbon future:

- Redistribute resources to prioritize community health and wealth, not corporate profit.
- Collectivize resources to unleash new forms of cooperation and shared abundance beyond the scale of just the individual.
- Invest in our public (social) infrastructure to meet people's needs and essential human rights, advancing a model of “universal basic services” as a fundamental right to the city.
- Address historical and ongoing injustices and center the most vulnerable and marginalized as core and defining members of the public.

Call to action for planners

The Green New Deal is perhaps most important as a call to action — a statement that a better future is possible and a rallying cry to make it happen. As we face the continued acceleration of inequality & the limits of the free market inadequately serving the needs of the most vulnerable Americans, as well as the environmental imperative of addressing climate change, we need to urgently reorient and reimagine the practices of planning. Planners should leverage the strategic opportunities of the built environment, particularly in redistributing, collectivizing, and anchoring community wealth, to provide
the grounding for a low carbon urban commons. Through considering how societal transformation, particularly decarbonization, can take place concretely within our cities, we can open up new possibilities and imagine alternatives that represent real opportunities to reorganize our everyday life and address historic and ongoing spatial inequities. We need to build from the bottom up and the top down to reshape our priorities, institutions, and distribution of resources. More broadly, decarbonization, as intertwined with a larger project of democratization, decommodification, and decolonization, provides us the opportunity to rearticulate what cities are for, how they function, and whom they serve.

Notes


6 Naomi Klein, This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate, (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2015), 41


12 Ibid.


Contesting Neoliberal Climate Resilience
Toward Community-Driven Climate Resilience Planning

K.C. Alvey

OVER SEVEN YEARS AFTER SUPERSTORM SANDY WREAKED HAVOC UPON NEW YORK CITY, significant swaths of the city remain unprepared for future storms. Mayor Bill de Blasio recently announced a controversial $10 billion climate adaptation plan that would extend lower Manhattan’s shoreline 500 feet into the East River, in order to protect the city’s financial center and critical infrastructure. However, many low-income communities of color in other parts of the city face disproportionate impacts from climate change and environmental injustice, such as extreme heat, flooding, air pollution, and limited access to green space. The politics of climate adaptation raise fundamental questions about “distributional and procedural justice.” Environmental justice advocates are calling for a comprehensive climate resiliency plan that protects vulnerable communities citywide.

This piece examines the divergent ways that “climate resilience” is framed in the current urban development paradigm by elected officials, city planners, academics, and environmental justice advocates. In addition, this piece evaluates varying approaches to climate resilience planning, such as New York City’s Lower Manhattan Coastal Resiliency Project and WE ACT for Environmental Justice’s Northern Manhattan Climate Action Plan, contrasting neoliberal development with community-driven, equitable development. Ultimately, how we define and understand climate resilience dictates how we respond to the climate crisis, and whether adaptation strategies will address - or exacerbate - structural inequalities.

Diverging definitions of “climate resilience”

As a result of the Trump administration’s rollbacks of major environmental protections and the decision to formally withdraw the United States from the Paris climate agreement, many people are looking to local and state governments to demonstrate leadership on climate change. In addition to calls for greenhouse gas mitigation, there are growing calls for adaptation measures to prepare communities for anticipated climate impacts. The concept of “climate resilience” is increasingly popular in urban policy discourse. Networks of local elected officials have emerged around a framework of urban climate resilience, including the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, Climate Mayors, and Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI). While definitions of climate resilience vary across disciplines, they often include a “generic capacity to deal with climate impacts and disturbances.” For example, one academic definition of urban climate resilience from Henstra (2012) highlights “...the capacity to withstand climate change stresses, to respond effectively to climate-related hazards, and to recover quickly from residual negative impacts.”

Researchers have noted discrepancies between definitions of “climate resilience” by different actors.

One distinguishing element is the “...extent to which the definitions incorporate change, as opposed to resistance or recovery.” Engineering-based definitions of climate resilience focus on “bouncing back” to a former state of equilibrium after a disturbance. In contrast, ecological-based definitions emphasize “bouncing forward” to altered systems, recognizing that “...it is not always possible or desirable to return to previous conditions.” Scholars have also categorized these definitions as either “physical-infrastructural” or “social-institutional” approaches to climate adaptation. For example, elected officials, planners, and developers tend to narrowly frame climate resilience as engineering and design measures to protect...
WE ACT marchers outside of NYC City Hall during the Climate Strike on September 20, 2019

Photo by WE ACT for Environmental Justice (weact.org)
physical infrastructure from the impacts of climate change. However, environmental and climate justice advocates often promote a more holistic vision of community-driven climate resilience centered on principles of social equity and community participation. The “lack of a unified understanding of resilience” has made it challenging for practitioners to “operationalize the concept.”

Globally, climate change disproportionately impacts marginalized communities that have contributed the least to greenhouse gas emissions and are the least prepared for climate risks. Climate vulnerabilities stem from structural inequalities that are a result of “existing patterns of development.” Low-income people are more likely to live in “informal settlements, public housing, or hazardous and high-risk locations,” suffer from chronic health conditions, and have fewer resources to recover from natural disasters. “Socially vulnerable groups” often need specific attention and support in “addressing the compound effects of multiple vulnerabilities.” Some definitions of climate resilience, therefore, prioritize building social resilience in order to ensure that low-income communities of color are better able to cope with and recover from the impacts of climate change. For example, the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance (NYC-EJA) distinguishes its understanding of climate resilience, explaining that “bouncing back to inequitable systems that disproportionately affect people of color is unacceptable. For true resiliency to exist, we must ‘bounce forward’ to systems that place equity and social justice at their core.”

Climate adaptation as a field of struggle

Given that climate change exacerbates existing inequalities, underlying power dynamics can turn climate adaptation projects into “flashpoint[s] for competing interests.” Scholars and advocates have critiqued definitions of climate resilience that “fail to address issues of equity,” arguing that we must ask “resilience for whom?” There are key distributional and procedural questions surrounding climate adaptation projects, given the constraints of “scarce public resources.” Climate resilience initiatives have the potential to either deepen inequalities or address them. “Maladaptive strategies” further “entrench unequal power distribution by taking advantage of disasters to relocate disadvantaged populations from urban centres” and can result in the failure to protect historically marginalized communities. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has warned that climate adaptation strategies “...carry risks of disrupted livelihoods, displaced populations, deterioration of valued cultural expressions and practices, and in some cases violent conflict.”

With the rise of white supremacy, xenophobia, and right-wing nationalism in many parts of the world, author and activist Naomi Klein similarly cautions that we are witnessing the beginnings of an “era of climate barbarism.” Researchers have found that over 300 million people live in coastal cities worldwide that are projected to be impacted by sea-level rise by 2050. As the number of climate refugees grows, Klein argues that we need policies to “make our societies more humane,” rather than responding to climate change by “fortressing our borders.” Scholars have also described how climate adaptation measures could result in “ecological enclaves,” which are promoted as “climate-safe zones but exclude and displace marginalized populations.” Elected officials often undertake climate adaptation projects as “strategic decisions to protect existing centres of global investment, economic growth and infrastructure expansion,” rather than based upon environmental and social equity considerations.

Therefore, meaningful community participation in decision-making about climate adaptation strategies is crucial for ensuring more equitable outcomes. Environmental and climate justice advocates call for “participatory processes” in which residents of marginalized communities identify the “complex challenges they face” and policy solutions that address their unique assets and needs. An emerging framework of “community-driven resilience planning” emphasizes the need for vulnerable communities to actively shape and implement measures that will “prepare them to survive and thrive” in the face of climate change.

Climate resilience in New York City

In the context of New York City, the most populous city in the United States with 520 miles of shoreline, critical questions remain about how to define and evaluate climate resilience measures, particularly in waterfront areas. New York City has already felt the devastating impacts of climate change-intensified storms, with 44 deaths and at least $19 billion in economic damage from Superstorm Sandy in October 2012. By the end of the century, New York City is projected to see another four to six feet of sea-level rise along the coastline, which would put “more than 800,000 people at risk from major storms that will likely become more frequent.” The New York City Panel
on Climate Change has predicted a worst-case scenario of up to nine feet of sea-level rise by 2100, “if the Antarctic ice sheet melts more quickly,” which would permanently inundate entire areas of the city, including Coney Island and large portions of Long Island City and East Harlem. In parts of New York City, temperatures could rise by eight degrees Fahrenheit and precipitation could increase by 13 percent, contributing to increased heat waves and storm surges by 2100.

Despite growing vulnerabilities to climate change, new waterfront construction continues at a “breakneck pace” in New York City, leading some to believe that Mayor de Blasio’s housing plan and climate resilience measures are on a “collision course.” There are increased calls among scientists and advocates to return more waterfront areas of New York City to wetlands and open space, which can “help absorb storm surges when they hit.” In the Fourth Regional Plan, released in 2017, the Regional Plan Association called for a “moratorium on new development in flood-prone areas by 2020” and for long-term adaptation planning over the coming decades, including “buyout programs” and managed retreat from sensitive areas. However, the City “is showing no interest in pulling back from the water’s edge.” In the dominant neoliberal paradigm, planners and developers often aim to stimulate land value through upzoning formerly industrial areas along the waterfront, claiming the ecological benefits of new, luxury developments. However, the risks of increasing density in these flood zones are often overlooked.

Mayor Bill de Blasio has claimed that his administration is committed to climate adaptation, highlighting a $20 billion “multi-layered resilience strategy citywide,” coordinated by the Mayor’s Office of Recovery and Resiliency. It is challenging to assess how much of this money has been spent or “allocated by city, state, or federal sources,” given that this funding is distributed between various agencies. The City’s approach to climate resilience is primarily centered on engineering and design strategies to ensure that buildings and streets can withstand flooding, rather than a deep commitment to social equity. Jainey Bavishi, Director of the Office of Recovery and Resiliency, says that resilience measures have focused on “upgrading buildings and the building code, outreach and education around flood insurance, hardening infrastructure, protecting coastline, and ‘investing in neighborhoods’ to promote ‘social cohesion.’” A limit of the City’s current approach is that “zoning proposals can only affect new development and renovations,” which could leave neighborhoods with a “mix of resilient new buildings and flood-prone older ones.”

The NYC-EJA has raised concerns about “inequitable investments for coastal protection.” Lower Manhattan, particularly the Financial District, has received a significant amount of the administration’s attention and funding at the expense of other parts of the city. NYC-EJA’s City Climate Justice Agenda has called for the de Blasio administration to focus on protecting vulnerable Significant Maritime and Industrial Areas (SMIAs) that are primarily located in low-income communities of color along the waterfront. Environmental and climate justice advocates have also challenged the top-down nature of the de Blasio administration’s decision-making, which NYC-EJA argues has often “minimized the concerns of community residents and stakeholders.”

An essential question remains: “How does the city enforce waterfront protections for all when some of it is home to billions of dollars of real estate, infrastructure and investment, and elsewhere it has been neglected for decades?”

The current context

The struggle between competing conceptions of climate resilience continues to play out today, exemplified by New York City’s Lower Manhattan Coastal Resiliency Plan and WE ACT for Environmental Justice’s Northern Manhattan Climate Action Plan. The stark contrasts between these two plans demonstrate the diverging approaches to climate resilience - one rooted in a neoliberal development paradigm and the other centered on principles of equity and community participation.

In March 2019, Mayor de Blasio announced a dramatic plan to protect Lower Manhattan from rising seas by extending the waterfront 500 feet into the East River as part of the City’s Lower Manhattan Coastal Resiliency Plan. Mayor de Blasio has billed this $10 billion proposal to protect the “financial capital of the United States” as a Green New Deal for New York City, despite little consideration of social equity. Citing the area’s low-lying topography and important infrastructure, the de Blasio administration has argued that it is necessary to create another two city blocks’ worth of land surrounding the Financial District and South Street Seaport. While sources of funding have not yet been determined, Mayor de Blasio has acknowledged that private funding may be needed and that it would influence the nature of the
project, stating, “If there’s not federal money in play, we have to get some private money into it and there has to be some development.”

In an extreme extension of a neoliberal logic that privileges the free market, the City has suggested allowing for new development on the constructed landfill in order to fund the project. The City’s plan highlights the potential for this “new land” to be “partially financed through development, maximizing the integration of public-private resources and providing a critical source for implementation.” At a time when many scientists and advocates are calling for the restoration of open space in flood-prone coastal areas, and when nearly one in four luxury apartments citywide are unsold, such a strategy of relying on new waterfront development to finance climate resilience measures appears reckless and short-sighted. This neoliberal approach to climate adaptation will likely have the perverse impact of putting more people and infrastructure at increased risk of storm surges and sea-level rise while draining limited public resources.

