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Reclaiming Disruption: Pathways to Hopeful Urban Futures

Fenna Imara Hoefsloot [1], Oksana Zaporozhets [2,3], Annegret Haase [4], Valeria Lazarenko [2,5], and Moritz Kasper [6]

[1] Department of Geography, University College London, UK
[2] Georg Simmel Center for Urban Studies, Humboldt University Berlin, Germany
[3] Institute for Regional Geography (IfL), Germany
[4] Department of Urban and Environmental Sociology, Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research (UFZ), Germany
[5] University of Hamburg, Germany
[6] German Environment Agency (UBA), Germany

Correspondence: Fenna Imara Hoefsloot (f.hoefsloot@ucl.ac.uk)

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Abstract

Disruptions increasingly constitute urban futures by interrupting established trajectories and influencing how cities are imagined, planned, and realised. This article challenges the prevailing assumption that urban disruption merely produces social fragmentation and catastrophic futures, positioning it instead as a catalyst for progressive urban transformation. Although disruption is widely discussed across politics, management, technology, and infrastructure, these discussions remain compartmentalised. Rather than adopting sector-specific perspectives, we propose an urban-centred framework to understand how disruptions converge and manifest within cities. The article examines how disruption functions to destabilise established thought patterns, revealing how the city operates and how urban actors might think and do the city differently. Drawing on diverse examples, this conceptual intervention highlights disruption's capacity to create openings for innovation, creativity, and transformative change while acknowledging its potential for ambivalent outcomes. By revisiting existing scholarship on disruption, we argue for studying disruption in relation to the transformations it produces in agency, power relations, imaginaries, and future-making. The potential of disruption to elevate marginalised voices, expand epistemic resources, and foster collective action toward better urban futures is examined. Disruption is thus reclaimed as a political and creative force—one that reorients urban research from diagnosing fragmentation toward exploring pathways for hopeful, collective, and democratic urban futures amid and through disruption.

Keywords

agency; collective; disruption; fragmentation; hopeful urban futures; urban future-making

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1. Introduction

The definition of disruption takes on as many formulations as its sources and effects take shape. Across disciplines ranging from environmental sciences and management to transition theory and educational and political sciences, there are many ways to understand and define disruption. In an era of poly-continuous crises (Lawrence et al., 2022), disruption carries with it a certain temporality and imagination for the future. Chappells and Trentmann (2019, p. 206) state that "disruption and normality are inextricably connected in time." Although disruptions often arise from long-term structural issues, they are acute and urgent impacts that can increase precarity and vulnerability for people, societies, and geographies. However, these disruptions can also create pathways for alternative outcomes, an abrupt interruption for relevant change:

> Disruptions give us short, momentary glimpses of the fabric of "normality" as it is fraying and reveal the patterns in which practices and infrastructures are woven together. Rather than being isolated instances, disruptions over time shape expectations of a "normal life." (Chappells & Trentmann, 2019, p. 198)

Chappells and Trentmann come to this conclusion through a historical analysis of a sequence of disruptions in the 20th century, illustrating how disruptions are as frequent and part of life as "normalcy" is (Graham, 2010). History, in this definition, is a continuous tide of disruptions. As a result, people and institutions that have experienced disruption become acclimated to adverse conditions or find coping mechanisms and social learning, reducing the impact of the disruption in practice, despite its force. Importantly, looking through a historical lens also shows how disruptions are not stand-alone events, emerging out of thin air, but rather structured by regimes and behaviour before and after the "disruptive incident." In other words, disruption is a combination of the immediate disaster and decades of history. This shows how disruption is relative and situated, not only in relation to normalcy or societal impact, but also in relation to past disruptions and those yet to come (Chappells & Trentmann, 2019). In response to disruptions such as an earthquake, a pandemic, or a war, the distinction between "temporary" and "permanent" becomes blurred, and temporary spaces such as refugee shelters, pop-up malls, and bike lanes emerge and persist for years. Acknowledging these localised and situated effects of disruptions, we focus on the "urban" as a representation of these spatial-temporal entanglements born out of disruption.

Through its situated (im)materialities, politics, and lived experiences, the urban provides us with a rich catalogue with which to frame—and potentially reclaim—disruption as a tool for future-making. Cities are often centres of activity in times of crisis and disruption; disruptive events tend to begin or be resolved there, and those who shape the way disruption is handled or responded to are largely concentrated within them. For these reasons, cities and urban societies play a crucial role in navigating disruption and, ultimately, in shaping possible futures.

