

# Spaces of contestation: transgressing policies and practices of eco-social transformation

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**ESPPRIT Workshop Programme | 18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> September 2025**

TU Wien, Vienna, Austria

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<b><u>Programme</u></b>	<b>p.2</b>
<b><u>Timetable</u></b>	<b>p.3</b>
<b><u>Abstracts</u></b>	<b>p.5</b>
<b><u>Locations</u></b>	<b>p.19</b>
<b><u>Further Information</u></b>	<b>p.20</b>

# Programme

This workshop aims to critically explore the multifaceted contestations in and around social-ecological transformation processes. It is grounded in the premise that sustainability transitions are deeply contested, conflictual and highly ambiguous. We conceptualise contestation as the active challenging of prevailing transition trajectories, manifesting across various tensions, from local opposition to renewable energy projects, to organised public and political backlash against environmental policy. These contestations are often fuelled by rightward political turns, rising polarisation, democratic backsliding and authoritarian shifts (Patterson 2023; Pel 2021; Patterson et al. 2025).

Contestation poses a significant challenge to transformative change, arising from diverse and deeply rooted sources. Rather than being mere anomalies, such tensions are persistent and unlikely to dissipate without intervention. At one end of the spectrum, contestations often express legitimate and constructive concerns, including historic path dependencies, entrenched regional inequalities, and unmet social needs, highlighting the imperative for more socially just and inclusive transition strategies and mechanisms. At the other, they may be driven by populist mobilisations that instrumentalise and exploit public discontent (e.g. Matilla et al. 2025), often disconnected from the actual social and ecological issues at stake.

For transformation processes, contestation thus presents both opportunities and risks: on the one hand, it can foster democratic engagement and draw attention to overlooked injustices; on the other, it can fuel persistent and self-perpetuating dissatisfaction that obstructs progressive change. To navigate these tensions, we argue that contestation must be understood through its spatial and temporal dimensions, often rooted in various forms of lock-in (e.g., behavioural, technological, institutional) that keep systems in place and constrain change (Seto et al. 2016). This includes examining how conflicts emerge, evolve, and are negotiated and potentially transgressed through the entanglement of distributional, procedural, and recognitional (in)justices, as well as the role of place-based narratives, imaginaries, and governance and planning arrangements in shaping these dynamics.

The workshop aims to:

- Explore the local socio-spatial drivers and dynamics of contestation;
- Reflect on how democratically legitimised transition pathways can be protected and stabilised amidst contestation;
- Discuss governance and planning approaches capable of constructively engaging with contestation.

## Literature

Matilla, Hanna, Hirvola, Aino & Borrup, Tom (2025): Communicative and Agonistic Planning Theories in the Face of Populist Rhetoric: Reflections on Minneapolis 2040 Process. In: *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, DOI: 10.1111/1468-2427.13351.

Patterson, James J. (2023): Backlash to Climate Policy. In: *Global Environmental Politics*, 23 (1), 68–90. DOI: 10.1162/glep\_a\_00684.

Patterson, James, Anisimova, Ksenia, Logg-Scarvell, Jasmin & Kaiser, Cille (2025): Reactions to policy action: socio-political conditions of backlash to climate change policy. In: *Policy Sciences*, Springer Science and Business Media LLC, 58 (2), 287–320. DOI: 10.1007/s11077-025-09578-5.

Pel, Bonno (2021): Transition 'backlash': Towards explanation, governance and critical understanding. In: *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, Elsevier BV, 41, 32–34. DOI: 10.1016/j.eist.2021.10.016.

Seto, K. C., Davis, S. J., Mitchell, R. B., Stokes, E. C., Unruh, G. & Ürge-Vorsatz, D. (2016): Carbon Lock-In: Types, Causes, and Policy Implications. In: *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, Annual Reviews, 41 (1), 425–452. DOI: 10.1146/annurev-enviro-110615-085934.