In contrast, WE ACT for Environmental Justice’s Northern Manhattan Climate Action Plan (NMCA), released in 2015, articulates a visionary approach to climate resilience that is focused on addressing “systemic inequality.” The NMCA Plan aims to build social resilience and advance equity for low-income communities of color in Northern Manhattan. The plan outlines strategies for “energy democracy, emergency preparedness, social hubs, and greater participation in local governance.” Through a months-long community-based planning process that included seven public workshops, WE ACT for Environmental Justice engaged hundreds of local residents, partner organizations, and city agencies in creating the NMCA Plan. Facilitated by urban planner Aurash Khawarzad, the process included “scenario-planning techniques” to assess potential risks, along with community capacities to address these threats. Importantly, the NMCA Plan links the fight for climate justice with the fight against gentrification, arguing that “true victory in the climate struggle is not simply based on the preservation of physical conditions, but also on the achievement of lasting security for communities that are now under threat of displacement.”

Climate justice advocates and scholars with the CUNY Climate Action Lab have also proposed mechanisms to replicate WE ACT for Environmental Justice’s community-
based model citywide, as described in their plan, A People’s Climate Action Plan for New York City.\textsuperscript{57} Recent calls by the NYC-EJA and Council Members Justin Brannan and Costa Constantinides for a comprehensive, five-borough climate resiliency plan demonstrate significant concerns about the City’s current approach to climate adaptation.\textsuperscript{58}

Given the growing support for climate action and the popularity of the Green New Deal at the national level, we must critically evaluate how “climate resilience” is framed. Questions about community participation and distributional justice are increasingly important in discussions about climate adaptation. The urgency of climate change demands a fundamental transformation of our approach to urban development. If we are to address the intersecting crises of our time meaningfully, planners and advocates must push for a paradigm shift away from top-down, neoliberal development to bottom-up, community-driven climate resilience planning that centers equity and sustainability.

Notes


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4 Ibid., 4.
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7 Ibid., 5.


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The Death & Life of a Great Bowery Street Tree

Its name was Pryus Calleryana, street name Callery Pear, and it had survived on the western edge of the Bowery for nearly 40 years. When it was a sapling, wild-haired punk rockers destined for CBGB zipped right past it. As the Liz Christy Community Garden took shape on the east side of the Bowery, its roots detected the cornucopia of new life that sprang up across the street. As this street tree grew and matured, the sounds of its rustling leaves mingled with multiple Chinese dialects spoken under its branches, as employees from the nearby kitchen supply stores took their breaks. And a few years into the new millennium, when my mother-in-law was ill from chemotherapy, she would sit on a hard metal folding chair — the kind too heavy to comfortably steal—under the shade of this tree, for as long as her fading body would allow.

In many ways, this Callery Pear’s development followed the common trajectory of a tree, but its narrative recontextualizes a tree’s value for city planners. This planted street tree survived decades of emissions from leaded gasoline, and the increased pollution as toll-shopping commercial trucks flooded lower Manhattan after the Verrazano Bridge’s one-way toll was implemented. This tree was adapted into a temporary bench and shelter by this decade’s expanding homeless population. And yet, due to climate change, this Callery Pear would not live to see the next decade.

As average temperatures rise and additional moisture enters the atmosphere, the death and life of this street tree exemplify the urgency for policymakers to update and improve upon how they value and care for city trees.

The trees of New York City are a part of its culture and history. Though their species differ from native trees of the past, city trees are a living testament to the forests that once were, and today are a vital provider of heat mitigation and clean air. In practice, city trees provide the only connection to nature that concrete-encased residents encounter on an everyday basis (pigeons notwithstanding). Yet climate change isn’t the only factor making it harder for trees to survive. The trees here are also threatened by outdated policy; several current redevelopment projects across the city call for the chopping down of mature, healthy trees. As climate change unfolds, it is time to update policies for the planning and treatment of the city’s 694,000 trees.
What compromises a neighborhood is far from self-evident according to William P. Hojnacki, who outlined neighborhood types based upon residential attitudes of neighborhood identification. In the early aughts, the Bowery was upzoned by city planners, a process detailed by Samuel Stein in *Zoned Out! Race, Displacement And City Planning In New York City.* Life was altered by the resulting development along this so-called skid row. Thereafter, hundreds of new residents and thousands more tourists would come to walk past this Bowery street tree. The area’s informal homeless population was left largely unaddressed. None of the development included give-backs to the community, such as public facilities, POPS (Privately Owned Public Spaces), or green space. As single-room-occupancy (SROs) establishments disappeared off the Bowery, and the numbers of homeless increased in the city overall, by the second decade of the new millennium street living adapted to include the trees.

In late 2017, temporary tree guards made of wood were erected around several street trees on the northern-most quadrant of the Bowery. The tree guards were intended to protect the street trees from the construction in the adjoining roadbed. Not long after, a small group of the Bowery’s informal homeless population moved in and adapted the tree guard around our Callery Pear into a bench. Day and night, they lived under the tree, with two, sometimes four individuals sitting on various parts of the tree guard.

Why this particular tree, when other nearby trees also featured temporary guards? The width between the upper and lower portions of this tree’s horizontally-laid beams of lumber was generously wide — it accommodated sitting where other tree guards did not.

These dwellers socialized in the ways associated with street living, a lived experience where shelter is temporary. In November 2018, an unknown person (a storeowner? a resident?) disassembled the whole tree guard. Subsequently, the informal homeless group splintered; two individuals tried to make a go of it by moving one tree guard north, although this one did not accommodate sitting. Yet the move out from under the Callery Pear may have saved their lives.

Days later, our Bowery street tree would have one of its thick limbs ripped off and crash to the ground below.

The climate is changing. Warmer ocean temperatures and higher sea levels intensify the impact of storms. One such storm dropped unexpected snow on the city on November 16, 2018. The city’s trees had not dropped their leaves. Unable to cope with the increased weight tree limbs crashed down. Our Bowery street tree’s plume of branches and leaves landed where the temporary tree guard, and its homeless dwellers, once resided.

As with many other trees around New York City, our street tree succumbed to a feature of climate
change: an unexpectedly fierce storm. Yet outdated policy surrounding our mature trees may have also played a role.

The day after the storm, outside on the Bowery, was eerily reminiscent of the damage to city trees following Superstorm Sandy several years earlier.

And then came the chainsaws.

For many weeks after the storm, city-owned or subcontractor-owned pickup trucks loaded with tools and chainsaws circled around the five boroughs. The air buzzed with the sound of gas-powered chainsaws, chopping down most any living tree that had suffered damage in the storm.

This carnage included the Callery Pear. First, its crown was cleaved off. Then, days later, its trunk was sawed through at its base, leaving an empty and exposed tree bed.

It should be noted that city agencies do not use the term “tree bed” to refer to these soil-filled sidewalk cutouts, but use instead the word “tree pit.”

After a living entity fought for life and occupied this small square space for 40 years, in 2018, this tree bed reverted back to what city agencies call it: a pit.

Cigarette butts, trash, and a discarded mannequin leg are now a part of the lived experience here as the city moves into the 2020s.

The narrative of this Bowery street tree exemplifies a life of value to its human cohabitants. It explains how each tree is an integral part of city life. Its death demonstrates how much more difficult life has become; storms increase in their ferociousness, and the climate changes more quickly than plants and creatures can respond and adapt. The birds, insects, and wildlife that use trees as their home vanish when trees disappear.

Yet policymakers seem rooted in the past, unwilling to adapt tree care to the massive changes befalling us. Collectively, city agencies continue to consider development proposals that include the wholesale destruction of healthy, mature city trees: one lush grove of trees outside of New York City Housing Authority’s Meltzer Tower and the four trees of the Elizabeth Street Garden (extremely rare jewels in lower Manhattan’s dense, polluted core); the 58 trees of Brooklyn’s Fort Greene Park; the 981 trees of East River Park. Whether the policy in question is about flood mitigation, park renovation, or housing expansion, policies need to be updated to help mature city trees endure and survive. Our city’s decision-makers need to adopt tree care policies that reflect conditions in the twenty-first century. Fortunately, there are many avenues for improved policies.
The Bowery’s Callery Pear was located inside of the Little Italy Special Purpose District (SPD). One goal of this zoned district, created by the City Planning Commission in 1977, revolves around providing and valuing street trees. Can planners harness this type of zoning as a tool for positive environmental impact? Perhaps SPD zoning could trigger a required assessment test of a tree’s chances of rehabilitation through trimming and pruning, instead of moving first to chop a mature tree down.

Remember the “L-pocalypose”? The planned complete closure of the L train tunnel was averted, and its rehabilitation is currently underway using innovations new to the rail industry in this country.

Emerging innovative practices are not merely the purview of transportation planning. The same thinking can be applied to mature trees and development projects. During the redevelopment of its property last decade, the Brooklyn Botanic Garden transplanted a mature tree. To create room for a new building, development efforts incorporated a continuation plan for the life of this mature, healthy tree, instead of taking a chainsaw to it.

The New York City Parks Department is responsible for city tree care. As its budget has shrunk over the years (this most recent year notwithstanding), published reports show that the city subcontracts out a significant amount of tree care and maintenance. As a result, tree damage is treated with a one-size-fits-all approach. Subcontractors, unlike formal park employees, are entities with little stake in the long term survival of a tree. On Minetta Lane, in Manhattan’s West Village, reports indicate that perfectly healthy trees were cut down by a subcontractor in August 2019. It is time for the city council to adequately fund the Parks Department’s budget so it can add more full-time arborists. A budget increase would allow the department to take back the tree care and maintenance that has been contracted out to other entities.

In these days of the sixth mass extinction, characterized by rising temperatures and rising rates of methane and carbon, the growth cycle of trees need to be recontextualized. Planted street tree policy should be updated so that all saplings are planted in tree beds that feature permanent tree guards—street trees need armor!

The life and death of this Bowery street tree is a wake-up call for city policymakers that our trees can no longer remain undervalued. The wanton destruction of mature trees should no longer be a matter of course; city planners should word RFPs to weigh other factors ahead of outright tree clearance, and tools and procedures should be updated so the growth of a city tree is tracked as an appreciating asset. The death and life of our trees are directly connected to the city and our survival.

Notes
The Case of Active Travel
Emphasizing Co-benefits in the Framing of Climate Policy

Reducing global transportation emissions is a key solution to solving the climate crisis—a result of the role that the transportation sector plays in contributing to the issue. The World Bank has reported that CO2 emissions from transportation fuel combustion produce roughly 23 percent of global carbon emissions. Overall, transportation is growing at an alarming rate. It is the fastest-growing consumer of fossil fuels and the fastest growing source of CO2 emissions.1

This trend is due in large part to the rapid urbanization of developing countries. Opportunities exist for low-carbon urban mobility to reduce emissions. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has stated that any reasonable chance of limiting global warming to 1.5°C will require “rapid and far-reaching transitions” in all aspects of society, from including in the transportation sector.2

Active travel (mainly walking and cycling) is a vital component of policies that seek to achieve a transition to low and zero-carbon transportation. In order to meet emissions reduction goals in developed and developing nations alike, climate policy must be framed to highlight co-benefits—improved human health alongside improved planetary health.

Policy initiatives designed for active travel, in a way that fosters improved human health and greater transportation equity, require a comprehensive approach. Two such model pedestrian plans, PedPDX: Portland’s Citywide Pedestrian Plan and London’s recently developed Walking Action Plan, are considered below. A third case study contemplates the recent air quality crisis in New Delhi, India. It serves as a cautionary example of how a transportation system centered on fuel-combustion, single-occupancy vehicles can be detrimental to both human health and economic productivity. These case studies are juxtaposed with New York City’s own active travel policies. By adopting a comprehensive approach to active travel, the City would have a better chance of meeting its own stated goals of reducing carbon emissions by 80 percent before 2050, as well as creating a more inclusive and equitable transportation network.3

Co-Benefits of Active Travel

Action aimed at climate change mitigation can produce additional positive effects, known as co-benefits. In this case, the primary goal is climate action through cutting transport emissions, with active travel being the transportation alternative under consideration. Two co-benefits of active travel are improved health through physical activity and increased social cohesion. From a public policy viewpoint, it is often desirable to find policy instruments to achieve multiple outcomes from a single action. The co-benefits approach can be especially useful in the context of developing countries, where resources allocated to tackle climate change are often limited.4 While principally aiming to address climate change mitigation concerns, the co-benefits frame can also address critical local problems, such as poor air quality. It provides a policy approach that helps to achieve pressing development and health goals alongside addressing climate change.

This ability of climate co-benefit policy proposals to consider multiple scales of action, from the global to the local, is important for garnering support from diverse stakeholders, from communities to individuals. Thus,
policies such as those that upgrade urban infrastructure to improve pedestrian and bike safety, through facilitating the increased walkability of neighborhoods, can create positive local change while also reducing carbon emissions.