In now classic neo-Marxist works on cities, such as Lefebvre's *The Urban Revolution* (2003) and Harvey's *The Urbanization of Capital* (1985), urbanisation itself, along with capital accumulation and growth, is viewed as disruptive, altering socio-economic and geographic relations within and beyond the city. For the most part, and despite some texts also recognising disruptive acts as progressive tools for change and resistance (e.g., Amin, 2008; Harvey, 1985), disruptions such as migration flows, pandemics, or wars—as products of urbanisation, capitalism, and politics of power—have often been understood as negative in critical urban

studies. Man-made yet technical interruptions and sudden yet incubated failures, as well as natural causes, lead to unwanted harm, socio-economic consequences, and alterations to established orders. This transforms the technical systems of modernity—energy, sanitation, transport, communication, etc.—into "objects of public anxiety about the possible widespread loss of capacity and interrupted service" (La Porte, 1988, p. 241; cf. Turner, 1978). However, urban societies are constantly changing, making it difficult to predict and plan for the future with any certainty. The recent global impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is a prime example of how cities are vulnerable to unforeseen crises, bringing about disruption in many areas of urban life and functionality (Batty, 2020; Kasper et al., 2025). Due to their diversity, cities and urban settings may respond very differently to disruptions. While urban modernity takes variegated forms, with many post-colonial cities in the Global South having experienced widespread intermittency rather than a universality of basic services (Bruns et al., 2022), disruptions to cities in the westernised 20th century are often classified as disturbances in our economic system or technical problems that require technical solutions.

As a conceptual intervention, this article focuses on how *disruption* can function as *an epistemic tool* unstabilising established thought patterns, showing us how the city functions or not and how urban actors might think and do the city differently. Thinking and doing differently in this case refers to the making of urban futures by various actors out of disruption. Through examples of disruptions in urban space, we unpack the counterrevolutionary or glitchy properties of disruptions and explore where we might find agency and hope for making a better urban future. We are eager to prevent the transformation of disruption into an axiom "for erecting new grand narratives of history, politics or human life in the round" (Holbraad et al., 2019, p. 11). This inquiry becomes particularly urgent when uncertainties, turmoil, and accelerated changes reconfigure the ways disruptions are conceptualised and studied. Thinking about productive disruptions would require us to rethink *who* is disrupting. We use the term *productivity* outside of capitalist logic. We define it in the context of creating meaning and preserving the foundations of life, society, and community. Under this understanding, productivity is not measured by market value, but by its contribution to the common good, social cohesion, and ecological stability. Hence, without blindly following the regurgitations coming from the capitalist market logic, we can explore the smaller spaces of production created through disruptions which give insight into more just urban futures. Considering disruptions in their multifaceted ways and how they are materialising in the current polycrisis, we ask: How can we find hope for better urban futures in disruption?

To answer this question we will first bring together literature from urban and infrastructural geography, sociology, psychology, and innovation sciences to define the broad concepts of disruption, crisis, and future-making. We will continue with presenting two ways to understand the relationship between the city and disruption: studying the city through disruption and seeing disruption as a political strategy within urban future-making. The second half of the article concerns the role of agency within disruption and positions disruption as a generative force for more hopeful urban futures.

Our positionality shapes the analytical trajectory of this article. While acknowledging the multiplicity of disruptions, we draw our inspiration from the cities in which we have lived, worked, and researched.

2. Setting the Scene: Disruption

2.1. Disruption, Crisis, and Future-Making

Disruption is a much-needed concept for capturing the nuances of the current situation, which are often lost within umbrella terms such as crisis or polycrisis. As McFarlane highlights: "There are likely to be many cases where the term 'crisis' might be better substituted with other terms—'problem,' 'challenge,' 'dilemma,' 'impasse,' even 'issue'" (McFarlane, 2025, p. 305). Disruption can be defined as a disturbance or interference that interrupts the normal flow of operations. It causes a significant or fundamental deviation from the expected or normal state of affairs. In contrast, a crisis is an unexpected event that poses a significant threat to a society's stability and functioning in a more long-term perspective.

