Urban Planet

Global urbanization promises better services, stronger economies, and more connections; it also carries risks and unforeseeable consequences. To deepen our understanding of this complex process and its importance for global sustainability, we need to build interdisciplinary knowledge around a systems approach.

*Urban Planet* takes an integrative look at our urban environment, bringing together scholars from a diverse range of disciplines: from sociology and political science to evolutionary biology, geography, economics, and engineering. It includes the perspectives of often neglected voices: architects, journalists, artists, and activists. The book provides a much needed cross-scale perspective, connecting challenges and solutions on a local scale with drivers and policy frameworks on a regional and global scale. The authors argue that to overcome the major challenges we are facing, we must embark on a large-scale reinvention of how we live together, grounded in inclusiveness and sustainability. This title is also available Open Access from www.cambridge.org/core.

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The Urban Planet
Knowledge Towards Sustainable Cities

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Contents

List of Figures x
List of Tables xv
List of Contributors xvi
Preface xxi

Introduction: Situating Knowledge and Action for an Urban Planet
Susan Parnell, Thomas Elmqvist, Timon McPhearson, Harini Nagendra, and Sverker Sörlin

Part I Dynamic Urban Planet 17

1 Global Urbanization: Perspectives and Trends
Dagmar Haase, Burak Güneralp, Bharat Dahiya, Xuemei Bai, and Thomas Elmqvist

2 Embracing Urban Complexity
Marina Alberti, Timon McPhearson, and Andrew Gonzalez

3 Understanding, Implementing, and Tracking Urban Metabolism Is Key to Urban Futures
Abel Chávez, Chris Kennedy, Bin Chen, Marian Chertow, Tim Baynes, Shaoqing Chen, and Xuemei Bai

4 Live with Risk While Reducing Vulnerability
Patricia Romero-Lankao, Olga Wilhelmi, and Mikhail Chester

5 Harness Urban Complexity for Health and Well-Being
Franz W. Gatzweiler, Jo Ivey Boufford, and Anna Pomykala

6 Macroeconomy and Urban Productivity
Michael Cohen and Lena Simet

Part II Global Urban Sustainable Development 147

7 Rethinking Urban Sustainability and Resilience
David Simon, Corrie Griffith, and Harini Nagendra

8 Indicators for Measuring Urban Sustainability and Resilience
David Gómez-Álvarez and Eduardo López-Moreno with Edgardo Bilsky, Karina Blanco Ochoa, and Efrén Osorio Lara
## Contents

### Part I  
The UN, the Urban Sustainable Development Goal, and the New Urban Agenda  
180  
Andrew Rudd, David Simon, Maruxa Cardama, Eugénie L. Birch, and Aromar Revi

### Part II  
Utilizing Urban Living Laboratories for Social Innovation  
197  
Sandra Naumann, McKenna Davis, Michele-Lee Moore, and Kes McCormick

### Part III  
Can Big Data Make a Difference for Urban Management?  
218  
Ulrich Mans, Sarah Giest, and Thomas Baar

### Part III  
Collaborative and Equitable Urban Citizen Science  
239  
Karen MacClune, Kanmani Venkateswaran, Bolanle Wahab, Sascha Petersen, Nivedita Mani, Bijay Kumar Singh, and Ajay Kumar Singh

### Part III  
Sustainability Transformation Emerging from Better Governance  
263  
Patricia Romero-Lankao, Niki Frantzeskaki, and Corrie Griffith

### Part III  
To Transform Cities, Support Civil Society  
281  
Niki Frantzeskaki, Adina Dumitru, Julia Wittmayer, Flor Avelino, and Michele-Lee Moore

### Part III  
Governing Urban Sustainability Transformations: The New Politics of Collaboration and Contestation  
303  
Sarah Burch, Sara Hughes, Patricia Romero-Lankao, and Heike Schroeder

### Part IV  
Seeds of the Future in the Present: Exploring Pathways for Navigating Towards “Good” Anthropocenes  
327  
Laura M. Pereira, Elena Bennett, Reinette (Oonsie) Biggs, Garry Peterson, Timon McPhearson, Albert Norström, Per Olsson, Rika Preiser, Ciara Raudsepp-Hearne, and Joost Vervoort