# Timetable

## Day 1 - Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> September

Time	Location	Activity
09:00 - 09:30	TUW, Karlsgasse 11, EG-2	<i>Registration &amp; Coffee</i>
09:30 - 10:00	EG-2	Introduction & Welcome
10:00 - 12:30	EG-2	<p><b>Lightning Rounds: Your Current Focus</b> Each participant gets 5 minutes to pitch their idea on one slide introducing your research (please add you slide to the google slide deck <a href="#">here</a>).</p> <p><b>Group discussions: Exploring shared perspectives</b> Breakout tables: Participants self-organise into small groups based on focussed research questions to identify and discuss synergies and connections.</p> <p>We will then come back together for a short recap and closing of the first session.</p>
12:30 - 14:00	EG-2	<i>Catered Lunch</i>
14:00 - 16:00	EG-2	<p><b>Keynote 1 by Monika De Frantz</b> Capital City Cultures: Sustainability Transformation as Contested Urban Cohesion</p> <p><b>Keynote 2 by Johannes Suitner (TU Wien)</b> Contesting local frames and futures</p> <p>The keynotes will be followed by Q&amp;A.</p>
16:00 - 16:30	EG-2	<i>Break</i>
16:30 - 18:00	EG-2	<p><b>Thematic discussions and connections to research</b></p> <p>First quiet reflection on empirical cases and applicability of research focus.</p> <p>The participants then bring back the examples to the group discussion.</p>
18:00 - 19:00	-	<i>Break</i>
19:00	Gmoakeller	Dinner at Gmoakeller; Am Heumarkt 25, 1030 Wien

# Timetable

## Day 2 - Friday 19<sup>th</sup> September

Time	Location	Activity
09:00 - 09:30	TUW, Karlsgasse 11, EG-2	<i>Coffee</i>
09:30 - 10:00	EG-2	<b>Recap Day 1</b>
10:00 - 10:30	-	<b>Travel to excursion</b> Start at 10:00 at TUW, Karlsgasse 11
10:30 - 12:00	Nordbahnhof	Start of the excursion to Nordbahnhof  Introduction to the redevelopment of the Nordbahnhof, a former railyard with historical infrastructures.  Group discussion and reflection on Nordbahnhof redevelopment project
12:00 - 12:30	-	<i>Travel back to TU</i>
12:30 - 13:30	TUW, Karlsgasse 11, EG-2	<i>Catered Lunch</i>
13:30 - 14:30	EG-2	<b>Fishbowl Discussion</b>
14:30 - 15:00	EG-2	Wrap up, outlook and goodbye

# Abstracts<sup>1</sup>

## Transitions Fatigue and (eco)Social Contestation: The Just Green Transition in Post-Socialist Albania

*Fiona Imami, Co-PLAN Institute for Habitat Development & POLIS University*  
*Anila Bejko, Co-PLAN Institute for Habitat Development & POLIS University*  
*Besnik Aliaj, Co-PLAN Institute for Habitat Development & POLIS University*

This contribution critically interrogates the (eco)social contestations emerging from the implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkan (rooted in the EUGD and the concept of just green transition) in Albania—a country deeply shaped by its post-socialist legacy and a prolonged trajectory of externally steered, purposive transitions. Drawing on theoretical insights from transition studies and a detailed empirical analysis of Albania’s political and socio-spatial transformations, the paper argues that the JGT is not merely a technocratic policy shift, but a profoundly contested process rooted in structural asymmetries, historical mistrust, and “transitions fatigue.”

We conceptualize “transitions fatigue” as a cumulative societal condition resulting from multiple, incomplete, and often externally imposed transformation agendas—ranging from post-socialist liberalization to EU-driven reforms—which have frequently failed to deliver on their promises of prosperity and inclusion. Within this context, the JGT emerges as both a promise and a threat: while it is aligned with ambitious EU sustainability goals, it risks replicating extractive governance models and perpetuating territorial inequalities if not meaningfully adapted to local realities.

Through the lens of spatial and procedural justice, the paper highlights how contestation unfolds across multiple dimensions: as skepticism from historically marginalized communities; as institutional inertia within fragile governance structures; and as resistance to externally scripted, top-down transition agendas. Yet, contestation also reveals emancipatory potential: it surfaces embedded injustices, fosters demands for participatory planning, and opens space for imagining context-sensitive, bottom-linked pathways to sustainability.

In responding to the workshop’s call to “transgress policies and practices,” we propose a shift from transition management to transition negotiation—a mode of governance that actively engages with contestation as a site of transformation rather than a barrier. The Albanian case challenges dominant narratives of eco-social transition as linear or universally applicable, instead foregrounding the need for place-based, historically attuned, and socially reflexive frameworks of change.