In cities and suburban settings, active travel relies on specific urban form and design characteristics, such as supportive street infrastructure, transit accessibility, residential density, and intersection density. Without these elements, active transportation modes struggle to compete with cars, and physical activity is discouraged. Since the rise of the automobile in the developed world, active travel modes have been in decline. Decades of automobile-centric policies have failed to provide basic active travel infrastructure such as sidewalks, pedestrian ramps, and protected bike lanes. Even when this infrastructure is present, more often than not, vehicle transportation is still privileged.

Considering case studies from developing nations is especially important as a majority of future urban growth will come from those areas. By the year 2050, nearly “90 percent of the future urban population growth (2.5 billion people in total) will be concentrated in Asia and Africa.” Whether these cities choose to build active travel strategies into their urban form or follow the unsustainable path of private car ownership promoted in much of the West, will have a critical impact on the possibility of limiting global warming to below the 1.5°C threshold.

In Active Travel, there is Equity

The co-benefits of active travel also produce greater equity, another important consideration. A study on the public health benefits of reducing greenhouse-gas emissions noted, “much investment in major road projects does not meet the transport needs of poor people, especially women whose trips are primarily local and off road.” In response to such inequalities, the active travel policies of today must be developed with an intersectional perspective. This can effect a positive change in groups often forgotten by traditional and exclusionary urban development practices. For example, it has been argued that “lower-income households are also disproportionately affected by key negative externalities generated by transport.” These negative impacts include, but are not limited to, road accidents, air pollution, and displacement. Children are also particularly vulnerable to the most harmful elements of transportation emissions, as young people breathe at a higher rate and more air per pound of bodyweight than adults.

The consideration of equity when developing transportation policy also allows the reprioritization of modes under the active travel umbrella. While cycling has a key role to play in moving cities away from emissions-producing transportation modes (primarily because it allows for medium-distance car trips to be replaced), it is not a mode that is available to everyone. While the very young or very old might not have the ability to bike, almost everyone walks (with walking here understood to include the use of wheelchairs and other mobility aids).

The primacy of walking as a transportation mode can be seen in New York City where, in 2018, 30.7 percent of trips were walking trips, a higher percentage than for any other mode. For users of other modes, such as public transit, walking was also a vital component of the trip, with 96 percent of transit users walking to that transit. While New York City is unique in the North American context for its low rate of car ownership and high rate of walking, the model of supporting greater use of public transit through improving pedestrian infrastructure and connections to transit is the primary aim of many cities seeking to reduce transportation emissions. A recent C40 Cities report concluded that improved bus services with more extensive networks and connected pedestrian infrastructure would have the ability to “prevent the premature deaths of nearly 1 million people per year from air pollution and traffic fatalities worldwide,” as well as savings in emissions and commuters’ time.

Moving from considering co-benefits at a community-scale to quantifying co-benefits at the level of individual health, a 2012 study provides notable results. The health benefits of walking and cycling were ascribed a quantified monetary and health benefit, in line with World Health Organization guidelines. The value benefits of physical activity substantially outweigh the costs of air pollution and injury to the pedestrian (by at least an order of magnitude). The overall net benefits of switching to active travel are substantial, both for the individual and for the broader community in which that mode shift occurs.

Case Study 1: Model Pedestrian Policies in Portland, USA and London, UK

Over the last few decades, the City of Portland has attempted to balance livability, efficiency, and growth. In Portland, policies promoting compact urban growth have contributed to per-capita vehicle trips decreasing by 17 percent since 1990. Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions were also kept at 1990 levels, despite a 16 percent growth.
in population. While Portland’s urban growth boundary is central to these trends (increased urban density is an important factor in expanding active travel’s modal share), successive and comprehensive pedestrian master plans are also key.

This focus on walking has brought more than an improved quality of life; it has also had a positive economic impact. In the wider U.S. context, it has been noted that “doubling density within metropolitan regions in the U.S. can reduce vehicle-kilometers traveled by up to 25 percent while also concentrating employment.”17 Urban transport experts working in the ‘New Climate Economy’ project at the London School of Economics drew a similar conclusion. They projected that globally, measures to increase the modal share of walking and cycling would “expand GDP, total employment and employment in transport by 1.11 percent, 1.37 percent, and 4.14 percent respectively by 2030”.18

Portland’s pedestrian plan successfully takes an intersectional approach when considering barriers to active travel. The plan observes that in the city, inadequate pedestrian infrastructure and traffic safety concerns “disproportionately impact low-income communities and people of color, where housing cost-burdened Portlanders are increasingly concentrated.”19 The plan also makes no assumptions about walking being an equal experience for all citizens, acknowledging that a “2005 study... found that drivers are less likely to stop for Black pedestrians waiting at a crosswalk than for White pedestrians.”20

London has also become increasingly focused on active travel, as the previous Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, emphasized cycling — establishing ‘Boris Bikes’ and blue-branded cycle lanes. More recently, Mayor Sadiq Khan reset the city’s active transport goal, aiming for 80 percent of all journeys to be made on foot, by cycle or using public transport by 2041. Moreover, London’s Walking Action Plan: Making London The World’s Most Walkable City, is distinctive in that it places walking at the top of the city’s transportation hierarchy: “street changes of any kind will be required to benefit people walking,”21 states the plan at its outset.

London’s Walking Action Plan also expressly addresses health through metrics beyond the traditional factors of increased physical activity benefiting health. There is an acknowledgment that walking must be pleasurable if it is to be truly sustainable. For example, it cannot negatively impact mental health through the noise and associated stress. London thus defines the goal of becoming the world’s most walkable city through the mode of walking, becoming “the most obvious, enjoyable and attractive means of travel for all short trips.”22 For transit beyond brief journeys, the plan makes links essential, prioritizing connectivity and access for people walking to/from bus stops by “ensuring all new households are a max of 400 meters walk from bus/tram stop.”23

**Case Study 2: The Air Quality Transportation Nexus in New Delhi**

The C40 Cities initiative reports that populations in low-and middle-income countries are most likely to be impacted by air pollution. Among cities with 100,000 inhabitants or more, 97 percent24 failed to meet World Health Organization air quality guidelines. This is certainly the case for New Delhi, India, where air quality problems are linked to transportation and urban form. While poor air quality in New Delhi derives from fossil fuels burnt in a range of contexts, including households, industry, and power plants, automobile emissions are reported to be 40 to 80 percent of the total air pollution.25 A solution to the air quality crisis requires a transformation of the transportation system.

Many of the air pollutants that impact health, including carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide, and nitrogen dioxide, are also drivers of climate change. Delhi’s poor air quality may have an impact on residents so severe that it could reduce their life expectancy by up to seven years.26 The recent State of Global Air 2019 report concluded that “air pollution reduces life expectancy on average by one year and eight months globally — a loss that ranks just below that related to smoking but above that related to unsafe drinking water and lung cancer.”27

Six solutions to New Delhi’s crisis have been proposed by the non-profit organization, Help Delhi Breathe, which draws international support from organizations such as Greenpeace and Climate Agenda. These solutions encompass the production of more solar electricity within the city and the region and the creation of greater public information and awareness about the issue. Transportation, especially the role of active travel, is a major component of the solution. Help Delhi Breathe calls for improved public transit, presenting solutions such as the electrification of buses, improving “last-mile connectivity,” expanding bicycle and footpaths, and creating no-car zones in the city.
The risks of air pollution do not affect all Delhi citizens equally, as risks to health are assessed differently across genders. “Smog and pollution are the top barriers that keep women from walking,” reported the Hindustan Times, drawing on the 2017 Max Bupa Walk for Health Survey. One-third of women questioned did not walk because of air quality issues.

Conclusion: What New York Has to Learn About Active Travel

New York City has a stated goal of achieving carbon neutrality and 100 percent clean electricity by the mid-century, as outlined in OneNYC 2050, a strategic plan that encompasses various sectors, including transportation. The plan envisions that “in 2050 New Yorkers will no longer rely on cars,” going on to predict that the city will become a place where “bicycle lanes abound and walking is a favorite way of getting around town.”

However, during his tenure as mayor to date, de Blasio has been sharply criticized for his car-centric “windshield” perspective on the City’s transportation policy. To advance mobility options, the Speaker of the New York City Council, Corey Johnson, has unveiled a local law to produce a five-year plan that transforms streets, sidewalks, and pedestrian spaces. The bill has ambitious designs, which include: a completely connected bike network, protected bus lanes everywhere feasible, accessible pedestrian signals at all relevant interactions, compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accessibility at all intersections, and “within the first two years, create and maintain one million square feet of pedestrian space.” As Streetsblog New York City reported:

The bill sets priorities at every level. Even parking policies for delivery trucks, according to the bill, should be based not on the immediate needs of drivers, but the “safety of pedestrians and individuals using bicycles; access to and use of public transit; reduction of traffic congestion and emissions; and improving access to streets, sidewalks, public spaces, and mass transit for individuals with reduced mobility, hearing, or visual impairments.”

This is being dubbed Corey Johnson’s “Master Plan,” inclusive of many ambitious elements that will pave the way for more active travel. It includes provisions for pedestrians specifically, such as a focus on sidewalks and public space. What is lacking, however, is a coherent vision...
for pedestrian travel of the type outlined in Portland’s plan, or the focus on health outlined in London’s plan. The piecemeal attention given to pedestrian activity in the bill is symptomatic of walking still being perceived as an appendage to public transit and biking, rather than as a sustainable transportation mode in itself.

In the New York City context, there is currently a chance for a reframing of pedestrian transportation. Such a reframing could follow Portland’s example that everybody is a pedestrian, and London’s example that all street changes must benefit people walking. Simultaneously, there is a lesson to be learned from developing world contexts such as New Delhi. Although not as severe, New York also faces severe air quality challenges. Poor air quality is not experienced equally across the city but instead is worse in low-income communities and communities of color such as the South Bronx, where there is a concentration of expressways, waste-transfer stations, a sewage-treatment plant, and truck traffic associated with food delivery. The residents of such neighborhoods suffer accordingly. Of the ten neighborhoods in New York City with the highest rates of hospitalization for asthma, a disease exacerbated by poor air quality, five are located in the Bronx.35

Active travel, when considered through the lens of co-benefits, produces a focus on how transportation mechanisms can improve individual health, while also having broader social benefits, such as better air quality, greater social cohesion, and increased equity. This co-benefits approach also increases the opportunity for diverse stakeholders to support policy action, especially those who might not otherwise be in favor of adopting or funding climate-focused policies. With such an approach, the overall likelihood that transportation emissions reductions initiatives will be adopted and successfully implemented increases.

Policies that promote active travel, especially those that emphasize walking, have co-benefits visible at various scales. At the individual level, health benefits are deriving from both air quality and greater physical activity; at the community level, improved air quality, reduced noise and congestion, and greater social cohesion; at the city scale, increased economic activity and vitally; and finally at the global scale, reduced greenhouse gas emissions.
Examining Procedural Justice through the Closing of the Rikers Island Jail

In March of 2017, Mayor Bill de Blasio announced the closing of the Rikers Island jails at a press conference in City Hall alongside then-Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito, and Director of the Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice Elizabeth Glaser. Mayor de Blasio emphasized that “Closing Rikers Island is a key piece of creating a smaller, safer and fairer criminal justice system in New York City. It is the right thing to do, but it will take time, the effort of many and tough decisions along the way.” His speech outlined that the City needs to reduce crime, improve efficiency in the court system, and reduce recidivism in order to bring the population down from about 9,500 at the time of the press conference to 5,000 in ten years to make this plan possible. Even from an early stage, the question of process appeared to be a central but ambiguous piece to the project of closing Rikers Island’s correctional facilities.

Rikers Island is named for the Dutch family, who claimed ownership of the land in the 1660s and has a heinous history going back to the 19th century. In the early 1800s, Richard Riker was responsible for the kidnapping and sale of escaped enslaved people from the American South back into slavery. Though a facility had previously been built for four inmates with leprosy, the Department of Correction opened the first penal facility on Rikers in 1932. After only five years, a Bronx court stated that Rikers was unlivable due to cramped and unhygienic conditions.

Nonetheless, officials opened new facilities and relocated most of the City’s jail population to the island, where abhorrent conditions and violence persist. Policies such as the War on Drugs and broken windows policing ballooned the number of inmates to around 24,000. The consequences of Rikers’ conditions are exemplified in the case of Kalief Browder, a teenage boy who committed suicide after his release. He was wrongfully held, and his suicide is attributed to the psychological trauma experienced throughout his engagement with the justice system and Rikers Island jails. In the wake of Browder’s death, Speaker Mark-Viverito pulled stakeholders together to form the “Lipman Commission” through which Judge Lipman, an advocate within the criminal justice space, and other actors would develop recommendations for closing Rikers and repurposing the island.

