

Urban Studies Journal – Special Issue

Inclusive Circular Cities

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Rationale

The circular city concept is gaining increasing momentum amongst city governments worldwide, underpinned by “zero waste” strategies, which aim to close supply chain loops through the reuse, repair and recycling of products and materials (Bolger and Doyon, 2019; Ortega Alvarado and Pettersen, 2024; Prendeville, Cherim and Bocken, 2018; Williams, 2019b). Beyond this fundamental direction, however, the notion of circular cities remains contested, and its engagement in fields of urban scholarship and practice is still nascent (Prendeville, Cherim and Bocken, 2018; Turcu and Gillie, 2020; Williams, 2019a). Circular city discourses and policies continue to overlook critical social dimensions that impinge on livelihoods, social production and consumption practices, and their implications for socially equitable urban and regional economic development (Calisto Friant et al., 2023; Williams, 2019a). This special issue seeks to engage with these issues to redefine circular cities.

Current conceptualisations of circular systems in urban contexts have been dominated by industrial ecologists, calling for industrial systems transformations to support symbiotic material flows, measured through resource efficiency gains and other ecological metrics (Abreu and Ceglia, 2018; Chertow, 2000, 2007). With growing interest among city governments to implement circularity at local and regional scales, this approach is limited, often informing technocentric and economic growth-focussed policy approaches (Bolger and Doyon, 2019; Calisto Friant et al., 2023; Williams, 2019a). At the same time, “Post-industrial” narratives continue to influence urban, regional and industrial policy in navigating significant shifts toward sustainable urban development (Ferm and Jones, 2017; Grodach and Gibson, 2019; Newman, 2020). These hold that labour-intensive, materials-based industries are of low relevance in developed cities, largely overlooking the critical roles these jobs play socio-economically and socio-ecologically (Carr and Gibson, 2016; Grodach and Gibson, 2019; Grodach and Guerra-Tao, 2023). As a result, a diversity of low to medium-skill jobs in industries like (re)use, (re)manufacturing, repair and recycling have become undervalued, geographically peripheralised and offshored (Carr and Gibson, 2016; Ferm and Jones, 2017; Grodach and Guerra-Tao, 2023; Li and Zhou, 2017).

This special issue comes at a key moment. Understanding the importance of social dimensions for circular economies will be key to engaging local communities in re-localizing production chains to address this historic disconnect between production and consumption processes, necessitated by circular transitions (Boeri et al., 2019; Drucker, 1986; Williams, 2019a). Furthermore, understanding the social disparities often overlooked by circular economies transitions discourse is critical to ensure that they are viable and align with other objectives like human development (Schröder, Lemille and Desmond, 2020; Mies and Gold, 2021).

The collection of papers in this proposal focus on two key themes at the heart of circular cities and regions: 1) the multifaceted socioeconomic and socioecological challenges besetting cities and regions within the ongoing restructuring of workforces and workplaces and 2) social innovation and community-based approaches to achieving socially equitable local circular economy systems.

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