

Urban Futures in Times of Disruption

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Abstract

Overlapping crises and pervasive uncertainty make it profoundly difficult to think productively about the future. Navigating this landscape requires new conceptual frameworks to capture the nuances of current and future realities, including the productive potential within moments of rupture. Against this backdrop, this thematic issue explores the relationship between disruption and urban future-making, defining disruption as both an epistemological and political tool. Rather than treating disruption as an abstract concept, it anchors its exploration in the tangible realities of the urban environment and the everyday life of cities. It brings together 12 contributions that examine theoretical and methodological interventions, the structural conditions that shape practical disruptions, and the vital role of residents, communities, and civil society organisations in shaping urban futures amidst disruption.

Keywords

agency; disruption; epistemic and political tool; polycrisis; productive moment of disruption; urban futures

1. Introduction

Current challenges, accumulating and reinforcing each other, at once new and deeply familiar, have outpaced existing vocabularies. So, the search for concepts able to grasp the complexity of the current moment becomes both an analytical and a political urgency. Today, derivatives of crisis dominate public and academic discourse (Beveridge & Davidson, 2025; Hilbrandt & Ren, 2025; McFarlane, 2025, 2026), yet their omnipresence is precisely what exposes their limits—their bluntness, their tendency to flatten rather than illuminate. Besides, the widespread usage of crisis risks to generate legitimacy rather than knowledge, normalizing realities rather

than challenging them. Thus, building alternative conceptual repertoires capable of capturing the nuances and complexity of the current and future situation becomes an absolute must. With this in mind, in this thematic issue, we turn to disruption—a concept that represents the road less traveled and therefore remains open to discovery.

This issue grew out of a workshop organized by the Urban Futures at Risk group at Humboldt University Berlin in December 2023, bringing together scholars whose personal and professional trajectories had been disrupted by war and political persecution, alongside researchers from less affected regions and more stable positions. Hence, while focusing on disruption, we acknowledge that our positionalities as editors and contributors of this thematic issue have shaped our reflection. We embarked on this collective inquiry with a shared aim: to reflect on disruption and its entanglements with urban futures. In the process, we forged new solidarities and deepened existing ones, collectively working to fill the gaps and ruptures that mark current theoretical and empirical terrain as well as life trajectories.

2. The Ambivalence of Disruption as an Opportunity for Studying and Making Urban Futures

In this thematic issue, we treat disruption as both an epistemic and a political tool, since naming something as a disruption is already to take a position and to cause actions in knowledge production and beyond (Hoefsloot et al., this issue). Disruption is a remarkably flexible concept with an impressive academic journey—traveling from a narrow technical term to a concept capable of naming shifts that unsettle structural conditions and challenge long-held assumptions (Greschke et al., 2021). Yet despite this conceptual expansion, disruption has largely served to study other processes rather than being examined on its own terms (Hoefsloot et al., this issue). Here, we seek to reverse that priority.

While the vocabulary for disruption is still emerging, it already captures important nuances and contradictions that blunter concepts tend to miss, including, first, the *complex temporality of change*, encompassing disruptive moments, the accumulation of conditions leading to disruption, and their aftermath. Second, the *ambivalence of change* linked to disruption, which is simultaneously productive and destructive. It operates as a double-edged sword: clearing away the obsolete on one side, and opening space for the new on the other. Disruption, in this light, is never purely loss or gain, but both. Third, the *diverse and uneven impact* of disruption on the actors involved. Depending on their degree of affectedness and capacity for action, disruptions may present an opportunity for some while posing a threat to others, and their meaning and effects may shift over time. Accordingly, disruptions unfold across society in multiple ways, eliciting varied responses: some actors develop agency and mobilise, while others become passive or paralysed and unable to act.

Rather than treating disruption as an abstract concept, we situate our exploration within the urban environment, in the context of cities and urban life. Cities are themselves disruptions as their emergence and development are a continuous breaking of existing conditions (Lefebvre, 2003). But they are also arenas where disruptions unfold and intensify in ways that are distinctly urban. The concentration of people and materiality makes cities ideal centers for producing, testing, and spreading innovations and equally effective theaters of maximum damage in wars, pandemics, disasters, and infrastructural malfunctioning. Urban diversity, tightly connected to inequality, makes the effects of disruption highly uneven, opening

opportunities for some while generating precarity and loss for others. Yet cities do not experience or navigate disruption in isolation, as they are embedded in wider networks. In this sense, how cities navigate disruption reveals broader trends—the capacity of societies for transformation and resilience, and ultimately their ability to move beyond established routines.