The hard work and advocacy of various people preceded the announcement to close Rikers and highlight an inherent tension in this plan from a criminal justice reform perspective. Individual advocates within the movement to close Rikers made concessions on behalf of other advocates grounded in an abolitionist philosophy. Observers looked at the diverging segments of the movement and particularly how the final push from the #CLOSERikers campaign, a coalition of 170 partner organizations with support from both Facebook and Google’s charitable arms, created the space for a plan that centered decarceration over abolitionism. While ultimately it was the #CLOSERikers campaign which was able to sustain enough pressure on the administration, longtime activists felt that the conclusion was an unfavorable compromise considering their broader goals for dismantling a criminal justice system that enacts violence on under-resourced communities of color.

In the tension between the abolitionist movement and more mainstream campaigns, emerges the problematic that underlies the web of activities connected to the closing of Rikers—the release of the City’s borough-based jail plan, the outrage from community members in the
South Bronx, and the proposed repurposing of the island to promote environmental justice. The closing of Rikers Island jails is a tremendous win for criminal justice reform; however, questions remain about a broader procedural justice related to land-use decision-making and the siting of City facilities.

The Borough-Based Jail Plan

At the March 25, 2019 City Planning Commission Review Session, Elizabeth Glaser, Director of the Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice, presented the Borough-Based Jail Plan seeking the Commission’s approval to begin the Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP) process. Glaser opened the presentation by saying, “For us, we think this is a moral imperative because our reform efforts are limited by our current facilities.” The goals of the Department of Corrections are to create jails that are “fairer” with rehabilitative facilities, “safer” to make them more humane, and “smaller” to reduce the size of the incarcerated population. Glaser then emphasized that this requires “every part of the justice system changing its behavior.”

Parallel to the reduction of the Rikers Island inmate population to 5,000, the city will construct four borough-based jails in Manhattan, Queens, Brooklyn, and the Bronx. The four facilities will equally house the reduced population and will account for minor fluctuations in population by creating 5,750 beds. The criteria used to pick the locations of new jails were fourfold; that it be close to the borough courthouse, on City-owned property, accessible by transit, and that there is a sufficiently sized site area, though the minimum lot size is not specified. The facilities in Manhattan, Queens, and Brooklyn will replace the in-use Department of Corrections facilities with newly built, state of the art facilities that take design justice guidelines into account in their construction.

The siting of the jail in the Bronx, however, is uniquely contentious. Located at 745 E 141st Street in the neighborhood of Mott Haven in the South Bronx, this jail is the only proposed site that is currently not a jail and is not near the borough courthouse. An article from the New York Daily News called for the City to “prove” that the site 2 miles from the courthouse is the only location that fits their outlined criteria. Despite these questions, the City Planning Commission approved the application to push the project into ULURP. Audience members of the hearing can be heard on the recording saying, “Wow,” “Really?” and “You’re selling out the community.” Joanne Page, the president and CEO of the Fortune Society, argued in an op-ed for City Limits, “while the current plan to close Rikers
and build smaller, community-based jails is not perfect, we cannot let minor flaws get in the way of doing what is right and good.”13 However, who determines what is considered a “minor flaw” and how “right and good” is defined in the historical contexts of mass incarceration, environmental injustice, and spatial inequality along racial lines?

Response from the South Bronx

On March 8, 2018, following the announcement of the Borough-Based jail program, stakeholders in Mott Haven gathered at a town hall to voice their opposition to the proposal. The event was organized by the Diego Beekman Mutual Housing Association, a Mott Haven-based organization, with support from other community groups such as South Bronx Unite (SBU), a grassroots environmental justice advocacy group. Over 300 residents and community members attended who expressed a profound sense of outrage that is at odds with how the City has framed the borough-based jail plan.14

Residents’ outrage is a condemnation of the City’s historical and continuing disregard for their neighborhood as manifested by the excess environmental and social burdens thrust upon them by top-down planning decisions with almost no sincere investment in the neighborhood’s well-being. Because of many decisions over the years, Mott Haven is one of the poorest districts in New York City - almost 50 percent of its households are rent-burdened.15 It is the worst neighborhood for childhood asthma – 647 children per 10,000 are hospitalized for their asthma, compared to an New York City average of 223 children hospitalized per 10,000. And, Mott Haven-Melrose is the third-worst performing neighborhood for preventable adult hospitalizations with 3,138 avoidable hospitalizations per 100,000 adults, compared to the New York City average of 1,033 per 100,000.16

In the wake of the plan’s announcement, both South Bronx Unite and Diego Beekman Mutual Housing Authority penned thoughtful, open letters that framed their opposition to the project. SBU said:

The decision to construct a new jail in the South Bronx, made without any input from the local community, is a slap in the face of South Bronx residents who have suffered from top-down city planning decrees that put the interests of the powerful above the needs of the people in the nation’s poorest Congressional District...Our opposition to the construction of a new jail goes beyond “Not In My Back Yard” to a broader concern about how the city’s resources are allocated to deal with people in conflict with the law.17

This letter places the decision to site the jail in Mott Haven within a historical context of top-down decision-making and marginalization experienced by longtime community members. It is made clear through responses from community groups and activists that the process by which the jail was sited in Mott Haven occurred prior to any engagement.

If the City had gone through the trouble of engaging local stakeholders, they would have learned of Diego Beekman’s plan to use the identified lot to build housing affordable to people already in the neighborhood, a plan that contributes to the Mayor’s broader affordable housing development goals. The Diego Beekman Neighborhood Plan builds on 22 years of community organizing and engagement with “residents, organizations, agencies and elected officials, none of whom were consulted about the mayor’s new jail proposal.”18 The site selected by the Department of Corrections was the “centerpiece” of their plan as it would have been their largest new building of three proposed new buildings.19

Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz Jr. expressed opposition to the decision stating that “No one who made the decision for us in the Bronx, lives in the borough of the Bronx,” yet City Council Person Diane Ayala did not stop the process from continuing behind closed doors.20 She even remarked, “I think it’s an opportunity to have the administration’s ear, and to reassess the way that we provide social services in the South Bronx.”21 Neighboring City Council Person Rafael Salamanca rejected Ayala’s suggestion stating, “Without something in writing, it’s a non-starter. My community in the South Bronx has done more than its fair share.”22 Without the binding assurance that a community like Mott Haven will benefit in specific ways from any given project, it is safe to assume that based on its history, the local residents will not be included in the process or any potential benefits.

Despite the opposition, Director Glaser still insists there has significant engagement with the ULURP process still to come.23 The implication is that the difficult decision to build a new jail in the Bronx has been made, and the City will work to quell the reaction from the local community. It reflects an operating logic that contradicts the very goals set out in the plan to make the justice system fairer in favor of what is expedient. The situation indicates either some
level of poor municipal coordination between departments, like Corrections, City Planning, and Housing, or purposeful neglect. Arlene Parks, the President of Diego Beekman, aptly placed the borough-based jails plan in the broader context of the City and the de Blasio administration’s pattern of operating without consent or consensus of the affected neighborhood, as happened during the Amazon deal.24

Envisioning New Uses on Rikers

On April 5, 2019, the Regional Plan Association (RPA) hosted a panel on “The Future of Rikers and the Inner Sound.” Panelists from Environmental Justice, Urban Design, and Public Interest Law fields spoke about the unique opportunity presented by the closing of Rikers Island to re-site harmful, polluting uses to this space. Panelists suggested many alternatives, such as using one-quarter of the island for solar power to reduce the need for highly polluting peaker plants - power plants only activated during peak demand times - in environmental justice communities, creating an anaerobic digester to deal with waste, building a wastewater treatment plant, and even creating open space. The panelists presented practical approaches to improving the City with a new asset with specific limitations, while also raising the question of community participation in the process.

The Lippman Commission offered a similar conclusion, describing that Rikers represents “a singular opportunity to plan for the future of New York City.” The report titled “A More Just New York City” suggests using the island for energy infrastructure that, according to their calculation, could power 30,000 homes with renewable energy. It discusses using the island for environmental infrastructure like wastewater treatment to help prevent combined sewage overflows or waste facilities to divert landfill waste. The Commission argues that these uses could create $7.5 billion in annual economic activity, which could yield up to 50,000 jobs, and would create space in neighborhoods where facilities have been moved for redevelopment.25

Queens Councilperson, Costa Constantinies, who sat on the RPA Panel, echoed these sentiments in an op-ed for “City & State,” co-written with CUNY Law Professor Rebecca Bratspies. They discuss how investing in solar power on Rikers can eliminate the need for highly polluting facilities that pollute low-income neighborhoods throughout the City. They continue, “New York City has been powered off the backs of these communities for too long, as many in power ignored the physical and social
effects on these people." While raising similar ideas for the island’s transformation, their argument demands the changes based on environmental justice.

However, these calls to utilize Rikers Island to achieve environmental justice goals seem to overlook or dismiss the process by which the jails are relocated. The “Principles of Environmental Justice,” created at the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991, enumerate both the right to self-determination and the right to participate as equal partners in decision-making as core principles. The purpose of these Principles is to ensure that actions that shape spaces in which people live and work should be led by those who will be affected by the changes. These principles offer space to reflect on how calls for environmental justice, through the proactive planning of Rikers, conflicts with the injustice in the siting of the jail in Mott Haven.

Transparent Processes and Just Outcomes

The complicated web of processes and decisions tied to the closing of the Rikers Island Jails, the Borough-based Jail plan, and repurposing of the Island for environmental justice purposes works to both support and undermine common goals. The plan to close the jails on Rikers Island is derived from decades of advocacy for criminal justice reform, which is grounded in trauma and violence experienced predominantly by people of color at the hands of a system entrenched in white supremacy. The borough-based jail program provides a blueprint for a realistic decarceration and redesign of New York City’s corrections facilities to be more humane, though it has done so without community involvement in the key decision-making phase. The response from community members in the South Bronx expresses their frustration at a decision that continues a history of top-down planning in their neighborhood, especially since the site chosen by the city as the centerpiece of a community-driven planning process in Mott Haven. The suggestions to use the newfound space on Rikers for infrastructure facilities that can relieve overburdened neighborhoods on the Inner Sound present a remarkable opportunity to make these areas less polluted. Taken together, the question remains: can the closing of the Rikers Island jail be considered a just outcome if it means undermining a community’s vision for equitable growth?

The recent New York City Charter Revision process offered an insight into why these sorts of decisions are made behind closed doors, and what alternatives might exist. The 2019 Commission was made up of representatives from across City government and aimed to develop recommendations for amending the City Charter to reflect better the current situations that New York City faces. The discussions included deciding what the powers and limits of City Officials should be and establishing how land-use decisions are made. While the official report is slated to be released in November 2019, the Commission highlighted preliminary ideas for consideration like Ranked Choice Voting, a Civilian Complaint Review Board for the NYPD, and clarified powers for Borough Presidents and the Public Advocate. New Yorkers voted in favor of five ballot measures in the November 2019 election which also included the development of a rainy day fund for the City and establishing a 2-year time limit before former City employees can lobby their former colleagues.

The Commission’s suggestion for land-use seeks to improve community engagement by providing additional time for Community Boards and Borough Presidents to review applications before ULURP. Their suggestion for Planning points towards developing a process that can project how different projects “should relate to and impact each other” and should “address future planning challenges.” Unfortunately, the Commission did not elect to include a comprehensive planning process into the Charter. Developing a planning process that could proactively account for the myriad of activities within a neighborhood would have meant that the public could better respond to a plan like the Department of Corrections’. Questions about how this process would have played out in practicality remained, but establishing the values of community participation in decision-making, transparency, and justice could begin to make a land-use decision-making process work for all New Yorkers.

The need for a planning process that facilitates a more equitable distribution of resources has become increasingly apparent with the climate crisis looming. As planners adapt cities for climate change, modifying our processes to promote environmental justice will be crucial to ensure that marginalized communities can lead a just transition. While the siting of a jail in the South Bronx does not appear to be an environmental justice issue, the politics of space articulated in this article emphasize how this decision fits within a broader constellation of processes that influence urban space without a meaningful opportunity for individuals to shape outcomes. Whether it is promoting a comprehensive planning process or facilitating decentralized activities like community land
trusts and cooperative economic development, planners and policymakers need to develop and mobilize democratic processes to plan for a just transition and the major adaptations of our urban form and systems that will enable a livable future.