Our contribution invites further discussion on how to reconcile purposive, often externally driven transitions with the lived experiences of post-socialist societies, and how to harness contestation not as obstruction, but as a vital democratic force in shaping just and resilient futures.

<sup>1</sup> Submissions are in random order.

# Abstracts

## Beyond the hype lies...? Scrutinising the transformative potential of urban energy prosumerism

*Wolfgang Haider, ZSI-Centre for Social Innovation*

*Andreas Bernögger, Fakultät für Architektur und Raumplanung der TU Wien*

*Katrin Burgstaller, Energieinstitut, JKU Linz*

*Lena Hohenkamp, Fakultät für Architektur und Raumplanung der TU Wien*

*Mara Haas, Fakultät für Architektur und Raumplanung der TU Wien*

*Michael Haml, Energieinstitut, JKU Linz*

The concept of energy prosumerism (EP) has recently gained attention from a social innovation perspective (Pel et al. 2023; Campos und Marín-González 2020; Sovacool et al. 2023; Weber et al. 2024). EP refers to decentralised and local ownership of energy systems—particularly in the production, storage, self-consumption, and sale of renewable energy—whereby traditional consumers become both consumers and producers (Horstink et al., 2021; Gržanić et al., 2020; Butenko, 2016; Espe et al., 2018). With EU-level legal provisions increasingly supporting decentralisation, for example through the promotion of energy communities, this phenomenon is becoming more common. In Austria, since the introduction of new regulations in 2022, more than 1,000 energy communities have been established, the vast majority in areas with low urban density (Brazda, 2023). This development is generally considered a success in enabling citizens to actively participate in the energy transition under fair conditions (Fischer et al., 2024).

Studying this new form of societal organisation from a social innovation perspective—focusing on relationships within and between EP initiatives and their ecosystems—enables us to scrutinise their contribution to societal transformations. This is particularly relevant in a sector shaped by incumbents and associated power asymmetries, conflicting interests, and a contested debate about the energy transition's future, who will shape it, and who will bear its costs. In our research, we studied this phenomenon through exploratory surveys, interviews and desk research on the varieties of energy prosumers in Austria.

The empirical analysis has revealed initial findings we want to discuss, related to different dimensions of contestation (conceptual, social, institutional, and policy-related):

- First, we propose a typology of motivational and organisational differences among EP initiatives (elaborating on Vogler/Kump 2023). This typology provides a starting point for understanding conceptual contestations arising from EP oscillating between (economic/ecological) efficiency and solidarity-oriented models.

- At the individual level, existing generation capacities are primarily utilised rather than expanded. Urban groups such as tenants face limited access to EP. We therefore want to explore how EP can act as a democratically accepted transition element, e.g. through solidarity-based, collective, and institutionally supported models, including new urban–rural linkages to avoid.

# Abstracts

## **Socio-Ecological Transformation and Spatial Belonging: Resistant Subjectivities in Times of Change**

*Angelika Gabauer, TU Wien*

Urban planning measures aimed at socio-ecological transformation – often framed within crisis discourses and climate imperatives – frequently provoke backlash. Such resistance is rarely based solely on “rational” objections and equally operates at symbolic and affective levels. Emotional attachments to familiar spatial arrangements and anxieties about social change can make even small-scale interventions, such as adding cycling lanes and reducing parking spaces, trigger broader rejection of shifting socio-material dynamics. These reactions extend beyond mobility practices and reflect concerns about the social fabric of neighbourhoods, changing value systems and everyday social interactions. Contestations often hinge on belonging and entitlement, expressed, for example, when long-term residents invoke strong place attachments and memories to assert authority over what is considered “normal” for a neighbourhood. Such struggles over who defines the neighbourhood and who counts as “truly local” can intersect with exclusionary attitudes toward perceived “strangers”, thereby reinforcing patterns of alienation and social division within broader transformation processes.

This contribution argues for a deeper engagement with how subjectivities are formed and lived through urban space. Personal life-course trajectories, memories and identities are inscribed into places, shaping how individuals experience and respond to change. A practice-theoretical perspective is proposed that moves beyond conventional structure–agency dualisms and understands identities as continuously produced through social practices. This approach foregrounds both the structuring power of socio-cultural norms, planning interventions and material conditions, as well as the agency of subjects whose responses are shaped by biographically embedded dispositions and embodied experiences. By starting from the subject, the analysis extends urban transformation debates, which are often dominated by structural or policy-level perspectives, towards a more nuanced understanding that integrates research on subject formation into studies of urban transformation.