In this article, we focus on disruption rather than on crisis because we are especially interested in how societies (here: urban societies and their actors) respond to disruptive change, the rapid transformation of structural foundations of urban realities, and how they try to imagine, shape, and build strategies for the future in times of change, uncertainty, lack of plannability, and related conflicts. Additionally, the use of disruption as a framework is our deliberate attempt to sidestep the concept of crisis, which has become semantically overloaded and politically weaponised (Roitman, 2013).

Our closer focus is on the intersection of urban future-making and disruption. "Future-making" as we understand it here refers to the active process of shaping and influencing the future rather than passively accepting what may come (Kemmer & Simone, 2021; Zhelnina, 2022). This involves envisioning potential futures, devising strategies to realise preferred ones, enacting them, while adapting to evolving circumstances (Grubbauer et al., 2024). The relationship between disruption and future-making might unfold in different ways. Disruptions may be anticipated and woven into processes of imagining and enacting futures (De Coss-Corzo, 2025). For instance, envisioning some situations as potential catastrophes or disasters can shape urban infrastructure and professional and everyday practices. At the same time, unexpected disruptions that challenge established norms within affected societies and communities may open new spaces for rethinking futures, creating moments when existing systems can be re-evaluated, new possibilities imagined, and new vulnerabilities exposed (Andrighetto et al., 2024).

By shaking existing urban power geometries and relationships, disruptions could create space for diverse perspectives, enhance the involvement of urban citizens and civil organisations in future-making, and foster a sense of collective agency in order to envision alternative futures. This may involve crafting a compelling narrative about the desired future to inspire action and provide direction, while also encouraging experimentation and innovation to develop new solutions and approaches. In this sense, rather than attempting to predict the future, future-making involves imagining a variety of potential scenarios, including those that might not be immediately apparent. By and large, future-making in the context of a disruption means developing a new narrative, productively embracing uncertainty, and, given those conditions, actively shaping a more desirable future. This understanding aligns us with Comi et al.'s (2025) conception of future-making as emancipatory inquiry: "the practising of an inquiry driven by an emancipatory concern and directed at crafting (more) desirable futures" (Comi et al., 2025, p. 2472).

2.2. Studying the City Through Disruption, and Studying the City and Disruption

Current scholarship reveals multiple analytical trajectories of how disruption is investigated. These trajectories are guided by two key questions: To study *disruption* or to study *through disruption*? To *study* disruption or to *change* through disruption? While the latter question poses a somewhat false dichotomy, it nevertheless raises important considerations about the balance between scholarly investigation and transformative practice.

Across diverse fields, including urban studies, scholars have consistently studied *through disruption*, employing it as an analytical lens while rarely examining disruption itself. This research strategy finds its most vivid expression in *defamiliarisation* (Shklovsky, 2017), *breach* (Garfinkel, 1967), and *dérive* (Debord, 2014)—research tools conceived as universal epistemological instruments. Of these, only dérive was explicitly developed as a method for reflecting on urban experience, while others were adopted from adjacent fields such as sociology (breach), or evolved in parallel, as Benjamin's "hashish passage" (Benjamin, 2006) did with defamiliarisation in literary studies. Despite their differences, these methodologies share a common epistemic logic: They presuppose the existence of a social order, the repetition and routinization of everyday practices, the coherence of the lifeworld (and of the city), and, crucially, the manageability of disruption as an analytical tool. In defamiliarisation, attention to previously unnoticed details was meant to interrupt the automatism of perception and reveal the latent assumptions that render habits and norms "natural." In breach, the deliberate disruption of routine social interactions exposed how everyday life is made to appear rational and coherent, and thereby how social order is reproduced (Garfinkel, 1967). The dérive, "a technique of rapid movement through varied urban ambiances" (Debord, 2014), sought to elicit psychogeographical effects and, in doing so, to transform ordinary urban wandering into critical exploration, a fundamentally collective practice that produced the solidarity capitalist society so desperately lacked.