Disruption's sensitivity to both generative and destructive registers is precisely what makes it a productive lens for thinking about urban future-making: unlike concepts that foreclose possibility, disruption opens the full spectrum, avoiding a drift toward either purely dystopian or utopian scenarios. Disruption marks the end of a current situation, at times desired and hopeful, such as the collapse of authoritarian rule, and at others, feared, such as wars or disasters. By unsettling existing arrangements, disruptions expose the struggles through which futures are made. Moments of disruption reveal that futures, especially long-term ones, are never equally available to everyone or automatically guaranteed. Rather, futures are a privilege, unevenly accessible and actively struggled over. This unevenness reflects that future-making is always a site of competing interests and power relations: some futures are alienated and foreclosed by dominant groups (Aalders & Müller-Mahn, 2026), while others are built through collaboration and mutual support (Kononenko et al., this issue), remaining with and for those who make them.

In this issue, we trace futures shaped by a wide range of actors across different scales, treating everyday acts of hope, endurance, and resistance as no less significant than large-scale, transformative visions. We focus on the productive and futuring side of disruption, not to romanticize it or dismiss its negative effects, but because it has been largely underestimated and understudied. Across many disciplines, disruption has primarily been associated with crisis and catastrophe, leaving its generative potential comparatively underexplored. By contrast, practice-oriented fields such as architecture, urban planning, healthcare, and social work have long understood disruption as both a challenge and a productive force. Building on this perspective, we explore how disruptions can open pathways for change, innovation, and collective action, even as their outcomes remain ambivalent and shaped by existing power relations.

3. When Epistemological Turns Political: Limits of Disruption

While making disruption our analytical priority, we resist treating it as a universal explanatory model, acknowledging both its conceptual limits and the risks embedded in its use. Most notably, the term risks de-radicalizing scholarly vocabulary. Disruption today tends to describe any significant change. However, framing something as disruption risks pacifying it: what might otherwise be called revolution or radical transformation loses its intensity and edge in the process. This replacement of concepts adequate to sharp, structural change with ones that obscure severity and actively normalize the status quo is a risk we take seriously, not as a reason to abandon the concept, but as a call for greater sensitivity to context and reflexivity about the politics of its use. A further risk stems from the concept's enduring association with technology and management through concepts such as “disruptive technologies” and “disruptive innovation” (Christensen et al., 2018). Uncritically adopted, the term risks reproducing and normalizing technocratic power (Swyngedouw, 2007) by importing not just a vocabulary but the methodological assumptions and power relations embedded in it. However, treated critically, the concept opens rather than forecloses opportunities. Third, disruption carries an unintentional presentist bias, foregrounding past and present states at the expense of future orientations. This, however, is the most readily overcome of the three risks: linking disruption to future-making reveals the variety of alternative futures it opens up.

The contributions in this thematic issue address these risks directly, saturating the concept with empirical materials and theoretical reflections, while also probing its limits and, in doing so, connecting disruption firmly to urban futures.

4. Possibilities of Urban Futures in Times of Disruption in This Thematic Issue

This thematic issue brings together 12 contributions that aim to advance our collective understanding of urban disruption and the agency of people in creating more resilient, inclusive, and hopeful futures. The contributions move beyond disruption as a moment of rupture or loss, conceptualising it instead as a material and epistemic shift capable of generating insights into the vulnerabilities and potentials of urban society. The conceptual article by Hoefsloot et al., which opens the thematic issue, provides the theoretical scaffolding for this reframing: positioning disruption not as a force of mere fragmentation, but as a political and creative catalyst that destabilises established thought patterns, elevates marginalised voices, and opens pathways toward collective and democratic urban futures.

The diversity in geographical contexts and urban systems covered in this thematic issue highlights the impact of disruptions worldwide. From conceptualising the wait for the next big earthquake in Kazakhstan, to the responses to incoming refugees in Germany, or navigating the political and discursive disruptions of authoritarian regimes in Turkey, Brazil, and Russia, the articles are characterised by their ability to unpack the globalised drivers of disruption—climate crisis, wars, authoritarianism, and natural disasters—while focusing on the site-specific outcomes of these collated crises and the impact of citizens to create the city they want to inhabit.

We have organised the thematic issue into three sections. The first is the theoretical and methodological interventions. While also grounded in empirical research, the three articles in this section advance our conceptualisations of urban disruption and the methodological approaches for researching future-making in times of disruption. The second section collates the contributions that unpack the structural roots and structuring abilities of disruption in the city. These research articles show how disruptions are never one thing; they are not neutral, a-political, or natural. Rather, as illustrated across the contributions, disruptions emerge from the polycrisis—interlocking forces of conflict, inequality, authoritarian governance, and ecological instability. The third section centres on agency in the midst of crisis, and the ability of people and organisations to work towards better futures. This includes accounts of communities creating solidarity networks, the adaptation of the material city to house new populations, and the work done to maintain continuity and heritage during adversity and the disruption of time.