Empirically, the contribution draws on a qualitative interview study combined with ethnographic research on older people’s experiences of “ageing in place” within Vienna’s transforming urban landscapes. The study shows how residents negotiate change at the intersection of past memories and embodied practices in the present, often navigating, resisting, or reinterpreting transformation in ways that reveal the ambivalent and contested nature of socio-ecological transitions. At the level of planning theory, these findings call for an agonistic and affect-informed perspective that treats conflict as intrinsic to planning and challenges consensus-oriented participation by acknowledging emotions and passions as essential to democratising urban transformation processes.

# Abstracts

## Contestation or contestations? De-colonising epistemologies through the lens of the foundational economy

*Hans Volmar, Technical University Dresden*

Growth-dependent capitalist accumulation lies at the heart of climate breakdown (Foster 2015). Within this system of accumulation, cities have developed as nodal points of a global economy (Sassen 1990) based on the continuous redistribution of wealth within countries (Harvey 2012) as well as the exploitation of natural resources and labour in the Global South (Brand & Wissen 2017). Consequently, there is much emphasis on the role of cities in eco-social transformations, as sites of unbounded consumption (Swyngedouw 2006), as well as its contestations (Brenner et al. 2009). The Foundational Economy has developed as a key concept proposing an alternative for organising urban economies (FEC 2018). At its heart lies a sectoral understanding of the economy, with some being foundational to the satisfaction of human needs, some necessary, and some harmful (Calafati et al. 2023). One key insight to take away from this is that underlying conflicts and resulting contestations of eco-social transformations are not about “the economy” but about specific economic sectors that are not foundational (Bärnthaler et al. 2023).

However, the Foundational Economy is a concept that was developed in Europe against the backdrop of the very specific historical and conceptual context of the welfarist European city (FEC 2018). As there is growing recognition of a lingering Eurocentrism in research around de/post-growth and ecological economics (Dengler & Seebacher 2019; Escobar 2015), there is the need for decolonising Eurocentric epistemologies (cf. Robinson 2015) – including the Foundational Economy, which is hardly discussed in the context of foundational provision in the GS (but see Dengler et al. 2023).

In my contribution, I would like to present the outline of a planned research project, specifically the first working package, which provides a systematic overview of concepts and practices pertaining to foundational provisioning in a Global South context. It seeks to answer the following RQ: What concepts and practices are discussed in the context of foundational provisioning in cities of the Global South?

The contribution to the workshops is twofold:

- 1.) Draw attention to the injustices of global patterns of unequal exchange and widen the scope of (Eurocentric) eco-social research;
- 2.) Enable a discussion on how concepts such as the FE can constructively engage with concept and practices, as well as forms of contestations from the GS.



# Abstracts

## **Contested Winds: Narratives, Ownership and Socio-Environmental Dynamics in Spain's Renewable Energy Transition**

Carlotta Terhorst, JKU Linz

This work explores the contested dynamics of renewable energy transitions in Galicia and Asturias, Spain, focusing on the socio-environmental and political tensions surrounding onshore and offshore wind energy projects. These regions, critical to Spain's renewable energy targets, have become sites of resistance, as fishing communities, environmental organizations, and cultural heritage advocates challenge the dominance of external corporate actors and the exclusion of local voices in decision-making processes. Contestation has been fueled not only by material concerns, such as land-use conflicts and threats to biodiversity, but also by competing discourses about what a "just" and "sustainable" energy transition should entail. To analyze these dynamics, this study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how different stakeholders construct and contest narratives about renewable energy projects.

This includes analyzing policy documents, corporate communications, media coverage, and semi-structured interviews with fishermen, environmental activists, and policymakers. CDA is complemented by Ownership Network Mapping, which traces the concentration of ownership and control within the Spanish energy sector, linking discourses about transformation to the material realities of governance and power. The preliminary findings highlight how dominant discourses of renewable energy as a driver of economic growth and decarbonization often clash with local narratives emphasizing cultural heritage, environmental stewardship, and community agency. The ownership structures are still to be examined but might give an extra level of insight in these kinds of tensions. By centering the voices of fishing communities and other marginalized stakeholders, I aim to offer insights into how more inclusive and participatory approaches to energy transitions can be developed and I would like to discuss how to look at ownership structures in such cases as a researcher.