The various methodological applications of deliberate and manageable disruption stand in contrast to the idea of disruption as an *accidental epistemological opportunity*. In this perspective, moments of breakdown are valued for their capacity to make visible the otherwise invisible functioning of complex socio-technical systems. Analysing the economic, political, and infrastructural upheavals of the 2000s, such as the War on Terror, the 2008 financial crisis, and the global spread of SARS, Graham's edited volume *Disrupted Cities* (2010) provides eclectic examples of urban infrastructural disruptions. In line with Star's (1999) interpretation of infrastructural breakdowns and Turner's (1978) perspective on disasters as analytical opportunities, these disruptions can serve as "important heuristic devices…through which critical social science can excavate the politics of urban life, technology, or infrastructure" (Graham, 2010, p. 3). These disruptions are largely framed as accidental or deliberate failures of infrastructures to facilitate the ideally networked, now globalised flow of resources and humans. This can be due to natural causes, such as a hurricane (Sims, 2010); technical occurrences, such as a blackout (Luke, 2010); or political or military reasons (Graham, 2010). Here, disruption serves as an analytical tool with several interconnected objectives. Disruption, as an accidental epistemological opportunity as well as a deliberately used one, uncovers hidden patterns and mechanisms of social ordering that typically remain invisible. By destabilising what passes as common sense, these analytical techniques may create openings for alternative perspectives that dominant modes of understanding otherwise foreclose.

But what happens if there is no need to employ disruption as an analytical tool to break what is already fractured or constantly being ruptured? This shift repositions disruption as the primary focus of scholarly

inquiry, as outlined by Holbraad et al. in *Ruptures: Anthropologies of Discontinuity in Times of Turmoil* (2019), in which they propose examining ruptures in their own right, as well as relating ruptures to broader contexts—worlds people imagine and live in. Such an anthropology of rupture does not simply document existing disruptions but actively multiplies them through research practice by articulating disruptions and discovering their transformative possibilities. We argue that this approach is particularly promising for studies of urban life in times of radical change, when urban disruptions overlap with and are amplified by large-scale turmoil such as war (Pilav, 2012) or state collapse (Shevchenko, 2008), which undermine entire lifeworlds and urban living, its affects, and collective emotions. Affective urbanism being attentive to how various modalities of the more-than-rational, including affects, emotions, and feelings, compose urban life (Anderson & Holden, 2008; Paiva, 2024), offers a valuable lens here to approach disruptions through collective emotions they generate. As Ahmed (2004) suggests, emotions are not simply individual states but circulate and intensify collectively, becoming particularly visible in urban settings. Urban anxiety, for instance, often follows disruptions but can also precede them, emerging from the anticipation of inevitable shocks such as those induced by climate change (Marvin et al., 2023). Similarly, anger, an inherently relational and collective affect, surfaces strongly during urban crises (Panno et al., 2023). Affects, feelings, and emotions, as part of assemblages, make cities complex sites of "a being together of existences" (Amin & Thrift, 2002, p. 28). Ultimately, this shows that disruptions may not only serve as epistemological entry points to research on the socio-spatial and techno-political conditions of cities, but should also be claimed as affective and "productive" agents of the urban in their own right.

2.3. Studying Urban Disruption as a (Political) Strategy

The distinction between analysing disruption and mobilising it as an instrument of (urban) transformation reveals a profound methodological divide embodied in situationist interventions, disruptive pedagogy, and innovation studies. While the Situationist International (1958) and proponents of disruptive pedagogy embrace disruption as an instrument of emancipation and social transformation, innovation studies and related approaches caution that disruptions remain "unpredictable and undomesticated" (Kivimaa et al., 2021, p. 121) and can serve as instruments of domination.

In addition to their use of disruption as a method, e.g., in the form of the *dérive*, the Situationist International aspired to a radical transformation of everyday life, confronting the social and spatial structures that sustained capitalism. For the Situationist International, cities as spaces where capitalism's spectacle concentrates most intensely became primary battlegrounds. At the heart of the Situationist International strategy lay strategic disruptions—the creation of situations: "moments of life, concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organisation" (Situationist International, 1958). These disruptions were designed to awaken people from capitalist passivity and to generate "the eruption of lived pleasure" (Vaneigem, 1967/2012, p. 171). By undermining monotonous routines, the created situations emancipate urban citizens and open pathways to freedom—the freedom to imagine and create new forms of collectivity and ways of being together. Once initiated, situations unfold spontaneously and creatively through the collaborative engagement of urban citizens. Similarly, but on an individual rather than a collective or urban scale, disruptive pedagogy uses disruption as an instrument of social transformation (Mills, 1997). Yet, it operates primarily on the micro level, without denying its possible macro-level implications. By challenging the legitimacy of school practices that reproduce oppressive power relations, disruptive pedagogy opens up spaces to imagine more equitable forms of education. One example of this approach is the establishment of

school committees or social justice groups that give students a collective voice and enable marginalised perspectives to intervene in institutional decision-making, thereby disrupting hierarchical norms and fostering more democratic participation. In this sense, schools can be seen as spaces where new social patterns emerge, patterns that can spread far beyond the educational sphere, influencing urban and social life in general.