The first section's theoretical and methodological contributions illuminate different registers of urban future-making under uncertainty. Challenging dominant framings on forced migration and urban resilience, Haase and Pöbneck's commentary argues that forced migration must be understood as a systemic component of urban resilience rather than an exceptional burden. Their reflections call for integrating urban and migration debates, and highlight the struggle between progressive and regressive narratives as itself a site of making urban futures. Lundmark's examination of the Future Bazaar method across thirteen Swedish municipalities similarly emphasises the creation of promise and fragility within disruption. The article shows how participatory futuring tools can challenge institutional path dependencies and stimulate systemic thinking, while also drawing attention to the structural frictions that hamper long-term impact. Together

with Hoefsloot et al.'s conceptual framing, these articles provide theoretical and methodological inspiration for future research on urban futures in times of disruption.

The second section turns to the structural conditions that shape disruptions in practice. Doğanay and Özdemir Taştan's analysis of the Canal Istanbul mega-project situates urban transformation within Turkey's broader trajectory of authoritarian neoliberalism, showing how technocratic narratives seek to naturalise centralised power while municipal and civic actors articulate counter-hegemonic claims to participation and social justice. Antonenko et al.'s study of Kherson, Ukraine, addresses some of the most acute types of disruption: war, occupation, and destruction. Their spatial analysis shows how recovery is non-linear, and requires stabilisation, reorganisation, and transformation. They conclude that urban futures under conditions of polycrisis require not only resources but a fundamental rethinking of planning and governance models. Lazarenko and Haase's comparative study of Ukrainian refugees in Berlin and Leipzig draws critical attention to the double standards that structure the reception of different migrant groups, particularly through the provision of public services. Together, these articles demonstrate that urban disruption unfolds as a structurally uneven terrain where democratic rearticulation is necessary.

The third section foregrounds the agency of residents, communities, and civil society actors in making urban futures from within disruption. Kononenko et al. trace how the residents of Slavutych, Ukraine, have cultivated resilient agency through collective memory, practices of care, and what they call heroic solidarity, a territorially rooted sense of identity and endurance that has sustained the city through the closure of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, Russian blockade, and ongoing war. Amer and Canedo examine how the BENN initiative in Berlin opens space for co-produced urban futures through collaborative knowledge production with refugees, showing how temporary activities in public space can generate socio-spatial transformations beyond their immediate scope. Lapina-Kratasiuk et al.'s article on JHQ Rheindahlen, Germany, explores how residents of a former military site engage in future-making through everyday practices and transgressive appropriations of abandoned space—showing that withdrawal from state and corporate control does not suspend but reconfigures agency. Eremenko's article on Toruń, Poland, examines how citizens mobilised to challenge the boundaries of institutional heritage frameworks, creating new urban commons and winning partial recognition for contested heritage sites. Finally, Chernysheva's article on Almaty, Kazakhstan, develops the concept of "configurations of care" to capture how residents, urban planners, and preparedness experts jointly navigate the anticipation of a major earthquake. By moving beyond the binary of activity and passivity and beyond the opposition between state and citizens, the article reveals disaster anticipation as a dynamic, relational process in which actors continuously aim to stabilize uncertain futures.

An important emergent theme across the articles is solidarity. Within and between communities grappling with the effects of disruption in Slavutych, Berlin, Rheindahlen, Toruń, Almaty, and beyond, solidarity surfaces as a crucial element in becoming more resilient and rebuilding common wellbeing. Kalinina and Sartoretto explicitly develop the role of solidarity as the foundation for sustained collective action, even when political or environmental disruptions work towards fragmenting society. Analysing community organising in Favela da Rocinha and humanitarian activism in Russia, they show how collectivities enact solidarity as a communicative practice, strengthened by place-based relations and affective bonds that give macro-political action its practical meaning for individuals. However, as all articles show, solidarity and care networks are not static or stable within disruption. Rather, they are continuously reconfigured, emerging in new forms, among new actors, and in response to shifting conditions.

5. Futures in the Making

This thematic issue explores the epistemic and political potential of disruption—a concept that has been deployed far less than its analytical siblings, including crisis. The wide geography, diverse disciplinary backgrounds, and life trajectories of the contributors of this thematic issue are themselves an argument that difference may generate deeper knowledge and greater capacity to act.

Through theoretical reflection and empirical grounding, the contributors show how disruptions can unlock productive potential, catalyze innovations, and drive meaningful change. This transformative power is examined here through three lenses: the evolution of conceptual frameworks, the dynamics of agency in urban transformation, and the physical reshaping of urban places and materialities. Crucially, none of the authors romanticize these processes, demonstrating that productive disruptive moments are inherently ambivalent, carrying real burdens, causing genuine harm, and distributing benefits and losses unevenly. Yet even amidst deep irritation and systemic rupture, unexpected pathways open toward urban future-making, offering a powerful sense of hope. Such hope is not passive. As Aalders and Müller-Mahn (2026) remind us, future-making is “hard work,” requiring not only imagination but enactment through physical effort, materiality, and related practices. Futures, however hopeful, must be actively made.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

LLMs Disclosure

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