### Part IV  
Provocations from Practice  
351

#### Part IV  
Sustainability, Karachi, and Other Irreconcilables  
353  
Mahim Maher

#### Part IV  
What Knowledge Do Cities Themselves Need?  
357  
Robert McDonald

#### Part IV  
Banksy and the Biologist: Redrawing the Twenty-First Century City  
359  
Debra Roberts

#### Part IV  
Every Community Needs a Forest of Imagination  
362  
Andrew Grant
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>How Can We Shift from an Image-Based Society to a Life-Based Society?</td>
<td>Cecilia Herzog</td>
<td>365</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>A Chimera Called “Smart Cities”</td>
<td>Gurbir Singh</td>
<td>368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Beyond Fill-in-the-Blank Cities</td>
<td>Cristina Rumbaitis del Rio</td>
<td>371</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Persuading Policy-Makers to Implement Sustainable City Plans</td>
<td>Pengfei Xie</td>
<td>374</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>To Live or Not to Live: Urbanization and the Knowledge Worker</td>
<td>Takeshi Takama</td>
<td>376</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>City Fragmentation and the Commons</td>
<td>Anna Dietzsch</td>
<td>379</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Cities as Global Organisms</td>
<td>Oliver Hillel and Manuela Gervasi</td>
<td>384</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>From Concrete Structures to Green Diversity: Ecological Landscape Design for Restoring Urban Nature and Children’s Play</td>
<td>Keitaro Ito and Tomomi Sudo</td>
<td>386</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Building Cities: A View from India</td>
<td>Radhika Khosla</td>
<td>388</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>The False Distinctions of Socially Engaged Art and Art</td>
<td>Todd Lester</td>
<td>391</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Overcoming Inertia and Reinventing “Retreat”</td>
<td>Andrew Revkin</td>
<td>394</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Money for Old Rope: The Risks of Finance Taking Over the New Urban Agenda</td>
<td>Richard Friend</td>
<td>397</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Aesthetic Appreciation of Tagging</td>
<td>Emma Arnold</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Understanding Arab Cities: From National to Local</td>
<td>Huda Shaka</td>
<td>404</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Who Can Implement the Sustainable Development Goals in Urban Areas?</td>
<td>David Satterthwaite</td>
<td>408</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
##Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Authors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Achieving Sustainable Cities by Focusing on the Urban Underserved: An Action Agenda for the Global South</td>
<td>Anjali Mahendra and Victoria Beard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>The Rebellion of Memory</td>
<td>Lorena Zárate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Cities Don’t Need “Big” Data – They Need Innovations That Connect to the Local</td>
<td>Mary Rowe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Digital Urbanization and the End of Big Cities</td>
<td>Gora Mboup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>The Art of Engagement / Activating Curiosity</td>
<td>Mary Miss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Nairobi’s Illegal City-Makers</td>
<td>Lorraine Amollo Ambole</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>Active Environmental Citizens with Receptive Government Officials Can Enact Change</td>
<td>Kate Scherer and Umamah Masum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>The Sea Wall</td>
<td>Paul Downton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>Academics and Nonacademics: Who’s Who in Changing the Culture of Knowledge Creation?</td>
<td>Kareem Buyana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>Private Fears in Public Spaces</td>
<td>Lesley Lokko</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>Leadership: Science and Policy as Uncomfortable Bedfellows</td>
<td>Thomas Tang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>Sketches of an Emotional Geography Towards a New Citizenship</td>
<td>Diana Wiesner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>The Shift in Urban Technology Innovation from Top-Down to Bottom-Up Sources</td>
<td>Reyhaneh Vahidian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>Greening Cities: Our Pressing Moral Imperative</td>
<td>Troy Pickard</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Contents

50  Recognition Deficit and the Struggle for Unifying City Fragments  455
          Pranab Kishore Das

51  Disrespecting the Knowledge of Place  458
          Rebecca Salminen Witt

52  Broadening Our Vision to Find a New Eco-Spiritual Way of Living  460
          Guillermina Ramirez

Synthesis:  New Integrated Urban Knowledge for the Cities We Want  462
  Xuemei Bai, Thomas Elmqvist, Niki Frantzeskaki, Timon McPhearson,
  David Simon, David Maddox, Mark Watkins, Patricia Romero-Lankao, Susan Parnell,
  Corrie Griffith, and Debra Roberts
Figures

0.1 Cities and urban areas will house nearly all of the world's net population growth over the next two decades with 1.4 million people added to urban areas each week (UN 2014), equal to roughly the population of Stockholm. Cities are engines of national and global growth, accounting for 80 percent of global economic output. In China, four city clusters account for nearly half of China's GDP (Shao et al. 2006). Cities are also key drivers of global energy demand and greenhouse gas emissions, accounting for around 70 percent of both (IEA 2008). Meanwhile, urban land area could triple globally from 2000 to 2030 (Seto et al. 2012). This is equivalent to adding an area larger than Manhattan every day. Accelerating urban development boosts private consumption (Dobbs et al. 2008) and requires significant infrastructure, including carbon intensive manufacturing and construction consuming massive quantities of concrete and steel consumption, particularly in the early phases of urbanization (Wang 2007).