Also in innovation studies, the multi-scalar scope of influence is regarded as one of disruption's defining characteristics, ranging from the production of alternative products and processes that disrupt personal relationships to the transitions of entire systems, economies, and regions. Conceptualising disruption as a strategy at a micro-scale, Parry-Jones and Gay (1980, p. 215) defined disruptive events as "a complex and sometimes protracted inter-personal process comprising a sequence of verbal and non-verbal events which can evolve independently of static, institutional factors." No one is really in complete control; instead, everyone acts with uncertainty about the impact, responses, and outcomes of their actions. Yet, the disruptive power of a single person or a small group—as well as economic or governmental actors—should not be underestimated (Piven, 2008), because disruptions can be the terrain of power struggle connecting individual or niche action to systemic change.

Conceptualising the relation between niche and systemic change in more detail, Kivimaa et al. (2021) make a distinction between (a) disruption in actors and networks and (b) disruption in behaviour, practices, and cultural models. The former captures changes in the constellation of actors within socio-technical systems, including urban societies, as well as the changing distribution of power within the network. The latter refers to how disruptive events can change practices and cultural meaning, altering existing patterns on a more systemic scale and leading to transition. The direction of this change, however, is difficult to predict. Transformation following disruption is often unpredictable and turbulent, unfolding in nonlinear patterns across scales of governance and impacting different actors in different ways (Schipper et al., 2021). Moreover, disruptive innovations are embedded in long-term trends, which can either sharpen or dull their impact (Valenduc & Vendramin, 2017).

Translated into the city, we see the unpredictable and revealing power of disruption in the platform economy—led by Uber, Airbnb, and the like—and in its attempts to reshape the city. While digital technologies have transformed industries, social relations, and economies, they have also merged with pre-existing institutions to entrench their power. In such instances, technology has not so much changed the rules of the game. In cases where technological innovation has profoundly restructured society or the economy, it has often done so by reducing job security and eroding public infrastructure (Chua, 2023). For example, introduced as a housing-sharing platform, Airbnb has disrupted the hotel market in many cities and directly influences the availability and cost of housing for locals. Numerous studies show a direct correlation between the density of Airbnb listings and rising rents. Sublandlords convert conventional rental flats into more lucrative short-term rentals and residential areas are turning into "tourist zones," replacing local shops that sell everyday goods with tourist attractions and destroying the social fabric (Spangler, 2020; Törnberg, 2022).

Taken together, all these perspectives and examples reveal that disruption is inseparable from questions of power, agency, and control. Building on these insights, we revisit the meaning of studying disruption as a political strategy. We argue that disruption becomes political not only when it functions as an instrument of

social change, but also when it turns reflexive—confronting the capitalist and technocratic logics that render it technological and controllable. The politicisation of disruption recognises its grounding in concrete situations, spaces, institutions, cultures, and histories. In reclaiming disruption in this way, we restore its potential as a critical and emancipatory force.

3. Outlining Our Approach: Linking Disruption, Future-Making, and Agency for the Urban Realm

Having emphasised that disruptions are materially, politically, and epistemologically charged, the question arises: How can these moments be made productive and hopeful rather than paralysing? Instead of viewing disruption solely as a breakdown, we propose seeing it as an opening—an invitation to reconsider who creates the urban future, on what terms, and with what forms of knowledge. Accordingly, for this conceptual intervention, we are particularly interested in the "productive function" of disruption. While bringing rupture, danger, and hardship, disruption can also enhance productive change, progressive innovation, and the overcoming of old obstacles. How disruption is responded to is not predetermined; it depends on the actions taken, which shift the balance of forces and shape future outcomes.