# Abstracts

## **Kaffeekränzchen: an approach towards spaces of contestation**

*Lukas Dörrie, Uni Münster / Kompost Ensemble*

Kaffeekränzchen are a hedonistic act of sharing cake and coffee in rural regions in Germany. They are locally situated institutions beyond state or capital and are organised as commons-based peer production. These non-commercial, temporary spatial encounters are shaped by a two-fold social architecture that can be productive for understanding contestation.

Firstly, participants with differing ideologies may be brought together at small coffee tables. Even if unmoderated, their exchange is likely to address areas of conflict; contestations become tangible and open to contradiction and may lead to moments of irritation.

Secondly, the commoning-aspect of a Kaffeekränzchen may produce resonances and empowerment, strengthen relationships and build alliances among participants. From a methodological perspective, this social architecture may enable us to learn about contestation and empowerment while also facilitating change.

The Kompost Ensemble has experimented with this method in various settings. Whilst enjoying plum cake, we learned about singing clubs that struggle to find new members, about the new housing estate where young families live – who, in the opinion of some, are not often enough seen in the village – and about the different experiences of arrival and exclusion of women, who have married 'into' the village.

# Abstracts

## Democracy and sustainability on the brink?

*Margaret Haderer, TU Wien*  
*Karoline Kalke, IGN, WU Wien*

Diagnoses such as the “end of liberal democracy” (Patzner 2023) at hands of its authoritarian enemies or the “dying of democracies” (Levitsky/Ziblatt 2019) have become prominent in recent social and democratic theory. The rise of these diagnoses correlates with the rise of the far right (Pirro 2023). Yet not only liberal democracy is under pressure, but also socio-ecological transformation efforts towards greater sustainability. Backlashes against Barcelona’s super blocks or against Germany’s Renewable Energy Sources Act [“Heizungsgesetz”] are just two cases in point. For some, sustainability as a guiding principle for socio-ecological transformations has become outpaced by resilience and adaption (Adloff 2024, Folkers 2022, Staab 2022). For others, sustainability as a transformation goal that hinges on and is secured by democratic participation is “dead” (Blühdorn 2023).

So what’s the status quo? Are both, democracy and socio-ecological transformation (and assumptions about their interrelatedness) on the brink, outpaced or even dead? And what does this mean for socio-ecological transformation efforts at the urban level? The goal of this contribution (whose background is a book chapter in “Die sozial-ökologische Transformation der Welt” edited by K.W. Brand & Bornemann, forthcoming) is to shed light on the intersection of democracy and sustainability.

We deliver an inventory of current debates of transformations of democracy by the far right and the rise of post-sustainability in political and environmental sociology. And we take a position: namely that poorly understood and unresolved eco-social class conflicts are one contributing factor to the current anti-democratic backlash against eco-social transformations. We argue that conflicts in eco-social transformations are more likely to be navigated if their class character were better understood (the task of sociologists) and paid attention to in concrete, eco-social transformations (the task of policy makers and planners).

# Abstracts

## **Politicizing policy in turbulent democracies engaged in war and conflict: The backlash against eco-social transformations in 2022-2025 Israel**

*Lia Levin, Bob Shapell School of Social Work, Tel Aviv University, Israel*

The movement toward an eco-social prism for policymaking and the promotion of welfare sustainability (as well as sustainable welfare), is of prime importance and relevance the world over. Like other policy trends, it is developed, discussed, and locally applied differing in each country. Based on data from 2001 and 2015, Hasanaj (2023) put Israel along the nations that may be considered “a prospective emerging eco-welfare state regime” (p. 55). Comparing public attitudes toward eco-social protection between 1993, 2000, and 2010, Jakobsson et al. (2018) found that at the baseline measurement, Israelis’ willingness to pay for environmental protection was high compared to other countries, but dropped between 2000-2010 (this opposite to support for income redistribution). Local research from more than a decade ago revealed that on average, Israelis supported the government being more involved in promoting eco-social policies, though with significant variations between religious and ethnic groups (Bendas-Jacob et al., 2012). In other words, surfacing trends in Israel had led many to presume that it was on a promising (albeit winding) path toward expanding the state’s engagement in eco-social and sustainable welfare policymaking and implementation. This presumption was backed by Israel’s until-recently consistent economic strength and prospects (OECD, 2025). Moreover, sustainable welfare is even implied as core to welfare service provision and management in the Code of Ethics of Israel’s Association of Social Workers (2018).