1.2 Median age by country for 2015. A youth bulge is evident for Africa and to a lesser extent for South and Southeast Asia and Central America. Source: Jerker Lokrantz/Azote, modified after UN Factbook.

1.3 Facebook connections worldwide. Source: Jerker Lokrantz/Azote, modified after Facebook www.facebook.com/.

1.4 Regions of urban shrinkage in the world. Source: Kabisch et al. 2010.

2.1 Cities’ patterns from space NASA City Night Lights
1) New York City, 2) Paris, 3) Cairo, and 4) Tokyo.

2.2 The scaling of gross domestic product as a function of city population. Source: Bettencourt 2013.

2.3 Examples of high-resolution tree species diversity (Street Tree Census, NYC), property values (Assessor data, NYC), and energy intensity (Energy consumption, NYC).

3.1 Urban population by community size for cities of five unique sizes. Note that smaller cities/communities of 500,000 inhabitants or less will continue to house the majority (approximately 50 percent) of the world’s urban population. Source: Jerker Lokrantz/Azote, modified after Chávez (2017).
3.2 Conceptual diagram of urban metabolism. A proportion of the resources that flow into cities become urban stock, while others enable and drive various anthropogenic functions and eventually produce intended or unintended outputs that stay within the system boundary or are exported beyond the boundary, with various impacts on the physical environment, flora and fauna, and associated ecological processes. Urban metabolism is shaped and regulated by factors such as urban policy, urban governance, culture, and individual behaviors. Source: Jerker Lokrantz/Azote, modified after Bai (2016).


4.1 A flooded house in Mexico City. Floods are major contributors to infrastructure and housing damage among poor populations in cities. Source: Patricia Romero-Lankao et al. 2014a.

4.2 Urban risk. This conceptual diagram shows urban risk not only as a result of hazard exposure and vulnerability, but also as shaped by five interacting development domains: sociodemographic, economic, technological, ecological, and governance. These domains operate within a wider context of interactions between environment and society. Source: Romero-Lankao and Gnatz 2016 modified after Field et al. 2012. Design Jerker Lokrantz/Azote.

4.3 Capacity and actual responses vary across scale, that is, across a household, neighborhood, and city region. Source: Romero-Lankao et al. 2014a.

5.1 Broad determinants of health. Urban health experts now know that the built, physical, social, and economic environments are crucial factors in maintaining and improve health. Source: Jerker Lokrabtz/Azote.

5.2 Urban health and well-being emerges as an outcome of urban system structure and processes and change factors from outside the system. Source: Jerker Lokrantz/Azote.

5.3 Simplified interconnections between urban transportation, air quality, climate change, and public health. Source: Jerker Lokrantz/Azote, modified after Lung (2014).

5.4 Dynamic relationships between variables for food security and the proportion of obese people in urban communities. Source: Jerker Lokrantz/Azote, modified after Proust and Newell (2016).
List of Figures


6.2 The relationship between income per capita (current USD) and Gini coefficient in Latin American countries. Source: Jerker Lokrantz/Azote, modified after UN Habitat (2014). 136

6.3 Cumulative change in productivity (orange) and hourly compensation (green) in the United States between 1945 and 2015. Source: Jerker Lokrantz/Azote, modified after EPI (Bivens and Michel 2015). 137

6.4 Changes in the Gini coefficient, as well as the differential between the salaries earned by the richest and the poorest 10 percent (a metric called D10/D1) in Bogotá between 1991 and 2010. Source: Jerker Lokrantz/Azote, modified after UN-Habitat (2014). 138

6.5 The relationship between GDP per capita and the shadow economy as a percentage of total GDP on a global average. Source: Jerker Lokrantz/Azote, modified after Slonimczyk (2014). 139

8.1 The evolution of urban indicators. 167

9.1 UN Summit Adopts Post-2015 Development Agenda. A view of the General Assembly Hall following the adoption of the post-2015 development agenda by the UN summit convened for that purpose. Source: UN Photo/Cia Pak, New York, 2015. 184

9.2 The place of indicators in public policy. 188

12.1 Odo-Osun Spring in Ibadan North-East local government. Source: CNES/Airbus DS, DigitalGlobe/Esri, @OpenStreetMap. 245

12.2 Odo-Osun spring in 2010. Source: Grace Oloukoi. 247

12.3 Mahewa ward, Gorakhpur, India. Source: map provided by GEAG. 253

12.4 Dhaincha (center). Source: photo by GEAG. 254

16.1 Macroscale systemic change typically emerges from a long period of preparation that entails experimentation, innovation, and the formation of new coalitions at the micro-level. Proto-regimes that emerge from this preparatory phase typically only become institutionalized at a meso-level once a window of opportunity emerges in the form of a crisis or anticipated crisis. Our understanding of how these meso-level regimes can then effect larger-scale systemic change is still limited. The symbols indicate new configurations, where the social and ecological components of the system are connected in new ways. Source: Authors’ own. 330