3.1. The Ambiguity of Disruption

Although disruption is often perceived negatively, it can also catalyse positive change, innovation, and new perspectives, forcing or encouraging societies and communities to adapt and learn. This can lead to innovative solutions and breakthroughs that would not otherwise occur. In other words, a context of disruption can help identify outdated or inefficient practices, prompting a re-evaluation of existing systems and processes. This ambivalent nature of a disruption lies in its ability to destroy and create, tearing down established structures while paving the way for new ways of thinking and futures in the long term (Tawil & Toukan, 2025). Examples illustrating this ambivalence include the aftermath of political turnarounds in former state socialist countries, where disruptive change produced both winners and losers (Atanasoski & McElroy, 2018, Tuvikene et al., 2024), and more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic, which opened some opportunities for changing routines and establishing new ones, while having harmful impacts on urban societies' functioning and cohesion (Bourdin et al., 2024; Grasso et al., 2021). The pandemic also exemplifies how disruptions foreground local capacities of care and solidarity, enabling everyday actors to creatively respond to systemic breakdowns (Schipper et al., 2021). Importantly, these disruptions highlighted the need for institutions to prevent the exacerbation of structural inequalities and instead support community-led forms of resilience.

Disruptions underscore both epistemic opportunities and risks. Drawing on strategies of Black Lives Matter, Hayward (2020) explores the disruptive power of political movements to define when, how, and under what conditions disruption becomes valuable. She argues that political disruption may arise not only through active intervention and mobilisation, such as protests and demonstrations, but also through withdrawal from collaboration, including labour strikes and other forms of non-participation. Inspired by McAdam (1996) and Piven (2008), she proposes that disruption unfolds through three steps:

> First, a group of political actors coordinates to withdraw cooperation from an epistemic power relationship, which enables motivated ignorance. Second, this act of epistemic disruption brings

> latent conflicts to the surface and forces members of dominant groups to take sides. Third, the resulting change in the political agenda enables subordinated actors to negotiate with the politically powerful. (Hayward, 2020, p. 458)

3.2. The Importance of Agency, Knowledge, and Power for Productive Disruptions

Crises and disruptive events often necessitate adapting to new circumstances and finding innovative solutions. By doing so, individuals, communities, and societies may build resilience through agency (Newman & Dale, 2005).

But agency is not just about reacting to events; it is also about actively shaping the narrative, influencing outcomes, and, ultimately, emerging stronger and more resilient. As discussed, the interplay between disruptive contexts and their influence on agency remains deeply ambiguous. Disruptive changes can unsettle routines and create a sense of unease, making it difficult for individuals to act decisively (McCann & Selsky, 2012). At the same time, they can enhance agency by highlighting shared vulnerabilities and creating a sense of urgency, thereby strengthening social cohesion and collective action. They may also force communities to develop new solutions and strategies. In some cases, disruptive contexts provide marginalised groups with opportunities to challenge existing power structures and advocate for change. For example, Corburn (2003) argues that communities facing environmental risks often mobilise their first-hand experience to challenge expert–lay distinctions, thereby reshaping planning processes. This is particularly visible in flood resilience efforts, where frontline communities contribute crucial insights into adaptive strategies. As Morris et al. (2024) show, coastal resilience planning in the United States demonstrates how marginalised BIPOC communities, despite systemic exclusion, bring invaluable situated expertise to the fore—expertise rooted in everyday survival and struggles for environmental justice. Here, disruptions elevate previously marginalised voices, compelling planners to integrate diverse forms of knowledge into formal decision-making.

Another instructive example comes from the growing field of citizen science and participatory planning, and, particularly, the "refugee urbanism" approach (Darling, 2020), where displaced populations assert themselves as political actors in urban contexts. Krick and Meriluoto (2022) describe this shifting positionality as "pushing the boundaries of expertise." Still, they caution against framing participation in terms of "empowerment," since citizens already possess knowledge and agency without the need for external validation. Knowledge production processes are being transformed by the growing integration of "non-certified expertise." As a result, evidence-based policy, once dominated by credentialed science, is increasingly pressured to account for lived experience and "anyone's knowledge" (Stewart et al., 2020).

By positioning urban citizens as active agents and epistemic producers, current scholarship shifts from a critique of expertise to a reconfiguration of knowledge itself—its authority, its methods, and its purposes. One compelling articulation of this shift is Ottinger's (2023) concept of *careful knowing*. This approach questions the universalising methodologies and reflexive tools favoured by earlier analysts of disruption and instead advances a practice-based and context-specific mode of inquiry. Careful knowing seeks to confront epistemic inequality and injustice by centring the needs and situated knowledge of marginalised communities, affirming their authority as knowledge producers. For Ottinger, careful knowing is not simply the creation of new epistemic resources but an empirically grounded commitment to obligations toward

others. It entails modes of investigation and interpretation that make visible the *responsibility* of different agents for present circumstances and future trajectories.

