

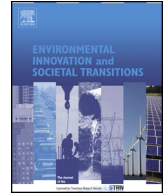


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# Remaking the material fabric of the city: 'Alternative' low carbon spaces of transformation or continuity?

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### ABSTRACT

This article is about re-making the material fabric of the city and the role that space plays in this. There are many ways of understanding the remaking of the city, including a range of often diverse 'alternative' initiatives which are enacted by neighbourhood, voluntary and civil society groups. We address the construction of 'alternative' urban low carbon spaces and whether these result in transformation of or continuity with dominant ways of thinking about remaking the city. Drawing on examples in Greater Manchester, UK, the article argues that, often despite the intention to promote forms of localist values and strategies as alternatives to dominant accounts of remaking the city, the hand of dominant and particularly state interests is critical in shaping 'alternative' spaces and strategies. This tension – between dominant and alternative – is illustrated through a five-fold typology of the role of space in alternative strategies of remaking the city.

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## 1. Introduction

We live in an era where there are widespread efforts to purposively make new cities and to remake existing cities. This view is concerned not with the incremental and ongoing remaking of the city

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but with its transformation. These efforts are primarily responses that can be understood within the broad frame of sustainable urban development, where ‘many new categories of ‘cities’ have entered the policy discourse: ‘sustainable cities’; ‘green cities’; ‘digital cities’; ‘smart cities’; intelligent cities’; ‘information cities’; ‘knowledge cities’; ‘resilient cities’; ‘eco cities’; ‘low carbon cities’; ‘liveable cities’; and even combinations, such as ‘low carbon eco cities’ and ‘ubiquitous eco cities’ which ‘often appear to be used interchangeably by policy makers, planners and developers’. Though these ‘can be seen as repeated attempts to articulate, specify, and even popularise, the concept of sustainable urban development’, and there are interrelationships between them, they can be seen as distinctive categories that each capture ‘a different view of what the city is and how it works, with respect to the role of citizens and the way they relate to the governance of the city, with respect to the interactions between the city and its natural environment, and with respect to the role of urban infrastructure systems and services in the city’s economy and liveability’ (de Jong et al., 2015, pp. 1, 2, 12).

Our interest is in the organisation of cities, the ways this is seen to contribute to unsustainable levels of greenhouse gas emissions and how their remaking can promote lower carbon futures. A dominant response to this challenge has shaped a discourse where new eco-cities are designed on the principle of the lower carbon material and social organisation of cities. In already existing cities, this principle is ‘retrofitted’ to the built environment and to the infrastructures and resources that flow through them.

Though there are various manifestations of both eco-cities (Joss and Molella, 2013) and strategies to retrofit existing cities (May et al., 2013) there are common principles that characterise the dominant strand of both responses. Most notably, these are techno-economic responses where lower carbon energy, water, waste and transportation technologies are configured in relation to a city and presented in terms of their cost and contribution to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, presented as bounded spaces and within which there is often a non-active role for people (Hodson and Marvin, 2010; Joss and Molella, 2013). They are interventions that are ‘measurable’, designed by coalitions of local and national policymakers, architects, utilities and corporate technology providers. Some of these social interests that seek to re-make urban space are locally embedded but many are not and these often have a ‘top-down’ view of organising the city. In doing this, these often narrowly constituted coalitions produce visions of how the city is made and re-made (Hodson and Marvin, 2013; Rapoport, 2014).

Within this dominant discourse there is spatial unevenness both between and within cities. Eco-city developments, for example, whilst often characterised as bounded spaces are not only produced by coalitions of geographically disparate relationships but also often rely on new interdependencies within the wider regional geographies in which they are embedded (Hodson and Marvin, 2010). Similarly, purposive retrofitting strategies have promoted various zones and corridors in high-value areas of the city (May et al., 2013). Yet what is frequently most telling about the dominant approach to remaking the city is how it is characterised as being *the* way of responding to the challenges posed by the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

It is helpful to explore alternatives to remaking the city that go beyond dominant responses. There are potentially multiple pathways in remaking the city as lower carbon; this is bound up with a spatial politics. There are many new forms of political space where climate change and decarbonisation initiatives intervene to try and reconfigure alternative energy, water, waste and transport systems (Castán Broto and Bulkeley, 2012, 2013). The possibilities arising from intervening in such systems are bound together with interventions in the organisation of space (a relational view), with what and where space is organised (a geographical view) and the effects that these have.

There are numerous ways that we can understand alternative new forms of political space. There has been engagement with efforts to construct new political spaces as strategies of relocating economies and resource flows (North, 2010) and as part of bottom-up efforts to build transition communities and towns (Mason and Whitehead, 2012). What is apparent is that these approaches to remaking the city aspire to be less managerial and technocratic than dominant approaches – which seek to apply mobile forms of knowledge and technology to the city – and often present as more embedded efforts that breakdown the boundaries between knowledge and its application (Evans, 2011).

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