16.2 Attributes of 120 urban relevant seeds from the Seeds of the Good Anthropocene database. These seeds are classified across five categories based on a) what type of action a seed is encouraging (stopping, reforming, or innovating activities); b) the status of the
seed (prototype, implemented, or a well-established project); c) which “anthrome” or social-ecological system the seed is oriented towards; d) what types of challenge of the Anthropocene the seed addresses; and e) the type of social-ecological integration the seed represents. The sum is greater than 100 percent because some categories are not mutually exclusive.

16.3 Urban seeds clustered into groups based on hierarchical clustering of the Anthropocene challenge(s) they address and their social-ecological type. 335

26.2 Walls isolate the street. Photograph by Anna Dietzsch. 380
26.3 When walls come down, space can flow. Credit: Anna Dietzsch. 382
26.4 Open private spaces are joined and opened up for common use. Credit: Anna Dietzsch. 383
26.5 A timeline of expanding São Paulo, but in 2100 nature starts to come back in through green corridors and open spaces. Credit: Anna Dietzsch. 383

33.1 Mural created by ROA for the 2013 Nuart Festival in Stavanger, Norway. Photograph taken in 2014. 401
33.2 A tag by Vrom Seier mimics the adjacent wrought-iron fence in Oslo, Norway. Photograph taken in 2014. 402
33.3 Various tags in Stavanger, Norway. Photograph taken in 2014. 402
36.1 Highest Urban Growth Expected in Asia and Africa. Source: Beard et al. 2016. 412
36.2 Comparison of city population and budget per capita in cities in Global South and North. Source: Beard et al. 2016. 413
36.3 Income distribution in cities and the urban underserved. Source: Beard et al. 2016. 414
36.4 Equity as an entry point to a more sustainable city – a theory of change. Source: Beard et al. 2016. 415
45.1 Makola Market, Accra, midday. Man carrying bathing sponges for sale. © L. Lokko, 2014. 442
47.1 The city doesn’t exist without an observer, by Diana Wiesner 446
47.2 Section of a drawing by Colectivo Bogotá Pinta Cerros, 2017. Citizens who participated printed their feelings for the mountains of the region with a 12-hand watercolor in 16 plates of 11.2 meters, representing the 57 kilometers of mountains near the city. 447
47.3 Soul Resilience, by María Cecilia Galindo. 448
47.4 A Child Holding a Painting by Walter J. Gonzalez called “My Future Bogotá”: from the south of the city he draws his image of the future. 448
List of Figures

47.5 Symphony of Democracy, by Diana Wiesner in collaboration with Daniela González. 449

S.1 No. of publications with “urban” as keyword 1950–2015 (Web of Science). 463

S.2 Current trends. 464

S.3 Urban system structure and interlinkages. The symbols represent various actors/constituents, structure, and processes across physical/built, social/economics, and ecological subsystems. The arrows represent complex processes and linkages within and between cities, and between cities and their hinterlands. The actors and constituents are typically self-organizing, and the structure, processes, and linkages and functions are dynamic and evolving, with nonlinear pathways. Source: Bai et al. 2016a. 474

S.4 Conceptualization of the interlinkages between factors and dynamic processes shaping urban futures. Visions are represented as societal goals influenced by worldviews, value systems, politics and power, culture and choices, and play an important role in intervention, innovations, and transformation that can lead to alternative and more desirable urban futures. Source: McPhearson et al. 2017, modified from Bai 2016b. 478
Tables

3.1 Simple univariate correlation matrix between per capita parameters for 27 of the world's megacities as of 2010 79
5.1 Urban system goods and services and examples of health benefits and risks 117
10.1 Characteristics of the selected urban living labs 203
10.2 Examples of projects supported by the Malmö Innovation Platform 205
11.1 Possible uses for data in creating more inclusive cities 229
12.1 Las Cruces, NM, stakeholder-identified extreme weather thresholds 250
12.2 Cost-benefit ratio of dhaincha cultivation 255
16.1 A brief comparison of each seed used in the mash-up 340
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Preface

The *Urban Planet* is the result of a collaborative project within Future Earth (www.futureearth.org). It emphasizes the need for a new knowledge generation agenda, given the urgency of understanding the sustainability challenges and options for a rapidly urbanizing planet. Our urban future will determine the viability and vitality of the human endeavor towards global sustainability. This centrality of cities to the sustainability of people, planet, and prosperity points to the need for continuous investments in an expanded and flexible urban science and practical knowledge generation that is forged out of innovative interdisciplinary and multisectoral understandings of the complex systems that both drive and derive from the prevalence of urban ways of being. Greater understanding of urbanization processes and the multiscale interactions and feedbacks with the earth system is required for addressing the complex issues related to urbanization and sustainability, and for aiding in the solutions. This book aims, therefore, not only to provide a synthesis of existing knowledge across the different disciplines, but also to showcase new ways of producing and integrating knowledge, extending the frontier of urban research, and providing new directions in research and practice that will help us achieve the cities we want now and in the future.