However, since most of the above-mentioned research was conducted and published, eco-social discourse and policy in Israel have taken a sharp turn for the worse. This has been most evident in two areas: one is a complete disconnect between environmental and welfare policy, possibly attributed to an unleashed politization of both. The second is the populist treatment of eco-social and sustainable welfare aspects of the outcomes of the October 7th war. In my talk, I will review examples of how discourse on eco-social policy and sustainable welfare unfolds in a country that has, in a short span of time, experienced democratic destabilization, political polarization, widespread social protest, and war. This will be discussed regarding lessons that can be learned from the Israeli case on the fragility of early-stage eco-social and sustainable welfare policymaking, and on the latter’s susceptibility to being sidelined by more conservative policymaking trends in the face of intensified strife and conflict.

# Abstracts

## **Spaces of Contestation in Vienna's New Social Housing: Negotiating Affordability and Green Transformation**

*Petr Kubala Kodenko, Institute of European Ethnology, University of Vienna; Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences*

My contribution addresses a central conflict in contemporary urban policy: the tension between the imperative to provide affordable housing and the necessity of adhering to planetary boundaries. While mass construction is often presented as the solution to the housing crisis, it simultaneously deepens the ecological crisis through emissions and resource consumption. This clash, sometimes called the eco-social paradox – raising environmental standards through green construction and retrofitting can reduce emissions but threaten affordability, risking eco gentrification and renovictions – creates new spaces of contestation where social and ecological objectives collide.

Drawing on ongoing qualitative research in Vienna, this contribution explores how these tensions manifest in practice. Vienna's model of New Social Housing (NSH), which encompasses municipal, limited-profit, and collaborative projects, serves as a real-world laboratory for identifying synergies and navigating conflicts. The research aims to analyse how the contradictions between affordability and sustainability are perceived, negotiated, and potentially left unresolved by key actors—from architects and developers to representatives of public institutions. Methodologically, the contribution is based on 17 semi-structured interviews and presents preliminary findings related to two types of projects. These include the ambitious eco-retrofitting (decarbonisation) of the iconic Alterlaa housing estate (the 'Decarb Alterlaa' project), where preventing 'renovictions' is a key challenge, and newly emerging collaborative housing project at the Viennese Northwest bahnhof.

The contribution thus offers empirical insights into the dynamics of contestation in the field of affordable and ecological housing. Furthermore, it contributes to the discussion on planning and governance approaches capable of constructively engaging with these deep-rooted conflicts and stabilising democratically legitimised pathways towards eco-social transformation. The work is part of a broader research effort on "Affordable Housing within Planetary Boundaries" and seeks feedback on the empirical part as well as on conceptual framing.

# Abstracts

## Exploring local relationships in place-making processes of grassroots innovation initiatives: barriers and pathways

*Roman Hausmann, Institute for Ecological Economics, Vienna University of Economics and Business*

*Andrew C. Stirling, Science Policy Research Unit, University of Sussex*

*Anne-Kathrin Schwab, Vechta Institute of Sustainability Transformation in Rural Areas, University of Vechta*

In the workshop, I aim to contribute my conceptual and empirical insights on the role of 'grassroots innovation initiatives' in place-based practices of social ecological transformation, with a focus on contested relationships between grassroots activists and other local social groups. To do so, I will present the findings of an action research project that explores the factors that shape such relationships. Building these ties with wider communities is crucial to the local effectiveness of grassroots innovation, yet in practice these relationships can be distant and strained. Despite its importance, reasons for this practical problem are insufficiently understood in the literature on grassroots innovation.

Developing and using a relational theoretical framework for place-based GI transitions, our research thus addresses the research question: How do the actions and goals of grassroots innovation actors shape relationships with other actors in co-creating local places? Accordingly, we conducted a qualitative single-case study of a German grassroots initiative in the context of rural solidarity-based provisioning. We identify five factors related to the initiative's approaches that influence such relationships: production of visible outputs, radicalism in self-portrayal, a pluralist approach, outreach activities and outward orientation, and awareness of current standing in their region.