Notes
6 “A More Just New York City,” Independent Commission on New York City Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform, April 2017, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b6d4e731aefed914f24628/t/5b96c6f81a6c5e9c5f186d/1536607993842/Lippman%2BCommission%2BReport%2BFINAL%2BSingles.pdf.
8 Note: I attended a #CLOSERikers rally which took place outside a Town Hall that Mayor DeBlasio was hosting, so I’m a bit familiar with the group. I was taken aback by the characterization of this campaign in a negative light because of the experience I had with them. It was led by people of color, several of whom had some experience with Rikers, and seemed to be a model of effective organizing. The question of funding is interesting because it is used to sour this campaign, however, I do think it was necessary to keep this campaign going for as long as it needed to. I feel that their work was invaluable in making the closing of Rikers possible, but do understand the need to question outcomes even when they are good.
10 Ibid.
12 “March 25th, 2019: City Planning Commission Review Session,” (comments around 1:23:00)
14 It should be addressed that the community in the South Bronx is describing the jail as an undesirable facility which on some level equates the jail and its inmates to other unwanted land-uses. Their position is clear though. They are against the decision because it was done without any sort of input from the community and because they feel oversaturated with LULUs, not clearly because of the stigma that the jails and inmates are being described with. This contrasts with responses in Queens where their argument is to say this to undermine a middle-class community.
15 “Bronx Community District 1,” Community District Profiles, New York City Department of City Planning, https://communityprofiles.planning.nyc.gov/bronx/1.
18 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
Reconstructing Housing after Natural Disasters

Responses to the Great East Japan and Gorkha Earthquake

NATURAL DISASTERS ARE OCCURRING MORE FREQUENTLY and strike with increasing intensity. Coupled with the devastating impacts of resulting emergencies, these disasters often disproportionately affect the world’s most vulnerable communities, making recovery efforts extremely difficult. In such communities, housing is difficult to restore given that resources are generally limited and the foundations of built structures are often weak. In the wake of such disasters, we must ask ourselves: what is the best way to rebuild these communities and who should assume the cost burden? The need for a housing recovery model that addresses these questions is exemplified by plans implemented after the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011 and the Gorkha Earthquake in Nepal in 2015.

While both disasters were physically and socially devastating, the Japanese and Nepalese governments adopted different approaches to rehabilitation. In Nepal, the government began reconstruction efforts by giving residents subsidies to rebuild their homes. In Japan, the government relocated affected residents to temporary housing until public reconstruction housing or land resiliency measures could be completed. Neither approach, however, has been universally successful. Most subsidy recipients in Nepal have either been unable to rebuild their homes, or homes were rebuilt inadequately. Many residents in Japan find themselves in limbo or at odds with their relocation situations. Though recovery is far from complete in both countries, Japan’s model provides a better framework within which recovery can occur, and, with the addition of more civic input, could be used to effectively reconstruct and improve housing or residents.

The Gorkha Earthquake

On April 25, 2015 a 7.8 magnitude earthquake hit the Gorkha region of Nepal. In addition to immediate aftershocks, the region was struck with another 7.3 magnitude earthquake on May 12, 2015. Combined, the earthquakes killed about 9,000 people and destroyed around 800,000 homes.1 It is estimated that 900,000 families were left homeless as a result of the earthquake(s).2 In addition to the destruction of the homes, the earthquake damaged many heritage sites, schools, and basic infrastructure.3 The mass devastation led the government of Nepal to pass legislation known as The National Reconstruction Act 2072 to create the National Reconstruction Authority (NRA), which presides over all post-earthquake redevelopment efforts.4

The NRA elected to provide subsidies for residents to rebuild their homes as part of the rehabilitation efforts. The subsidy amounts to a total of Rs300,000 ($2,632.97 USD) and is distributed in three tranches. The first tranche is received once the beneficiary is approved by the NRA. The second tranche is received once NRA technicians inspect and approve the beneficiary’s newly constructed foundation. The third and final tranche is received upon completion.5 The Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli has committed to meet the initial five-year reconstruction deadline (2020), and the NRA contends that it is on track to meet this deadline.6

NRA reports lead one to believe that these subsidies have allowed communities to build back stronger than ever, and that despite limited resources, recovery is in sight. However, the subsidies are deficient in multiple ways. First, they are not easy to obtain. In order to receive the first tranche, one must prove that they are an earthquake...
victim, which is difficult for the most vulnerable portions of the population. These victims are often excluded based on gender, caste, ethnicity, illiteracy, and inability to find the proper channels through which they can obtain support. Some do not have deeds, so they cannot prove that they owned property at the time of the earthquake.

Additionally, tranches are only available for new construction, forcing those who may have had an easier time renovating their homes to choose between starting from scratch or not receiving any subsidy. Further, recently imposed construction deadlines designed to speed up the process have forced people to forgo using local materials, and import brick and concrete instead. These materials are expensive, and delivery is often delayed due to transportation defects. These deadlines also do not account for geographical constrictions. In the more remote villages, construction can only occur about seven months out of the entire year due to the rainy season. Even if residents are able to receive the first subsidy, these restrictions often prevent them from further funding. Behind this, the subsidies are often not enough to cover the cost of construction. Many residents resort to selling personal belongings and taking risky loans with interest rates as high as twenty-four percent. When this is not enough, many male villagers must find work in Malaysia or other parts of the gulf, leaving behind their families for extensive periods of time, typically paying headhunters to do so, and incurring even more debt.

Further complicating the provision of subsidies is residents’ lack of technical construction knowledge. The NRA only distributes funds to people who are building their homes according to one of the thirty-four “seismic resilient” layouts they prescribe. Thus, self-built homes do not qualify. As a result, many cannot rebuild on their own. This knowledge gap has prompted humanitarian organizations like the United Nations Development Programme to go out to villages to train villagers in rebuilding methods. This too comes with its own challenges. According to the United Nations Development Programme “traditional ties” are strong, and, “owners prefer to work with masons they are familiar with, and not necessarily those who are newly trained.” Thus they have had to work extensively with communities to provide further training and knowledge about how to get subsidies.

Despite its deficiencies, the practice of giving rebuilding subsidies directly to residents does yield benefits. For
one, residents do not have to wait for someone to rebuild their homes.17 Though this approach would be more ideal in areas less susceptible to devastating earthquakes and among a population with more means (residents would be able to rebuild to match their lifestyles and have more flexibility with time and materials), the measure of self-control speeds up the process with minimal displacement. Subsidies also create an opportunity for multiple segments of the population to learn construction skills that could lead to job creation after the reconstruction is complete. Since the earthquake, many men have left the country to find work, and NGOs like Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation Nepal have trained women in trades such as masonry. This has allowed women to obtain an income and access a job market from which they had previously been excluded.18 Residents do not have to permanently relocate (though, out of the few who were able to get in, 612,000 are still living in transitional shelters constructed after the earthquake19), allowing for communities to stay intact and voice their needs.20 For all of the benefits of the owner-subsidy approach to be realized in vulnerable communities, a stable government must be in place, along with continuous funding, and heavy involvement from the international community and NGOs.

The Great East Japan Earthquake

On March 11, 2011 a 9.1 magnitude earthquake struck the Northeast coast of Japan. The earthquake, known as the Great East Japan Earthquake (GEJE), was followed by a tsunami that had a maximum height of 132-feet. The Iwate, Miyagi, and Fukushima Prefectures were struck the hardest. During the disaster, another 30-foot tsunami damaged three reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. As a result, there was radioactive leakage that took months to fully stop; the damage was so great that Japan declared it as a level 7 on the International Nuclear Event Scale. Cumulative damages resulted in about 20,000 deaths, 2,500 missing people, and 465,000 displaced persons.21 22

The strategy adopted by the Japanese Government to counter this devastation and displacement was to relocate residents to government-built housing, and, where possible, restore properties by reinforcing and elevating the land. They established a ten-year timeline for reconstruction and set aside ¥32 trillion ( $294 billion USD).23 In accordance with Japan’s Disaster Relief Act of 1947, the burden of cost of relocation and rebuilding was assumed by central and prefectural governments.24
About 390,000 houses were destroyed, prompting the local governments to construct prefabricated, temporary housing. Additionally, local governments deemed most coastal towns in which survivors previously lived as at-risk for future disasters and banned reconstruction there; replacement towns were to be built in the mountainside or areas with a higher elevation to account for the resulting displacement.25 Other towns have been declared inhabitable due to high levels of radiation from the nuclear spill, giving some residents no choice but to relocate.26

However, reconstruction plans are still not complete, leaving people in the temporary housing compounds known as kasetsu. The Disaster Relief Act puts a two-year limit on the use of the kasetsu, but delays keep extending the time survivors remain housed in them.27 A Mainichi survey, conducted from November 30, 2018 through December 19, 2018, revealed that about seventy percent of all kasetsu were used longer than the two-year limit, with the longest extension spanning a duration of seven years and eleven months.28

In some instances, residents of the kasetsu have a choice of moving to public reconstruction units or waiting for their land to be reinforced. Generally, residents who have chosen to move to reconstruction units were able to move out of the kasetsu faster than those waiting for their land to be reconstructed. Progress in building both reconstruction units and land reinforcement projects varies by municipality, making it difficult to pinpoint when the residents in the kasetsu will be able to move. Kasetsu in lagging municipalities like Rikuzentakata, are experiencing a decrease in services from both the government and NGOs. These poor conditions, and the dwindling population in each compound, have led to health issues and a sense of isolation.29 Compounds that were once full, like one in Yamada, Iwate, now have as few as eight households, and many of the remaining residents in these compounds are over fifty-years old, reflecting a stagnant, aging population. In an interview by Tokuyama and Mine, a woman described the feeling of isolation experienced in the compounds saying, “there are a lot more days when I don’t talk to anyone other than my husband.”30 This lack of interaction with anyone outside the immediate household, amplifies the evaporation of communities in these compounds. This isolation has raised mental and physical health concerns; some of the deaths that have occurred in these isolated compounds have been connected to suicide.31

Still, those who were able to move out of the kasetsu have experienced a similar sense of isolation. A study conducted between 2015 and 2017 of GEJE survivors in the kasetsu and those who have moved into public reconstruction housing by Sekiguchi et al. found that the latter felt a greater degree of isolation. They hypothesize that this is due to the built environment and the lack of NGO or local government social support. The new construction housing comes in the form of single-family units or apartments; this contrasts with the compounds where the kasetsu were close together, forcing social interaction. This interaction and the social aid received gave them a sense of camaraderie and resiliency. Thus, under this reconstruction scheme, once people move out of the kasetsu to reconstruction houses, only their physical conditions are improved. Residents suggest that this be countered by collective relocation and early moving plans but acknowledge that these strategies could be compounded by land acquisition, funding, and cultural adaptation during the planning phase.32

Unfortunately, neither temporary housing, relocation, or land reinforcement strategies have produced fully positive results; progress has been very slow, and survivors have little control over when they can move on, as they must wait on government action. Many local municipalities have identified government regulations stipulated in the Disaster Relief Act as a hindrance to rebuilding. They believe the law needs to be revised to allow for bigger/less prescriptive design of the kasetsu and lengthen the duration of stay in the kasetsu.33

Though improving the legal framework would allow for faster action, funding, collective relocation plans, and acquisition measures to meet the demands of a disaster, it still would not account for the social component. What is needed to make relocation work is more public involvement and resiliency awareness. Residents must be able to rebuild to suit both their own and the needs of their communities. Further, they must understand the seismic fragility of their at-risk lands so that if they cannot rebuild in their original property, they will be better able to accept the loss of a site-specific attachment. This would ease social anxieties that complicate rebuilding and help facilitate a smoother transition to life post-disaster.

Conclusion

Reconstruction after a natural disaster is not only physical, but also social. It is not only the structures that need to be replaced, but also communities that need to be
reinvigorated. A place and its inhabitants will never be the same after a disaster, but a new path can be forged. What is the best way to create an improved path? Considering that an essential component of reconstruction is people, strategies will ultimately have to be site-specific. However, there are frameworks from which we can draw to cultivate site-specific solutions.

In Nepal, the owner-subsidy method strives to give residents control and remain intact with and strengthen their communities and land. Though it has achieved this to some extent and provided opportunities for women, it puts too much onus on a population that is already monetarily burdened and depends on NGOs to provide extensive resiliency training. Additionally, funding is precarious when the government is not stable, and inequalities play a major role in the distribution of funds. Thus, this is not an ideal model for efficient and quality reconstruction.

In Japan, the government-funded relocation model has had more success in providing people with better physical conditions, but it lacks consideration of necessary social components and adequate timeframes. If paired with civic engagement, communities could have input in the temporary housing as well as the new public new construction housing and reinforcement schemes. They might also gain more control over timelines and where funds are directed. Thus, if a civic mandate was incorporated into Japan’s method, it would be a reconstruction model that could be adapted to fit the needs of other disaster-struck communities around the world.

Notes


4. Ibid


7. Hariram Upreti, “Rebuilding Work Fails to Progress as Expected in Gorkha District.”


13. Ibid


17. Arun Karki, “These Women Are Literally Rebuilding Nepal After Last Year’s Earthquake.”

18. Ibid


24. Hayato Jojima, Ken Nakazato, and Kumamoto Bureau, “70% of Temporary Disaster Housing Used Longer than 2-year Legal Limit: Mainichi Survey,” The Mainichi, March 08, 2019, https://mainichi.jp (These are the authors of the original article in Japanese;
At present, mainstream discourse about climate change in the United States remains trapped in a prism of postponement. Climate change is framed in terms of its future effects, requiring a radical break from the past and present in the response. In this discourse, as long as climate change is thought of as approaching, there is still time to prepare, as though it were a storm, and we need to make a trip for non-perishables. This tendency, to psychologically postpone the climate crisis, is increasingly ill-suited to the terms of today when the climate crisis is already unfolding. The world is facing ecological degradation and mass extinctions right now. Conflicts over resource use are ongoing, yet the discourse struggles to connect these catastrophic processes and how they affect daily lives.