In addition to academic scholars, this book gathers important urban stakeholders from a diverse range of disciplines to jointly show ways of coproducing knowledge. These urban stakeholders are critical, because ours is a book that aspires to make a difference in the real world of city building, city renovation, and city invention. To do so, the ideas of academics and thought leaders are paralleled by voices on the front lines of urban development and change – by stakeholders such as journalists, artists, designers, architects, landscape architects, activists, youth, and urban practitioners from city governments to civil society – whose perspectives are typically left out of academic books. The fourth part of *The Urban Planet* comprises contributions by 39 such diverse stakeholders, from the perspective of where the urban “rubber hits the road.”

The *Urban Planet* thus draws from diverse authors and intellectual traditions to engage the emerging science and practice of cities, and evolving ideas about global urbanism. This large-scale undertaking (with over 100 contributors) represents a diverse range of disciplines as well as important urban stakeholders. This new generation of scholars will be responsible for producing the evolving analysis, knowledge, and methods necessary to spark the innovation that will be required to make cities the most efficient, equitable, and sustainable places to live. Much of what happens, both in cities and across the global urban system, will result from the actions of citizens and political decision-makers. But
knowledge gaps and poorly understood urban design – its patterns, processes, and risks – in our urban planet will inevitably lead to poor decisions. Solid knowledge and knowledge-driven practice will be key to the future of life on Earth.

As editors and authors, we put considerable effort into addressing the scale issues and heterogeneity in urban issues (for example, differences in geography, biophysical conditions, size, growth rate, socioeconomic conditions, and demography). This is to avoid the usual generalizations that flow from the typically small selection of northern hemisphere and Global North cities included in similar volumes. Furthermore, we have tried to apply a knowledge co-production mode of operation. The selection and assembly of the chapter-author teams intentionally include disciplinary, regional, and gender diversity for more holistic perspectives on the respective chapter topics. This is likewise true of the authors of the provocations, who represent many communities of practice from around the world in both the Global North and South.

We believe that integrating knowledge from science and practice – or, more abstract research ideas with lived experience – will be critical to building better cities. Decision-makers at various levels of government require knowledge that is both grounded in science and data, and also consistent with proven practice on the ground, at street and neighborhood levels. This belief led us to include both perspectives – academic, practitioner, and the many gradations between – in this volume as a single book, perspectives that are typically sequestered into separate forums.

But, as in real life, integrating diverse, even radically different, perspectives and points of view is challenging. Much of this process has evolved organically during the production of the book, allowing us to follow needs and address emerging issues in novel collaborations of authors. Indeed, we examined various approaches to integrating academic and practitioner perspectives: having practitioner responses interrogate academic chapters; interspersing academic and practitioner contributions; and gathering each point of view in their own section. In the end, we chose the latter path, and pursued three academic sections around major themes (Parts I, II, and III), and a section called “Provocations from Practice” (Part IV). We found that this arrangement best honored the unique contributions of each.

We can also see how different the perspective often are. There is still much work to be done to integrate research and practice into integrated urban knowledge. This book continues a march in that direction. While there are many profound differences among the chapters and sections, all share a common interest: discovering and sharing ideas that can help produce future cities that are better for both people and nature.
Preface

The Urban Planet

Structured in four major sections comprising 18 diverse academic chapters and 36 provocations written by nonacademic knowledge holders and practitioners, the book tracks the surge of urbanization globally. We pose this question: What new thinking is required to radically shift the urban trajectory onto a more sustainable path, a mandate for urbanism that international policy-makers provided when they endorsed the 2030 Agenda in 2015 (UN 2015) and the New Urban Agenda in 2016 (UN-Habitat 2016)? Taken together, the book’s contents speak to the new multilateral demand that cities be given greater prominence in development. They also reflect the complexity and range of city realities and highlight the multiple, even competing, concerns of what we may frame as existing or contemporary urban science.

The book’s four parts are I) Dynamic Urban Planet; II) Global Urban Sustainable Development; III) Urban Transformations to Sustainability – corresponding to the three crosscutting themes that underpin the research framework of Future Earth; and IV) Provocations from Practice.