We discuss these findings against our relational framework, which links GI place-making with three other theories: the pathways approach, intermediacy, and boundary work. Our data not only confirm that grassroots initiatives are marginalised by powerful incumbent institutions and actors – as has been suggested previously – but also show that such initiatives themselves can close down and neglect divergent pathways of local actors, thereby hindering relationship-building. This research extends the theoretical understanding of the barriers and opportunities for grassroots innovation initiatives to induce local transitions and offers practical lessons.

# Abstracts

## **Fast (and furious) policy: The 15-minute City in Oxford**

*Micaela Mancini, Regional Science and Economic Geography - Cycle XXXVIII, Gran Sasso Science Institute*

The 15-minute city (15mC) has gained global traction as a model for sustainable urbanism in post-pandemic times. However, the same features that facilitate its widespread adoption also open it to confusion, contestation, and ideological framing. This paper examines how the 15mC rationale mutates as it rapidly travels from one place to another (the “fast”), focusing on how its uptake in Oxford, UK, provoked intense backlash (the “furious”).

Conceptually, this paper draws on scholarship on policy mobilities, which offers a relational and constructivist lens to understand how policies, ideas, and knowledge circulate across different places, particularly in urban contexts. It aims at continuing the exploration of “fast policy” (Peck & Theodore, 2015), looking at how in its swift travel and sequencing the 15mC exemplifies a contradictory urban condition: a model subtly informed by neoliberal governance logics while also aspiring to reimagine urban life. Empirically, the study draws on qualitative analysis of planning and transport documents, local and national media coverage, and twelve semi-structured interviews with policymakers, activists, and residents. The findings show how the 15mC became entangled with Oxford’s traffic policy and, in the absence of early and substantive participation, ambiguity was channeled into an us-versus-them populist dynamic, further appropriated by right-wing and conspiracy actors. At the same time, contestation surfaced legitimate concerns about uneven accessibility and historic path dependencies, indicating that ambiguity can also catalyse more inclusive problem definitions when governance actively engages with it.

The paper contributes to debates on contestation in eco-social transformations by exploring how global planning imaginaries are locally remade through affect, institutions, and ideology.

Open questions: Why, at this delicate historical conjuncture of health and climate crises, did the 15mC as a global imaginary crystallise such diverse concerns? What roles and responsibilities should scholars assume in public policy debates that are highly politicised and mediated? And how can we act firmly on climate emergencies while avoiding a politics of subtraction – making people feel heard, expanding participation, and ensuring measures do not read as “taking away” everyday capacities?

# Abstracts

## **Walking into Contestation: City Walks as Spaces of Climate Dialogue and Pre-Figuration for Eco-Social Transformation in Munich**

*Filipa Reis, Vienna University of Economics and Business (WU)*

*Elisabeth Hartmann, Vienna University of Economics and Business (WU)*

Contestation is intrinsic to eco-social transformations, shaping how conflicts over urban transitions emerge, evolve and are negotiated (Patterson, 2023; Pel, 2021; Patterson et al., 2025). Yet mainstream climate communication often fails to engage meaningfully, oscillating between tokenistic inclusion (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Irvin & Stansbury, 2004) and the cooptation of participation in governance (Fiorino, 2021). Our contribution builds on empirical transdisciplinary research (Hartmann et al., 2024) that examined a climate justice city walk in Munich through qualitative group discussion and exploratory questionnaires. Participants connected global urgencies to local infrastructures while reflecting on climate emotions, barriers such as wealth-induced complacency, and governance inertia. Contestation surfaced in metaphors of the “slow turtle” of climate policy, critiques of vested interests, and frustration with bureaucratic hurdles, yet also expressed through constructive anger and solidarity. These dynamics indicate that city walks can operate as prefigurative arenas, where participants articulate imaginaries and conflicts in ways that might otherwise remain latent until more polarising interventions unfold (Yates, 2015). The Kolumbusstraße “green superblock” experiment exemplifies how temporary interventions can act as flashpoints of contestation, particularly when governance logics and local imaginaries collide (Abendzeitung, 2023; Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2023; TUM, 2023). While such tactical experiments hold transformative promise, research shows they are also highly vulnerable to backlash, populist mobilisation, and political obstruction (Acuto & Leffel, 2025; Hopkins, 2025; Wolfram, 2015; Mattila et al., 2025). We propose extending the city walk methodology to include residents directly affected by forthcoming interventions. By surfacing contestations and emotional landscapes in advance, city walks could help anticipate conflicts and prevent the kinds of disputes that derailed the Kolumbusstraße initiative.