The discourse is also mired in an unhelpful binary between structural, production-side critiques of climate destruction and individual, consumption-side critiques. Consumption-side critiques offer solutions that are too minor for the enormity of the crisis and tend to harm marginalized people through individualist dictates. For example, recent plastic straw bans at restaurants and coffee shops dismissed the legitimate concerns of disabled people (those with limited motor function often need access to straws in order to drink) without making a significant impact on the environment. Another recent study made headlines for tying asthma treatment to greenhouse gas emissions. Structural solutions are essential to respond to the crisis but do not produce the profound changes in consumption patterns that are necessary to accomplish non-extraction and reduced waste. The changes that U.S. cities need to make to adjust to climate change will affect the lives and behaviors of individuals living in cities and will need to involve them in enacting those changes immediately. Planners and policymakers are obligated to help cities and their populations adapt existing modes of life to sweeping goals of climate mitigation and adaptation.

Studies have stated that climate change is the consequence of the actions of a small number of corporate executives. A widely cited 2013 study by climate scientist Richard Heede found that only 90 companies are responsible for two-thirds of historic carbon emissions. The depth of corporate villainy is palpable and provides an important focal point for climate organizing. Meanwhile, these corporations perpetuate and benefit from a misguided discourse that frames climate change as a tragic consequence of flaws in human nature: rapacious appetite and inexorable wastefulness. Corporate-sponsored initiatives such as recycling of consumer goods put the burden on individual consumers to act virtuously while letting big corporations shirk responsibility. Studies such as Heede’s do the important work of debunking myths of individual blame but are also used to create a new myth.

This new myth puts responsibility entirely onto big wigs and their oil rigs and ignores the uncomfortable truth that the unprecedented degree of environmental waste and carbon output is also fueled by first-world consumer societies. Oil rigs do not just spew oil and smoke straight into the atmosphere, or excrete industrial waste straight into the ocean, they also produce the vast quantity of goods that support affluent consumer society. Consumer society has a standard of living that requires unprecedented material productivity as well as unprecedented waste. Unfortunately, the benefits of that productivity cannot easily be extricated from the harms of the waste. To reverse the flows of waste and carbon output that are fueling
climate change, we need to unravel the toxic relationship between consumer culture and the biggest polluters.

Consumer society can be defined as the social aspect of an economic system whose growth is propelled by the production, exchange, use, and disposal of commodities—which are produced for profitable exchange in a market—and must be sustained by the growth of mass culture centered on the consumption of those goods. Consumer society is a twentieth-century product of capitalism’s evolution and its need for new frontiers for growth.

The story of consumer society begins with capitalism and its relentless growth of productive capacity. Rapid technological advances and increased labor productivity brought down the costs of production and increased profits. Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy, in the 1966 book *Monopoly Capital*, sought to describe why this stage did not bring capitalism to the point of stable equilibrium. Since capitalism operates through the pursuit of profit, that increase in capacity, also known as surplus, is captured by higher rates of profit. Those profits, in turn, must be reinvested to maintain the growth and viability of the economy. Instead of using its expanded productive capacity to meet the basic needs of the population, American capitalism absorbs the surplus by creating new opportunities for profit. One of the chief strategies for the absorption of the surplus is the expansion of the market for consumer goods. To achieve this expansion, industries needed to convince people to expand their needs and wants to be able to keep up with increased production – to become consumers.³

According to environmental scientist Max Liboiron, “American industry designed a shift in values that circulated goods through, rather than into, the consumer realm. The truism that humans are inherently wasteful came into being at a particular time and place, by design.”⁴ In consumer capitalism, we consume not just food and drink but almost all the material objects with which we engage. As Cesare Silla articulates, there is a difference between “the consumption of goods” and “the use of things."⁵ The relationship between people and objects is mediated by a schedule of planned obsolescence. The expansion of consumer capitalism at the turn of the twentieth century eroded the relatively closed systems of household production that existed for generations and replaced autonomous cultural activities with relations of mass production and consumption. It affected not just

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Staten Island Waste Transfer Station | Photo by mikeric
how people consume and create waste, but also their interactions and modes of organization.6

American consumer society is more profligately wasteful than Americans even at the beginning of the last century. In the book Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash, Susan Strasser provides extensive documentary evidence of the thoroughgoing nature of advertising and education that was required to rapidly construct consumer identity in the 20th century. This campaign, which Baran and Sweezy call “the sales effort,”7 replaced a predilection for adaptation, reuse, and cooperation with a proclivity for disposal and independence. Through advertising and consumer periodicals such as Good Housekeeping and Ladies’ Home Journal, people were taught to throw away rags and adopt disposable tissues, sanitary napkins, and toilet paper. Train passengers had to abandon communal water cups and switch to disposable paper. Clothing was to be thrown away when it wore out or went out of fashion, instead of being repaired or repurposed.8

Strasser describes a world before this extensive campaign with rich cultural knowledge of preservation and reuse. People participated in collective practices that ensured that every scrap of any useful object was as fully used as possible before it was discarded. A garment would begin as a piece of fine clothing before it was a patched-up piece of poor clothing, then upholstery, then a rag, then ripped into shreds and twisted into wicks to burn in oil lamps. Such an intensive life cycle of uses was characteristic of American society well into the 20th century and remains the orientation of a majority of people in the world today. This care and material reuse requires a high degree of technical and cultural skill and requires a high degree of interdependence between people. Consumer society today is uniquely unidirectional in its use of objects. The life cycle of commodities is foreshortened by disposability and planned obsolescence. Modern consumers respond to changing fashions and shifting norms by buying new things and throwing away less new things with historically novel prodigality.9 The consumers’ wants and needs are shaped to facilitate the expansion of capitalism and a new regime of waste and carbon output.

The federal government used policy to prop up the economy through stimulating consumption10 and later structuring the permissive economic environment that allows agents of production to emit so much carbon without consequence.11 Meanwhile, where even national governments have lost the ability to control multinational corporate entities effectively, municipal governments are much smaller players. Municipal recycling programs best exemplify municipalities’ role in the climate crisis.

Municipal governments, through the “sanitary city” planning movement of the 19th century, took responsibility for urban hygiene and waste management. As plastics technology advanced after World War II, producers began selling products in disposable containers.12 City governments, who had to manage this new waste, initially sought to ban disposable containers. But producers fought such bans through lobbying campaigns that promoted individual responsibility and municipal-led recycling. Thus corporations profit at the stage of production, and protect those profits by externalizing the costs of disposal. This “ensures limited post-consumer recycling at public expense, distances consumption from wasting, and maintains the perception that individual recycling equates to environmental responsibility.”13 Since the middle of the twentieth century, the municipal status quo has been to concede power in the spheres of production and consumption, accept as given the volume of waste created within the city, and devise solutions only during the disposal stage.

Mass consumption and disposability are corporate strategies that come at the expense of cities, taxpayers, and, of course, ecological integrity. Nevertheless, it is uncomfortable to imagine relinquishing these changes. People in consumer societies associate mass consumption and disposability with cleanliness, efficiency, and independence.14 Cars, clothing, and other widely available personal goods create a sense of independence. Fast package deliveries feel efficient. Single-use items like tissues and wet wipes reduce our exposure to germs. It feels possible to achieve more with less individual risk due, in part, to these changes. It is much easier to imagine fighting big oil than to imagine reconfiguring practices of consumption, potentially threatening these gains in personal autonomy. It feels as though the great social advances of our civilization will be threatened if society changes its relationship to objects.

Cities and urban communities must confront the need for profound social change, reduce demand, and reduce disposability and waste using policy strategies that draw from history and culture. A future of conservation and reuse is not an alien, unrecognizable future. Instead, it is about connecting to practices we or our parents and grandparents have already engaged in and encouraging tendencies we already possess. Nicky Gregson, a British
geographer whose research concentrates on social practices of consumption and disposal, has found that, excluding food and toiletry waste, consumers in England do not throw away the majority of household items, but instead opt to sell or give them away to charity, family, or friends. People have a sense of attachment to material objects, and this attachment should be the starting point for policy strategies to reduce consumer waste. Poor people, older people, and immigrants, who are less acclimated to the wastefulness of an affluent society, have existing strategies that cities can learn from and disseminate.

We should revive environmentally sound, traditional ways of living and adapt them to the present. Planners and policymakers should encourage programs that teach maintenance and repair, like mending circles, or create collective sharing institutions such as tool libraries. They should make it easier for people to donate used goods instead of throwing them away. Similar programs already exist throughout the country but must be expanded and funded. They should employ people from frontline communities who can teach the preservation of these skills and traditions. Another necessary component will be to strategically revive urban commons. The gathering spaces of the contemporary American city are consumer spaces, which encourage waste and discourage social practices of reuse. There is not a public space in the American city where one can comfortably wash a dish. Planners and policymakers should help create non-commercial commons that help people work together to preserve and share resources. These are all strategies that can break free of the prism of postponement and bring climate mitigation and adaptation into the present.

Any successful effort to create changes to reduce waste will need to include significant structural changes to the economy and limitations to the profit motive. But, there is no division between the economy and society; these economic and political changes will bring change to our communities, spaces, and daily lives. We must prepare for those changes and make them possible.

Notes
7 Baran and Sweezy, 112-141.
10 This is during the period of Keynesianism, which governed post-war U.S. economic policy, and which pushed the economy through recessions by stimulating consumption.
11 The neo-liberal turn which succeeded Keynesianism is characterized by deregulation of the market, and government support for capital through tax breaks instead of for consumers via federal spending.
13 Ibid.
Local Law 97
New York City is Missing the Environmental Justice Target

THE UNPRECEDENTED INCREASE IN GREENHOUSE
GAS (GHG) EMISSIONS and the destruction of land for
agricultural and industrial expansion is contributing to the
increase of global temperatures, accelerating the melting
of snow and ice at the earth’s poles, and contributing to
the rise of sea levels. The 2018 Fourth National Climate
Assessment report by the US Global Change Research
Program found that an annual average global temperature
increase of 9°F (5°C) or more by 2100 would cause
substantial damage to the US economy in the order
billions of dollars per year—primarily due to infrastructure
disruptions that will become more frequent during
extreme weather events such as heatwaves and flooding.1
A 2018 report from the Intergovernmental Panel on
Climate Change (IPCC) indicates that “human activities
are estimated to have caused approximately 1.0°C of global
warming above pre-industrial levels, with a likely range of
0.8°C to 1.2°C.” Failure to adapt urban infrastructure that
supports water supply, public health, and food distribution,
will exacerbate already existing societal inequalities.
In particular, environmental justice communities that
disproportionally consist of minority populations face a
greater risk of ongoing climate change impacts.

The growing realities of climate change are challenging
governments worldwide to institute policies to reduce
GHG emissions and change historical economic paradigms
that are damaging to the environment. In New York City,
Intro. No. 12534—later formally named as Local Law
97 (LL 97)—was presented as an initiative focused on
reducing GHG emissions from buildings. The City Council
introduced this law as part of the New York City’s Green
New Deal5 and as an attempt to mitigate climate change
and its impacts on communities that have suffered from
environmental injustices. LL 97 will require buildings
over 25,000 square feet to commit to profound energy
retrofits. This bill intends to introduce a metric based on
the building’s GHG emissions. Starting in 2023 buildings
will need to implement retrofits to achieve an 80x50
goal with at least a 40 percent emissions GHG emissions
reduction by 2030 and 80 percent reduction by 2050.
The Department of Buildings and the New York City’s
Office of Long Term Planning and Sustainability are to
oversee LL 97 implementation and to impose penalties
for buildings in violation. However, the effectiveness of
this legislation remains to be determined because the
law contains deficiencies in defining how strategies to
reduce GHG emissions will operate citywide. The law
focuses primarily on reducing emissions only from certain
buildings over 25,000 square feet that are relatively larger
buildings abundant in high density and wealthy areas of
the city. However, it excludes any building containing
rent-regulated units that are more typically present in low-
income communities.