Part I: Dynamic Urban Planet

In the first part, we seek to define the continuum of urbanity since there is a surprising lack of common understanding among scientific disciplines on what characterizes or defines an urban area or urbanization, making comparative and composite assessments of urban change difficult. This part of the book presents leading views, models, and new data from a diverse set of disciplines to advance our understanding of the urban, including the fundamental complexity of urban systems and how these intersect and interact with politics, justice, health, climate risks, and economics. The current framework of cities as social-technological systems is too narrow and should be complemented with the view of cities as complex social-ecological-technological systems that has recently advanced within urban ecology and social-ecological systems perspectives. This advance is critical given that the continuum of urbanity includes many characteristics and processes other than the particular density of people or land area covered by human-made structures. Furthermore, the conventional view of the urban-rural dichotomy is vastly outdated and needs to be challenged and replaced.

The first three chapters of the book deal with the different pathways of global urbanization; how they relate to different social, economic, historical, and geographical contexts, as well as different drivers and impacts; and the multifaceted dynamics of growing and shrinking urban areas. Different types of urban-rural interactions and urban teleconnections are introduced and
discussed. An important dimension is the shift from cities as social-technological systems to complex social-ecological-technological systems.

Chapter 3 focuses on urban metabolism and challenges in the Anthropocene. Chapter 4, on dynamics of risk and vulnerability, examines existing and forward-looking approaches to risk, vulnerability, and resilience – for example, in coastal, mountain, and desert cities as well as in rapidly growing, affluent, and shrinking cities. It discusses vulnerability and resilience at multiple scales (for example, from the city to the neighborhood), and it examines infrastructural resilience and its relationship to vulnerability as well as the significance of governance and politics in shaping urban risk.

Chapter 5, on urbanization and health, outlines the current major threats to urban health and well-being worldwide, for example, an aging population, the epidemiological shift from infectious to noncommunicable diseases, and climate change, which is changing both disease patterns and quality of life in cities. For coping with urban health challenges, a transdisciplinary systems approach is taken, which conceptualizes urban health disorders as emergent properties of urban systems. Among the lessons learned are that changing urban environments can have a broader and more cost-effective impact than changing individual behavior. As a result of health determinants being highly interconnected, a health-in-all-policies approach promises sustainable and equitable urban development outcomes.

Finally, Chapter 6 covers urbanization and macroeconomy and demonstrates that aggregate economic growth and productivity are closely correlated with urbanization levels. Yet, while urbanization and productivity regularly rise in tandem, not all cities are equally productive. The chapter explores explanations of why urban poverty and intra-urban inequalities continue to persist and even intensify despite increased per capita productivity. The chapter concludes with an outlook on future challenges and opportunities. Rising inequalities and pressures from global market economies are expected to increasingly affect cities, threatening economic and social opportunity. However, moving towards a green economy could have tangible and considerable positive effects on the environment, productivity, and economic growth. International collaboration also represents an opportunity to hold local and national governments accountable for their actions. Ultimately, proactive local governments are needed to reduce local constraints to productivity, as well as strong social programs and distributive mechanisms to create opportunities for all citizens.

**Part II: Global Urban Sustainable Development**

Although widely sloganized and even abused by greenwashing, sustainability as an aspirational and perhaps normative concept remains remarkably durable.
Ironically, perhaps, it is even experiencing something of a resurgence rather than being eclipsed by “resilience” as many had anticipated. This is explicable in at least three ways, namely that sustainability is broader and has resilience as one of its characteristics; that similar analytical ambiguities and operational weaknesses identified with respect to sustainability also apply to resilience; and that any such concept is open to contestation, discipline- or context-specific interpretation, and weakening through popularization.

The urban represents one crucial arena in which such debates are manifested, and the catalytic and often contradictory roles of towns and cities as fulcrums of population concentration, resource-intensive production, mobility, consumption, and both waste and opportunity generation – albeit in different combinations in different contexts – are now almost universally recognized. A key stimulus in this regard has been the explosion of research, political debate, and commitment to climate change mitigation, adaptation, and resilience. This has been further sharpened by increasing evidence of the devastating impact of increasingly severe and frequent extreme events on urban areas, both the highly vulnerable and the supposedly well protected and resilient.

All too often, however, debates over how to promote urban sustainability and resilience in progressive terms remain trapped in narratives that assume or imply that this is possible within cities in isolation from their hinterlands. Yet precisely because urban areas are not islands but integral parts of their natural, economic, and political regions, urban sustainability must be conceived and pursued as part of national and broader societal sustainability efforts.