We further conceptualise the city walk as a methodological innovation within participatory planning: an anticipatory arena embedded in planning cycles where climate emotions, second order beliefs, and contestations are openly negotiated (Becker, 2023). Unlike conventional formats that risk tokenism (Fiorino, 2021; Haase et al., 2022), city walks offer low-threshold, emotionally resonant spaces that link scientific expertise with lived experience. Additionally it aligns with bottom-up resilience planning by integrating citizens’ affective responses into collective strategies (Kythreotis et al., 2023). This raises a guiding question: How can city walks be designed to distinguish between contestation as democratic expression and as obstruction, while also integrating climate emotions into participatory governance? By bridging critical planning, climate communication, and urban experimentation, this approach presents city walks as an innovative governance tool that embraces contestation to foster inclusive, just, and resilient eco-social transformations.



# Abstracts

## **Chinese climate statecraft: governing low-carbon transitions through state campaigns, local adaptation, and market-making**

*Fangzhu Zhang, Bartlett School of Planning, University College London*

*Fulong Wu, Bartlett School of Planning, University College London*

*Handuo Deng, Bartlett School of Planning, University College London*

As the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases, China has announced its push toward carbon neutrality. However, a more strategic design for low-carbon transition contrasts with dispersed policy implementation in cities. This article attributes the puzzle to an insufficient understanding of statecraft, which translates decarbonisation visions into urban practices. Beyond stereotypes of authoritarianism or neoliberalism, Chinese climate statecraft is characterised by three key features: the centrally initiated climate campaigns and institutions, multi-scalar state actions, and market-making that directs state capital into climate initiatives. Drawing on two city-level cases (Wuxi and Chengdu), we demonstrate how Chinese statecraft is shaping China's urban low-carbon transition and discuss the potential implications of green gentrification and financial risks during the eco-social transformation in China.

# Abstracts

## Urban activism to improve the environmental quality of Polish cities in the times of the Anthropocene

*Katarzyna Gorczyca, Institute of Geography and Spatial Management, Jagiellonian University in Kraków*

Over the past decade, citizens in post-socialist cities have significantly expanded their influence in grassroots environmental initiatives. This paper examines different forms of local communities advocacy for nature protection in cities. Unequal opportunities for involvement in decision-making processes can lead to urban conflicts and serious problems in city management. The actions taken by residents to adapt cities to eco-social transformations may become more radical if their voices remain unheard and local authorities continue to adhere to a business-as-usual approach.

The aim of the research is to determine the impact of pro-environmental social movements on urban policy in Polish metropolitan areas. Building on the concept of environmental justice, our comparative analysis of grassroots initiatives emphasizes the role of local communities in improving the quality of the urban environment. The study analysed activities by local communities aimed at improving air and water quality and preserving green areas in major metropolitan areas in Poland—Krakow, Warsaw, Wroclaw, and Tricity. We also analyse actions taken by the youth climate movements. The research addressed the following questions: What actions do urban activists take to improve the urban environment and ensure fair access to environmental resources? How bottom up civic initiatives could influence local governments in the creation of an urban environment?

The actions and effects of bottom-up initiatives were identified based on the content of policy documents, programs, media discourse analysis, participant observation, and in-depth interviews. The research results take into account good practices, e.g. in the field of improving air quality, as well as long-term efforts to protect green areas in cities. The article presents alternative models of city development that implement pro-environmental and social goals, which emerged due to pressure from grassroots initiatives. The research is carried out as part of the project "Social processes of shaping urban space in time of adaptation to climate change" financed by the Polish National Science Center, Sonata-17 program.

# Locations

The workshop will be held at TU Wien, Institute of Spatial Planning, Karlsgasse 11, 1040 Wien, Ground Floor.

## Getting There:

From the subway/tram/bus station Karlsplatz: approximately a 5-10-minute walk.

For up-to-date public transport information, please consult Wiener Linien or your preferred journey planner.



## Further Information

If you have any questions before the workshop, please feel free to get in touch with us at [lucas.barning@univie.ac.at](mailto:lucas.barning@univie.ac.at). Phone: +49 176 819 70 440.



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