However, careful knowing and related approaches risk slipping into a binary framing of epistemic power as located either with citizens or with institutional actors. Avoiding such epistemic binarism requires developing practices that enact distributed epistemic authority through collaboration among diverse actors. While these arrangements are inherently fragile and shaped by ethical and political tensions and constraints, they nonetheless resist reductive either/or models of epistemic power.

Critically, the ability of communities and other urban actors to utilise disruptions to create progressive urban futures—whether through political interventions, knowledge production, or other means—is strongly determined by pre-existing power relations. The ability to disrupt, or utilise disruptive moments, is often a question of political connections and available resources. As discussed earlier, this simple truth is displayed by the many urban disruptions caused by tech companies in Silicon Valley and "Silicon Elsewheres" (Pollio, 2026), but the importance and implications of socio-political power are also visible at the micro level of everyday urban life. One of countless examples of this is provided by Porcel (in press), who shows how different communities with different levels of political influence in a Mexico City *pueblo* respond to the disruption of their sewage infrastructure through either collaboration or sabotage. Interpreting this situation through the lens of de Certeau (1984), we see that communities' attempts to assert their right to the city during and through disruption manifest as either a "strategy" of collaboration from a position of relative power or a "tactic" of improvisation and resistance, i.e., sabotage. Therefore, although we aim to reclaim disruption as a tool for productive urban change, we should not over-romanticise the extent to which actors can do so in the many political, economic, and infrastructural spheres of our cities. Subversive tactics of disruptions must acknowledge power imbalances and capabilities while actively resisting and contesting them, e.g., by acts of sabotage that carry an inherently productive potential for future-making (Aalders & Kioko, 2025).

3.3. Affect and Hope-as-Method for Progressive Disruptions

It is important to be sensitive to the *affect* of disruptions on people and communities, as emotions mediate the relationship between agency and action in often ambivalent and contested ways (Zuckerman, 2016). This ambivalence stems from the conflicting emotions and responses individuals experience during a crisis or disruption. In some cases, being able to act productively can mitigate the negative effects of the crisis and pave the way for thinking about and planning for the future. Disruptive circumstances can trigger feelings of helplessness and anxiety, but exercising agency—making choices and taking action—helps individuals and/or communities regain a sense of control over their situation. People may react with panic or heightened emotions, which can hinder rational decision-making but also foster a stronger sense of community. This affective ambivalence is evident in the simultaneous experience of both negative emotions, such as fear and anxiety, arising from the destruction or loss of livelihoods and fading prospects, and positive emotions, such as hope and determination, stemming from self-efficacy through solidarity and helping activities.

Furthermore, a context of disruption may lead to different forms of action or inaction. While some groups may be prompted to take action because disruptive events force them to do so (Hayward, 2020), others may remain passive or reject the idea of disruptive change. Here, hope as a method (Miyazaki, 2004; Pedersen,

2012) becomes a valuable perspective. Hope is not simply an affective response but a way of engaging analytically and practically with the possibilities that disruptions create. It foregrounds how disruptions may elevate the experiences of first responders, local actors, and marginalised groups. Anderson and Holden (2008) conceptualise hope as infrastructural to urban change, exemplifying affective urbanism, where hope is not merely a personal feeling or rhetorical ornament but a material force with performative effects. Infrastructural projects in Rio de Janeiro for the 2016 Olympics exemplify these dynamics: The preparations disrupted "normal" life through evictions, displacement, and reconfiguration of urban space, yet were justified by promises of a better urban future. When much of this infrastructure subsequently fell into decline, it became a reminder of "failed futures": lost hopes for a promised "future that never arrived" (Bradbury, 2012), and a call for residents to demand priorities grounded in lived needs (Cavalcanti, 2024). In this sense, hopes are multiple and accumulative; they constitute assemblages that are not merely expressive but productive. Hopes can mobilise support for regeneration strategies, extend the reach of urban projects by bringing the future into the present, and require constant repair and maintenance through the articulation of what is hoped for. At the same time, we must remain cautious of romanticising disruption. While some strands of thought celebrate disruption as opening new avenues for imagining futures (echoing situationist traditions), others warn against the immobilising potential of hope. Ringel (2021), for example, shows that hopes for the future can mire people in an unchanging present, preventing them from overcoming current realities. Rather than treating hope as inherently positive or negative, affective urbanism suggests that collective hopes are performative forces that shape how urban communities respond to, resist, and reimagine disruptions.