The six chapters in this part examine ongoing conceptual (re)formulations and more practical initiatives to achieve urban sustainability by harnessing new information sources, technologies, and tools; creating and exploiting opportunities in international initiatives like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and New Urban Agenda; and by applying new approaches to engage key stakeholder groups, especially those normally marginalized by and from conventional urban planning, design, and management procedures in order to achieve greater traction, acceptability, and local appropriateness. Several connective threads weave throughout these chapters that are important to highlight, particularly as they offer key messages for urban sustainability research, policy, and practice.

The first major thread concerns equity and justice principles, and thus links to where Part I ended. For example, Chapter 7 begins by pointing out that the “social” sphere of the traditional three-pronged approach of sustainability discourse has been, to date, heavily underemphasized within both research and practice, while resilience efforts are often critiqued for lacking critical examination of underlying power structures or conditions that maintain the status quo. That is, inequality and corruption may be highly resilient systems, but
they are clearly undesirable if the goal is to foster greater livability in the era of global urbanization. Inequality is further examined in light of the increasing trend of utilizing big data in the urban context. This brings to the forefront questions of what and how data are being collected or accessed, distributed, and used, by whom, and who is benefiting from these applications. As the use of crowd-sourced and remote sensing data and other technologies increase to support “smart” cities around the world, it is imperative that data-driven, or rather “data-informed,” solutions support equitable and just urban areas.

Closely related to equity is the second thread – the importance of finding new and more appropriate (and democratic) methodologies and instruments for “the urban.” Acknowledging that traditional or conventional (mainly Northern-derived and -centric) urban planning, development, and management approaches are often inadequate, the chapters emphasize the importance of nonexpert knowledge and participatory opportunities; citizen science or coproduction; and capitalizing on the innovation space that urban areas offer, such as the use of “living laboratories” that might help catalyze social innovations and lead to the transformation of more inclusive and effective urban governance structures. These approaches, which are in many ways complementary to one another and to novel and more democratic forms of generating and using big data, represent promising ways forward for the next generation of urban research and action.

The third collective message from the chapters is the continuing challenge of scale, that is, the inherent difficulty of reconciling the distinctiveness of specifically urban contexts with the need for integrated urban sustainability planning at the scale of functional/ecological urban regions, and also advancing sustainability through urbanization at the global scale (that is, ensuring that sustainability efforts in one location do not erode efforts or conditions in another). This tension is central to the book’s premise of the need to situate urban sustainability within an understanding of “planetary urbanization.” This is particularly evident in the two chapters that connect to the most recent UN-led sustainability developments, such as the new urban SDG, the New Urban Agenda, and Agenda 2030. What is clear is the need for holistic, localized indices and indicator sets for planning and management purposes, but this will also be crucial for the implementation of such global sustainability agendas.

The six chapters in Part II have been arranged to provide a logical flow of arguments and illustrative cases from the broad and contextual to the more specific. The first three are also global in scope, respectively addressing the evolution and use of the core concepts in different settings; the ongoing process via which urban sustainability and resilience indicators within the UN system have developed increasing sophistication and universal relevance over successive generations; and the unprecedented process of formulating and gaining
international political approval for the most ambitious global urban sustain-
ability agenda within a broader sustainable development approach. The latter
three chapters survey and illustrate three innovative and potentially comple-
mentary urban research approaches that emphasize substantive participation
and coproduction.

Altogether this part seeks to showcase a diversity of perspectives, an evolu-
tion and “state of the art” in sustainability and resilience interpretations, and
the actions that seek to improve urban areas worldwide. These new and, in
some cases, unconventional approaches help to move agendas forward and
open new potentials for our urbanizing planet, many of which are presented
in Part III.

Part III: Urban Transformations to Sustainability

Governance shapes transformations towards urban sustainability and resil-
ience. In Part III, we identify opportunities and challenges facing city officials
and private and civil society actors in their efforts to develop governance solu-
tions that support sustainable and resilient urban development. We introduce
key urban governance terms and describe the governance factors shaping social
and environmental change in urban areas. Chapter 13 describes policy actions
seeking to mitigate or prevent environmental risks and impacts, and to adapt
to environmental threats and disruptions. It analyzes the sectoral and juris-
dictional actor-networks involved in designing and implementing actions,
and the opportunities, barriers, and limits that multilevel governance poses
to local climate and environmental policy. The remaining chapters through-
out this part take a close look at the governance of environmental change and
transformations through different forms of experimentation.