Additionally, this law does little to implement policies
to increase the investment in the “clean economy,” an
economic strategy that has been applied successfully
in other metropolitan centers to foster the creation of
environmentally sustainable sources of employment that
are better-paid jobs for low- and middle-skilled workers.
Setting the legal structures for the development of a clean
economy could be the solution to strengthen the apparent
weaknesses of LL 97 in addressing issues of environmental
justice and sustainable development, while also meeting
the larger goal of reducing GHG emissions.
Zerega Avenue EMS Station situated in the southeast Bronx along Westchester Creek | Photo by New York City Department of Design & Construction; Green Roof designed by SCAPE and Smith-Miller + Hawkinson Architects
Air Pollution and the Unequal Distribution of Locally undesirable land uses (LULUs)

In New York City, air pollution is dispersed unequally through the city’s various neighborhoods. “Communities with higher concentrations of poverty have higher rates of health conditions sensitive to air pollution, making them more vulnerable to harm from a given level of exposure.” In New York City alone, approximately 1,200 annual hospital admissions for respiratory disease among adults age 20 years and older are attributable to current levels of PM2.5 (a pollutant made of fine particles and sub-product of fossil fuel combustion). More importantly, the statistics reflect that “across city neighborhoods, the rate of respiratory hospitalization among adults attributable to PM2.5 per 100,000 persons varies more than 7-fold, with the highest burdens found in sections of the South Bronx, Northern Manhattan, and Northern Brooklyn.

In New York City, the unequal distribution of Locally Undesirable Land Uses7 (LULUs) represents one of the most apparent environmental injustices. For New Yorkers, this translates into a constant battle with industrial and waste management facilities located in low-income neighborhoods. The framework surrounding the problematic siting of LULUs remains a complex one, with a wide set of factors that contribute to this injustice. These include poverty, residential segregation, zoning laws, and, most importantly, the role of real estate markets. LL 97 is challenging the notion of the distribution of LULUs by looking away from industrial and other polluting facilities to focus on buildings. In New York City, the main reason for air pollution is over one million buildings9 of varying uses that account for 66 percent of total citywide GHG emissions. These polluters include notable buildings such as 725 Fifth Avenue (also known as Trump Tower), which scores high in the ranks of building GHG emissions published by the Mayor’s Office of Sustainability. For comparison of scale, Trump Tower and the other eight largest New York City properties owned by the Trump Corporation emit “around 27,000 tons of planet-warming gases every year, the equivalent of 5,800 cars.” The ability for LL 97 to reduce GHG emissions from larger buildings in high-density areas is promising, but its impact on less-dense and highly-polluted areas, is unclear.

Legislative History

Councilmember Cost G. Constantinides was the primary sponsor for Intro. No. 1253 when introduced as a bill in the New York City Council. On November 28, 2018, The bill was referred to the Committee on Environmental Protection to amend the New York City Charter and the Administrative Code of the City of New York, and to create a commitment to achieve certain reductions in GHG emissions by 2050. The legislation was subsequently amended three times after its introduction. By May 19, 2019, upon a successful council vote, this introduction was adopted in the City Charter as Local Law 97 of 2019.

LL 97 reaffirms New York City’s commitment to the international goals of curbing GHG emissions. This law hopes to reduce the city’s emissions by focusing its effort on instituting better strategies for buildings’ energy management and compliance with mandatory retrofit upgrades. During the development of this legislation, individuals and organizations such as the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance (NYC-EJA) expressed hopes that by curbing buildings GHG emissions, it would also reduce the pollutants that contribute to poor air quality and asthma. Precautions were taken to ensure that the specific adaptations required in this law would not pose an economic burden to vulnerable communities. Moreover, the opportunity to create sources of employment by creating a niche industry to provide the new retrofit adaptations required by this law was an important consideration, but the specifics on how these actions would be implemented are not substantial. The opportunity to increase investment in the “green,” “clean,” or low-carbon economy—the “sector of the economy that produces goods and services with an environmental benefit,” was missed in the lack of clear definitions for the generation of a clean economy.

Thus, even if the introduction of this remarkable piece of legislation will have a positive impact on reducing GHG emissions, its influence will not be as far-reaching as anticipated. The exemptions drafted on this law to avoid economic burden on economically vulnerable communities are paradoxically impediments to the proper functioning of this legislation. LL 97 focuses on large buildings of more than 25,000 square feet, those that are usually within only the densest areas of the city. More importantly, this bill exempts every building containing rent-regulated units, therefore by default, also excluding the large public housing projects—buildings often located in areas where environmental justice communities could most benefit from increased local air quality.
Policy Problems

Covered Buildings: New York City’s buildings account for nearly 70 percent of city GHG emissions, but LL 97 aims to tackle the emissions of buildings only over 25,000 square feet. Therefore, the rest of the city’s buildings under these dimensions will not be subject to LL 97 requirements. Buildings hosting just 1 to 4 families generate only 19 percent of such emissions, yet represent 82 percent of the total floor area space within the city. During his opening statement introducing the bill, Councilmember Constantinides stated that 50,000 buildings over 25,000 square feet would be subject to the provisions of this law. However, according to the Mayor’s Office of Sustainability and their New York City Benchmarking Law Covered Buildings List - Required to Comply published in 2019, approximately 20,500 buildings will be subjected to the benchmarks established by LL 97. It is unclear where the Council Member is obtaining records, but as of May of 2019, the Covered Buildings List cuts across the reach of this legislation, compromising the goals to achieve a considerable reduction in GHG emissions and the overall purpose of green legislation.

Rent Regulated Buildings: LL 97 excludes buildings with at least one rent-regulated unit, including any development or building on land owned by the New York City Housing Authority. Therefore, the economically disadvantaged people and the buildings were they often live in will be left out of the efforts of reducing GHG emissions. The Rent Guidelines Board states that “about one million of New York City’s two million-plus rental units are considered to be rent-stabilized (with an additional 27,000 rent-controlled)." A rough estimate of the 2017 list of Buildings That Contain Rent Stabilized Units from the Rent Guidelines Board, show that there are around 50,000 buildings with rent-stabilized units in the city. These buildings would automatically not be subject to this legislation, plus the buildings containing the 27,000 rent-controlled units. These precautions were taken to avoid economic burden to vulnerable communities, but the exemptions of this law will definitely hamper its effectiveness. According to the Real Estate Board of New York, “the bill’s exclusion of buildings with at least one rent-regulated unit [...] effectively means that over a third of the GHG emissions from buildings over 25,000 square feet will not be addressed." More importantly, these exemptions can also be taken as an opportunity for buildings to avoid compliance by adding rent-regulated units to buildings, as it may likely prove to be less costly to take some rental income losses than adapt to the new energy and efficiency requirements.

Air Pollution Reduction: Air pollution in New York City is distributed unequally through the five boroughs. Air pollutants can come from waste management facilities and industry, but mostly from buildings. One of the concerning aspects of LL 97 is how it will deal with the energy management and GHG emissions coming from buildings that operate on high energy demands, and that represents a big part of total city GHG emissions. So far, all city-owned buildings (excluding CUNY campuses), as well as energy production facilities, are excluded from the legislation’s dispositions. It is unclear how these dispositions will affect buildings such as hospitals, airports, manufacturers, and other businesses. However, departing from the understanding that only buildings over 25,000 square feet will be covered by these provisions and by analyzing the data of different zoning uses through the city, we can expect that this legislation may fall short of improving local air quality in the most polluted neighborhoods of South Bronx, Northern Manhattan, and Northern Brooklyn.

The majority of buildings over 25,000 square feet are found in Manhattan. It is likely to be here where the legislation will have a greater impact. However, the most polluted neighborhoods hosting the most vulnerable communities have a low concentration of buildings over 25,000 square feet. However, it is in these areas where the neighborhoods with a higher concentration of manufacturing districts and other LULUs are localized. Moreover, it is here where rates of PM2.5-attributable respiratory hospitalizations are the highest. Interestingly, there are very low chances of dramatically reducing air pollution from buildings in these neighborhoods, as most buildings are smaller than 25,000 square feet and, if are bigger than this, such as the public housing projects abundant here, are excluded because of the rent-regulated exceptions specified in LL 97. Overlapping these patterns offers insight into the exclusion this law will impose, missing the target of advancing environmental justice for minorities and low-income New Yorkers.

LL 97 admits to the possibility of failing to advance environmental justice. The application of these new policies, and other actions to reduce GHG emissions, such as the Carbon Trading Study to be conducted by the New York City’s Office of Long Term Planning and Sustainability, are meant, as specified by the law, “to ensure equitable investment in environmental justice.
communities that preserve a minimum level of benefits for all covered buildings and do not result in any localized increases in pollution.” However, the mechanisms of LL 97 to protect vulnerable communities indicate a weakness on this legislation, taking as a preventive measure that if GHG emissions reduction are not feasible despite the best efforts of the city government, recommendations concerning policies, programs, and actions, will be made to correct a possible failure of this law. Stipulations like this jeopardize the overall outcomes of this law. Global warming and air pollution are severe problems that require immediate solutions. There is no time to draft a defective policy that includes provisions for failure. We must end the vicious cycle of policy drift when implementing compelling reforms on the smokestacks of the economic structures that propitiate climate change.

Councilmember Costa Constantinides stated in his opening remarks that, “The bottom line is this: We’ve been on notice for 112 years. We can’t wait anymore. The time to act is now.” But the truth is that this law contains a multiplicity of failures through exceptions that will hinder the proper reduction of GHG emissions. People living in polluted communities, and those living with asthma, placed their hopes on this law, but may have overestimated its reach. So far, the legislations’ outcomes are hard to conclude. Whether the reductions of GHG emissions by 80 percent from buildings will be achieved by 2050, is yet unknown. LL 97 may end up being a law that is politically expedient but provides few tangible effects. However, there is hope for environmental justice communities if future legislation helps to shift New York City’s economy to a green one, a true “green legislation” that can reduce air pollution citywide.

Policy Recommendation

The overall intention of LL 97 to reduce GHG emissions in New York City is positive, and this kind of legislation sets a remarkable precedent for future efforts. However, to improve its reach, legislation must help in the development of a citywide clean economy, thereby expanding positive outcomes for the benefit of environmental justice. The clean economy in the United States employs some 2.7 million workers, more than the fossil fuels industry. The clean economy encompasses industries such as education and compliance, energy and resource efficiency, greenhouse gas reduction, environmental management and recycling, and renewable energy. The clean economy offers improved opportunities for minorities and communities of color because it offers better-paid jobs for low- and middle-skilled workers compared to current typical employment sectors.

Additionally, median wages in the clean economy are 13 percent higher than contemporary median wages across the United States. Clean economy growth concentrates within the largest metropolitan areas, and New York City is especially positioned to build on the green economy. Governments, policymakers, and regional leaders – in addition to developing policies to reduce GHG emissions – should also focus their attention on fostering the growth of a clean economy by expanding the already growing sectors of clean energy-related goods and services. Financing from the private sector will play an essential role in catalyzing this growth. However, strong leadership and smart policy will be decisive in the battle against the recent White House efforts to depress the growth of the clean economy on a national level.

The clean economy offers the chance to help solve the problem of generating quality jobs for communities that lack specialized education and access to livable wages. Such communities will provide the active workforce to shift the economy towards a more conscious use of our resources, provoking less environmental damage in their communities. The clean industry must be established in the most air-polluted neighborhoods to mitigate environmental inequality. However, the growth of this industry depends on the right implementation of policy to propel a shift of the markets and to increase access to clean economy goods and services. More importantly, pushing the growth of the clean economy in New York City through innovation and financing represents an opportunity to solve the legislative deficiencies in LL 97 by genuinely including low-income and environmental justice communities in the overall goal of reducing GHG emissions. Creating clean jobs and stabilizing incomes for these communities, while decreasing the cost of clean technology and energy, is the answer to ameliorate the environmental crisis and the risks global warming poses to our local, national and international economies. “Green legislation,” especially one concerning environmental justice communities, should consider mechanisms to ensure the advancement of ongoing successful local clean economy endeavors. The time to act is now, and if the economy is to grow, it must be in a clean and sustainable way.
The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of New York City Department of Buildings or the City’s.

Notes


3 All references to Local Law 97 formerly referred as Intro. No 1253 are extracted from the files of The New York City Council.


8 Ibid.


21 Ibid.


23 Ibid.

Planning Without Growth

If you go to Hudson Yards today, there is no sense of the tidal creek that once irrigated the land now inundated by tourists, a staircase to nowhere, and a shopping mall. Walking down East 57th street, past the towering 423 Park Avenue—home to the world’s absentee billionaires—you are more likely to see wealthy pedestrians in fur coats than the numerous furry mammals that called that once particularly biodiverse part of the city home. In Lower Manhattan, there is almost no sign that the Lenape people lived on the land now occupied by the world’s financial center. It is hard to overstate how much New York City has grown since the first development by Europeans. However, it is equally challenging to imagine how this trend could continue for the next 400 years. With a severe need to cut emissions and reduce over-consumption, the city cannot support endless resource and energy-intensive growth and development with no end in sight. For planners, it is necessary to imagine the alternative possibilities of a no-growth or even a degrowth scenario where economic growth is not the priority. This alternative is critical to address climate change and move towards a more sustainable future.