4. Concluding Remarks: Reclaiming Disruption for Hopeful Urban Futures

Throughout this article, we have outlined the different approaches to understanding disruption in relation to agency and the production of urban futures. Returning to our initial question, of how we can find hope for better futures in times of poly-continuous urban disruptions, we have explained how disruption—defined as situated and relational events with destructive and productive potential—can serve as an analytical lens to observe the city, be mobilised as a political strategy for urban future-making, and function as an epistemic tool in thinking about alternative urban futures.

Urban disruptions have increasingly come to define how cities are lived, governed, and imagined. Rather than viewing disruption merely as a breakdown of systems, it can be seen as a force that exposes and transforms the everyday dynamics of urban life. As argued throughout this article, we need to approach the city as disrupted and disruptor. The city is constantly in flux, where crises, shocks, and interruptions reveal how deeply urban life is tied to wider social, economic, and political processes (Graham & Marvin, 2002). From "water crises" that expose inequalities of access (Anand, 2017) to the curfews and immobilities of the Covid-19 pandemic (Schnittfinke et al., 2024) or the deliberate targeting of cities in war as currently witnessed in Gaza (Ziadah et al., 2025), disruptions make visible the fragility and contested nature of urban existence itself. They unsettle routines, redraw boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, and reshape how people inhabit, move through, and make sense of the city.

At the same time, cities themselves can be agents of disruption. Urban transformations—whether through redevelopment projects, speculative construction, or social movements—can unsettle existing orders and produce new forms of displacement, encounter, and resistance. Such processes illustrate what Chua (2023)

calls “disruption from above, the middle, and below,” highlighting how instability is not exceptional but constitutive of urban life. Disruption, in this sense, is both a condition and a catalyst: It reveals the tensions that underpin contemporary cities while also opening possibilities for reimagining them amid geopolitical crises, global health emergencies, and climate uncertainty.

We conclude that, in the context of poly-continuous crises, the study of disruption fosters a more reflexive mode of knowledge production by emphasising questions of epistemic power and justice. Disruptions inevitably raise questions of loss and opportunity, damage and renewal. For urban studies, the value of disruption lies in its analytical potential to reveal the fragilities of existing systems while simultaneously opening up new avenues for transformation. Although unevenly distributed and constrained, we find examples in the literature where agency and hope are mobilised to create more productive urban futures. This is not only through practical or material interventions, but also epistemically, by multiplying the types of futures we can envision. Rather than treating disruptions solely as destructive, they can also be re-appropriated as productive moments in which new forms of knowledge, agency, and participation emerge. This final point, and the disruption’s potential to open new avenues for urban future-making, brings to the fore the importance of paying attention to agency and affect. A promising avenue for further epistemological development lies in elaborating analytical tools that recognise knowledge as a political and ethical project oriented toward social improvement and the strengthening of hope.

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About the Authors

Fenna Imara Hoefsloot (UCL) researches how computational logics shape the city. In exploring how digital technologies and planning support systems can be reshaped to inform a city that meets everyone's needs in theory and practice, she collaborates with residents and civil society organisations to design interventions in digital and infrastructural space.

Oksana Zaporozhets is an urban sociologist working at the Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography, Leipzig. Her recent projects focus on cities with radically altered trajectories, practices of urban future-making, and authoritarian cities. Across her work runs a consistent interest in urban residents and everyday life.

Annegret Haase is an urban sociologist working at the Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research (UFZ) in Leipzig, Germany, in the Department of Urban and Environmental Sociology. Her main areas of research include urban transformation and urban resilience, urban inequalities and justice, social conflicts, participation, local governance, urbanisation, and polycrisis.

Valeria Lazarenko is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Hamburg and former member of the Urban Futures at Risk research group. She examines migration and belonging through the lenses of urban studies and the sociology of emotions. Her work bridges academic research and policymaking in Ukraine and Germany.

Moritz Kasper is currently a postdoctoral researcher at the German Environment Agency, working on variegated infrastructural and socio-ecological issues of contemporary cities. Broadly interested in the planning, design, and governance of the urban and its infrastructures, he has worked in academia, international cooperation, and policy-directed research in Europe and Africa.