This part also examines the diversifying role of civil society organizations in
fostering Europe’s sustainability pathways in cities. First, civil society initiatives
can pioneer new practices, eventually leading to radical changes in the ways of
organizing urban life. Therefore, these initiatives can be an integral compo-
nent of urban transformations and can fill the void left by a retreating welfare
state, thereby safeguarding and servicing social needs but also backing up such
a rollback of the welfare state. Finally, civil society organizations can function
as a hidden innovator – contributing to sustainability but remaining discon-
nected from the wider society. While civil society organizations currently play
a noteworthy role in decision-making around sustainability, some dangers also
exist. Civil society initiatives can be used by neoliberal agendas to legitimize
existing power structures and deepen social inequalities between and within
communities, given their uneven capacities to self-sustain and self-organize.
Good Anthropocene futures are envisaged through the collection and use of “seeds,” defined as initiatives that exist at least in prototype form but are not currently dominant in our world. These seeds are used to explore the potential for fostering radically different futures. The authors highlight the synergies and tensions between the underlying values reflected in the seeds, and also how these seeds can be used to think about an urban planet. They conclude by presenting new research directions suggested by this project.

The part ends by describing conceptual and theoretical tools that have emerged in the attempt to understand the role of collaboration in transitioning towards sustainable futures. The chapter explores experiments in collaboration that have shaped local politics and models of governance. It underscores the capacity of local governance actors to respond to identified sustainability challenges, the networks of interaction they form, and the scale of transformation that takes place over time. It questions whether collaborations among public and private actors can deliver on multiple priorities simultaneously, and seeks to analyze how experiments in collaboration may be reshaping urban politics more broadly, or just revealing new governance questions.

Part IV: Provocations from Practice

“Provocations from Practice” is a novel inclusion for an academic book, but it is key for addressing the breadth of knowledge that is actually required to build better cities. What do we mean by provocations? One of our core themes of the book is knowledge: What knowledge do we need for cities of the future that are more sustainable, livable, resilient, and just? Where will it come from? How can it be produced (or coproduced)? How will it be used (or misused)? These questions are starting points for provocations. The contributors inspire us to think about these issues in new or different ways from their point of view and/or practice. Further, they speak of urbanism and its knowledge as a lived reality, from practitioners of all sorts who build cities from the ground up: architects (Paul Downton, P.K. Das, Anna Dietzch), landscape architects (Andrew Grant, Diana Wiesner), artists (Lesley Lokko, Mary Miss), activists (Cecilia Herzog, Guillermima Ramirez, Gurbir Singh), civil society actors (Cristina Rumbaitis del Rio, Mary Rowe), government and elected officials (Troy Pickard, Debra Roberts), journalists (Mahim Maher, Andrew Revkin), specialists from NGOs (Robert McDonald, Kareem Buyana, Pengfei Xie, Lorena Zarate), young students (Kate Scherer, Umamah Masum), and others. They may comment specifically about the ideas included in the academic chapters or take us in new and/or otherwise missing directions. A key question of these provocations is this: What knowledge is needed to build cities at the street and neighborhood level?
And: What is missing from standard academic discussions of sustainability and livability? In these important senses, we have intended not to privilege the academic contributions as being more important, or more central, to the concept of sustainability. At 36 in total – from 39 authors in 31 cities on 6 continents – these provocations from practice offer key voices and ideas that are central to the struggle for urban sustainability.

Many pieces illustrate the fact that it is not only urban academic research that is flourishing. Cities around the world increasingly benefit from greater participation and activism by civil society, practitioners, and regular citizens. This activism has three key benefits. First, it facilitates the grounded practice of making better cities not just through knowledge, but action: the design of neighborhoods, infrastructure, and open spaces – that is, places – that are better for both people and nature (see Keitaro Ito, Cecilia Herzog, Anna Dietzsch, Rebecca Salminen Witt, Lorraine Amollo Ambole). Second, it demonstrates that justice, livability, and participation by urban citizens in decision-making and urban creation should be key drivers in any connection between academic knowledge and policy (see Robert McDonald, Diana Wiesner, Lorena Zarate, Anjali Mahendra and Victoria Beard, and P.K. Das). Indeed, what knowledge do cities themselves feel they need? What kind of cities to they want? Third, it unveils that there is a clear role for imagination to the creation of cities, not only in the forms of art but also in innovation (see Mary Miss, Paul Downton, Debra Roberts, Andrew Grant, Emma Arnold, and Todd Lester).

The overarching message of the provocations is the growing vibrancy of civil society and communities of practice around the world, which put people and nature at the center of movements to make cities that are better for both people and nature.

Final Words

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Preface

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The Future Earth Urban Knowledge and Action Network was launched at the Habitat III conference in Quito, Ecuador, in October 2016. This network represents an integrative and transdisciplinary approach to engage researchers, policy-makers, and other stakeholders on urban issues at various levels, thus facilitating the knowledge coproduction needed to address urban challenges. We hope that this book may be the source of initiating lively debates, innovative partnerships, and a wealth of codesign, coproduction, and co-implementation initiatives within the new Future Earth Urban Knowledge and Action Network and other urban knowledge generation networks.

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