In the aughts, a period of unprecedented growth followed by the most significant economic downturn in recent history, two books were published that investigate past and future scenarios of a less-developed New York City. Leading up to the great recession, Eric W. Sanderson, the Senior Conservation Ecologist at the New York-based Wildlife Conservation Society, was working on what would materialize as the book *Manahatta: A Natural History of New York.* The final product reconstructs the Manhattan of 1609, before European development and colonization. Sourced from geological records, contemporary cartography, and historical documents, the contents of the book describe the natural world of the past, showing the tremendous changes made to the land in the name of progress. After constructing the dramatic recreation of a pristine wilderness inhabited only by indigenous people, the conclusion offers predictions for what New York City could be in 2409. Sanderson imagines that nature will start to reemerge through the regreening of streets and buildings, and the return of local agriculture all through Queens, Brooklyn, Long Island, and New Jersey. What Sanderson presents might be considered degrowth of the city, but his reintroduction of nature into city life only touches on the physical, as if its undoing is something that can still be accessed with urban design alone.

Another book, 2007’s *The World Without Us,* written by journalist Alan Weisman, imagines a different landscape, one where the natural world quickly retakes our cities within a decade of human disappearance. In a chapter on Manhattan, Weisman references some of Sanderson’s work in imagining how the city might crumble, instead of being brought closer to the past through redesign. The book believes that, within years, pipes would burst, roofs would begin to leak, and buildings would collapse. Without the pumps that keep New York City’s subways dry, underground rivers would quickly flood the tunnels, and wildlife would spread from the parks overtaking the pavement. The book’s description of the future is an eerie premonition that “the time it would take nature to rid itself of what urbanity has wrought may be less than we might suspect.” While Sanderson, calls for urban design as a solution to climate catastrophe, Weisman, in his conclusion, flirts with population control.

Subtextual anxiety about the possibility that economic growth will not last forever pervades both of these thought
View into Manhattan from Greenpoint | Photo by Kate Fisher
exercises. The interest of these books is the different ways they imagine the physical world on a path other than current development trends. While both of these books imagine what a degrowth city might look like, without explicitly mentioning the term, neither of them can offer a desirable path. New York City, as it was pre-European settlement is impossible to return to despite predictions of the reintegration of nature into city life. If Weisman’s vision is to be taken as an alternative, it means that human civilization is predicated on growth and the only way to avoid it is to remove society as we know it. The two books largely ignore the ways that the city is planned for growth and present a vision that is unacceptable and undesirable.

Since the recession, a rare period of slowed growth, we have returned to higher levels of consumption than before, and excess is visible in luxury enclaves, new and old. New shrines to consumption have been completed, such as Hudson Yards and Manhattan supertalls. Luxury apartments have shot up on some of the coastlines most vulnerable to sea-level rise. Some of the most expensive apartments have shot up on some of the coastlines most vulnerable to sea-level rise. Some of the most expensive condom developments sit vacant, unsold years after they entered the market, or are held as an investment, used explicitly mentioning the term, neither of them can offer a desirable path. New York City, as it was pre-European settlement is impossible to return to despite predictions of the reintegration of nature into city life. If Weisman’s vision is to be taken as an alternative, it means that human civilization is predicated on growth and the only way to avoid it is to remove society as we know it. The two books largely ignore the ways that the city is planned for growth and present a vision that is unacceptable and undesirable.

Since the recession, a rare period of slowed growth, we have returned to higher levels of consumption than before, and excess is visible in luxury enclaves, new and old. New shrines to consumption have been completed, such as Hudson Yards and Manhattan supertalls. Luxury apartments have shot up on some of the coastlines most vulnerable to sea-level rise. Some of the most expensive condom developments sit vacant, unsold years after they entered the market, or are held as an investment, used may be only a handful of days out of the year. Meanwhile, more than 62,000 homeless people live in New York City, rent and the cost of living has consistently risen, and public space is continually privatized. By investigating the causes and drivers of these inequities, advancing a more desirable and compelling vision for the future is possible.

**Agents of Growth**

Planners find themselves in a different role navigating contradictory objectives of facilitating economic growth on the one hand and acknowledging equity concerns on the other. While planners do consider concerns of quality of life and the environment, a plan for the future that does not include growth remains outside of the imaginable. In Scott Campbell’s 1996 essay “Green Cities, Growing Cities, Just Cities?: Urban Planning and the Contradictions of Sustainable Development,” concurrent goals such as economic growth, and social and environmental justice are placed in conflict with each other. Ultimately for Campbell, the resolution is a synthesis of these goals under the name ‘sustainable development,’ a contradictory term that aims to be a guiding principle for planners. The course of action for planners is limited to facilitating market mechanisms that incentivize good environmental practices and dis incentivize bad land-use planning. Like most of the discourse around environmental planning today, the role of the planner has been at most, to moderate the most egregious impacts of growth. Planners are trained to promote dense city centers to curb sprawl or transportation planning, while allowing private capital and the real estate industry to grow and remain profitable.

There are several ways that economic growth is prioritized in the planning of New York City’s built environment. Far removed from the big public plans of the past, the levers that planners and policymakers have to work with today are more likely to rely on the actions of the private sector. Common levers include rezonings, tax increment financing (TIF), payments in lieu of taxes (PILOT), tax incentives such as 421-a, opportunity zones, and public-private partnerships. By using these levers that rely on private capital and returns on investment to extract any amenities or benefits for the public, growth becomes a presumed inevitability.

Rezonings, the primary tool available to the New York City Department of City Planning, purport to increase affordable housing stock and provide much-needed city services to underinvested areas, but only at the cost of opening up neighborhoods to massive speculation and private investment. Spatially, this speculation and private investment manifest as luxury apartment buildings, justified with the concession of small set-asides of “affordable housing” as required through mandatory inclusionary zoning and tax credit programs. While wealthy areas of the city, typically amenity and transit-rich, may be better equipped to site affordable housing, upzoning working-class neighborhoods are more appealing as the potential to rebuild them opens up new opportunities for financialization and investment. By tying necessities such as affordable housing to luxury development, economic growth is the only way by which certain benefits can be accrued.

Either ‘sustainable development,’ as Campbell calls it, or ‘green growth’ has become the dominant framework for dealing with impending climate catastrophe. Since growth is not something that can be questioned, the ‘green’ or ‘sustainable’ part has been reduced to a qualifier that can be conveniently stuck on anything from a new bike path to the largest private real estate development in the United States. Hudson Yards was advertised as a green development throughout its construction and during its press tour right before opening. In the press release announcing its new title as the first ‘LEED Neighborhood Development’ Gold certified neighborhood in Manhattan, Hudson Yards was sold to the public as a model of “green
infrastructure, public transportation linkages, pedestrian-friendly community design and overall innovation,” which “furthers Hudson Yards’ position as one of the most sustainable, connected and forward-thinking urban neighborhoods in the country.” Nevermind the $12 million in donations Stephen Ross, the chief of the Hudson Yards’ developer Related, made to Donald Trump’s campaign, the idea that a playground for the rich could be a model for sustainability is suspect.

Green growth relies on the assumption that economic growth can be decoupled from the consumption of natural resources as technology improves, and the market is regulated in the right way. Thus, green growth does not mitigate the causes of the climate crisis because it does not address over-consumption or hard resource limits. Despite whatever level of environmental certification, the Hudson Yards-like developments of the global north achieve, the act of building more for only the richest people is not a responsible use of limited resources. The building materials, the carbon cost of construction, and new energy usage that, despite its efficiency, did not exist at all previously, only contribute to the current climate crisis. Ultimately, the idea of green growth is not meant to facilitate the transformative change we need to make; its primary aim is to preserve the current growth trajectory of our capitalist economic system. Can we decouple planning from this growth imperative?

The concept of degrowth acknowledges resource and natural limits and values quality of life, and true environmental sustainability over increases to economic growth or GDP. As a strategy, degrowth supporters argue for shrinking energy and resource consumption instead of greening current patterns, as exemplified by the green growth hypothesis. While the term degrowth was developed relatively recently, ideas of questioning the logic of endless growth predate the modern movement. Texts dating back to the 1970’s such as The Limits to Growth, a report commissioned by the Club of Rome, E.F. Schumacher’s collection of essays Small is Beautiful, and the work of French philosopher André Gorz have expressed skepticism about both the feasibility and the desirability of continuing on the path of endless growth. More recently, the ideas under the degrowth label have become a cause of “décroissance” activists in France, groups like Degrow Us in the United States, and a topic of broader academic study through international associations such as Research & Degrowth. This year, the theme for the Oslo Architecture Triennale was “Enough: The Architecture of Degrowth.” Degrowth posits that shrinking consumption and production is not only necessary to live in a truly sustainable way, but also desirable if done equitably. In contrast to green growth or sustainable development, degrowth challenges the commonly held belief that economic growth brings benefits to all people equally.

Planning for Degrowth

While the concept is mainly discussed within the field of economics, the use of the alternative value system of degrowth can be incredibly valuable to planners as well. Growth may be measured in dollars, but its effects are spatial, and the ecological and social problems of a growth economy play out in cities and the places where we live. Geographer David Harvey has written extensively about how urbanization has been driven by capital surpluses, which have grown exponentially. Even though planners are more likely to speak about Floor Area Ratio (FAR)
than GDP, the growth economy is expressed in land-use and threatens the natural environment, both of which are squarely in the domain of planners.

To meet the challenge of the climate crisis, planners have the chance to reframe their work around degrowth. Instead of economic growth, they can instead aim for more socially beneficial goals like decreasing the time people need to work, emphasizing low and zero-carbon leisure activities, and protecting the natural environment. Cities can be remade to be sites of life instead of consumption. Planners have the opportunity to promote low carbon, care economy work, which can be high quality, and fulfilling jobs. With the existing tools available to regulate land-use, instead of extracting benefits from new private development, planners can prioritize the adaptive reuse of existing spaces, the creation of truly public places that do not rely on consumption, facilitate collective living, and plan for local production and consumption.

Importantly, degrowth can also serve as a framework for achieving environmental justice. Currently, the drivers of over-consumption are the most affluent residents of the city, while the poorest often pay the price for noxious polluting infrastructure and often live in neighborhoods that will be first affected by sea-level rise. Local environmental justice battles against, for instance, the siting of waste transfer stations and truck routes in working-class communities, could connect to a larger project to lessen the need for additional polluting infrastructure. Planners often have to make decisions that either address or reinforce environmental discrimination, but could also deal with the problem of finding a location for waste infrastructure by reducing the creation of waste or deal with emissions by aiming to lower total energy consumption. Maybe the conflict between environmental goals and social justice that was key in Campbell’s analysis is both of those goals conflicting with economic growth.

Under a potential Green New Deal, a massive investment would be put into shaping the built environment to address climate change and the social inequality that it reinforces. However, with the chance to rebuild the built environment under a massive green investment program, we should not just green the existing conditions that lead us to a crisis. When resources are precious, some things that we do not find socially valuable may not be worth solarizing. Developing green energy is not without a cost. The resources and land that growth is dependent on are scarce, and at our current increasing pace of energy consumption, renewable energy has largely only augmented fossil fuels instead of replacing them.11 With the great opportunity that could come through adopting a massive climate plan, it is important that planners consider and prioritize environmental concerns over the impulse to maintain current growth trends.

In rejecting the false promises of sustainable development, the framework of degrowth allows planners to break from post-growth imaginaries that wish for a return to an imagined past or an apocalyptic demise of humans. To achieve a just and sustainable world, planners need to think about degrowth in ways that also address the inequities that exist within the cities in which they plan. The real possibility lies imagining new ways of living that value well-being for all over economic growth, which delivers benefits to a few. The thrill of breaking the growth cycle is not that New York City might be free of humans or under a layer of topsoil one day, but about finding new visions of planning that value humans and their relationship to the environment over-delivering returns to private real estate developers and wealthy investors.

Notes
Contributors

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COLLEEN O’CONNOR-GRANT is the director of community engagement for Park Slope Parents, an online community. She has a background in journalism and is a certified Master Composter. She received a M.S. Urban Policy & Leadership degree, with honors, Fall 2019. She is focused on economic development, specifically community planning and youth engagement policies.

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KATHLEEN ROSS is an undergraduate in Urban Studies. She is interested in environmental justice and the right to the city in the era of climate change and mega-development.

FERNANDO RUIZ previously received his MA in History from the City College of New York with a specialty in urban studies. He attained a BA in History from the University of Guadalajara and later was published by the Program for City Studies at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, with his book “La Cruz de Plazas. Transformación Urbana: Guadalajara 1947 - 1957”.

NISREEN SARRYEH is currently pursuing her degree with an interest in international urban policy and resiliency. She is also a fellow at Manhattan Community Board 1. Her vast professional background includes strategy development, communications, public policy and advocacy. She holds a B.A. in Psychology from the American University of Beirut, with a focus on biology.

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