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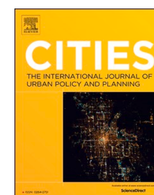

Reclaiming the city from an urban vitalism perspective: critically reflecting smart, inclusive, resilient and sustainable just city labels

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A R T I C L E I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

This article analyses four of the most prominent city discourses and introduces the lens of urban vitalism as an overarching interdisciplinary concept of cities as places of transformation and change. We demonstrate the value of using urban vitalism as a lens to conceptualize and critically discuss different notions on smart, inclusive, resilient and sustainable just cities. Urban vitalism offers a process-based lens which enables us to understand cities as places of transformation and change, with people and other living beings at its core. The aim of the article is to explore how the lens of vitalism can help us understand and connect ongoing interdisciplinary academic debates about urban development and vice versa, and how these ongoing debates inform our understanding of urban vitalism.

1. Introduction

Urbanisation and cities have received increasing attention in academic and public discourses over the past decades, and some themes, concepts and labels have become particularly popular, like smart cities, inclusive cities, resilient cities and sustainable cities. Each of these notions comes with specific theoretical perspectives, empirical contexts, political directionalities, and normative interpretations (Ma, Schraven, de Bruijne, de Jong, & Lu, 2019). These concepts are often used as city brands for political and commercial purposes that go beyond the meaning and wishes of residents living in the as inclusive, sustainable and smart branded cities (Eshuis & Edelenbos, 2009).

While much of urban research is by nature cross-boundary and interdisciplinary, new boundaries emerge between interdisciplinary fields that specialise in and organise around specific concepts (e.g. 'smart', 'sustainable', 'resilient', 'inclusive', 'justice', etc.). Although theoretical specialisation can be helpful to explain and design interventions for specific urban challenges, these distinct theories are not capable of providing an overarching and comprehensive explanation of urban development and the use of different city concepts therein. Sharing knowledge across these different specialisations can be challenging. To address this challenge, in this article we introduce urban vitalism as an interdisciplinary and critical perspective on urban development and cities that can connect key, and partly overlapping, existing urban concepts. The lens of urban vitalism enables a critical discussion of these city concepts and reclaiming them in ways that are more meaningful in the eyes of people residing in these cities (Ma et al., 2019). City concepts are socially and directionally constructed. It is important to recognise that we need not to take these concepts too simply, as they can be exploited for certain political or market purposes and gains (Adams & Tiesdell, 2007).

Urban vitalism is about 'life in urbanised environments' and how this life "enables survival, produces growth and gives health, energy and vigour" (Adams & Tiesdell, 2007: 671). With its focus on life that involves change to survive and thrive, vitalism seems to hold a huge potential to innovate existing urban theories. The interdisciplinary take that the lens of urban vitalism offers, can help to understand and connect, now separated, urban debates. The aim of this article is therefore to investigate how the lens of vitalism can be applied to help us understand and connect ongoing academic debates on urban challenges and concepts. We aim to answer the question: *how can the lens of vitalism help us to understand and critically discuss ongoing urban concepts, how do these debates inform our understanding of urban vitalism*? To answer this question, we address four debates on popular urban concepts like those on

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smart cities, resilient cities, sustainable just cities, and inclusive cities. These concepts currently dominate policies not only on the urban level but also feature in a more multi-level context, like the SDG (Sustainable Development Goals) program and the World Cities Day by the United Nations. As a result, these concepts are often applied as adjective to all kinds of urban development practices (resilient urban development, sustainable urban development, inclusive urban development and smart urban development). The reasons why we choose to apply the lens of urban vitalism on these four concepts also has to do with their open character – they are open for multiple interpretations – and have strong social, and hence normative, connotations. The lens of urban vitalism is however not exclusively of relevance and use for these four concepts and can be applied to other city concepts as well. However, for this article we restrict ourselves to these four. In exploring the research question, we adopt an interdisciplinary approach by crossing the boundaries between conventional disciplines. We believe, the main relevance of this article lies in conceptualising and exploring the value added of an urban vitalism perspective, leading to a new approach of city concepts and related research agenda.

2. The lens of urban vitalism

Urban vitalism is an encompassing and open perspective. It offers a process-based lens which enables us to understand cities as places of transformation and change, with people and other living beings at its core. This orientation entails a focus on and explicit appreciation of the ongoing and dynamic nature of social phenomena — i.e., an interest in their becoming. We therefore characterize a vital city as a city that is in an ongoing process of becoming and change, rather than of stagnation. To explore the value of urban vitalism as a lens to address urban challenges and concepts, it is crucial to identify its core dimensions. As a first dimension, urban vitalism focuses on the *lived city*. Industrialisation, modernisation and technocratic governance have led to a conceptualization of urban systems primarily as material, depersonalized systems. Instead, urban vitalism conceptualizes cities as organic entities (Baxter, 1987; Montgomery, 1998), and puts humans, social activity and other living creatures at the core. Jane Jacobs' work is quite famous on this, especially her work on the Death and Life of Great American Cities (1961). Second, urban vitalism acknowledges that the lived city is always in the process of becoming, a process that is plural, fluid and relational (Deleuze; Latour; Foucault). Cities are actively produced and experienced by people, communities and private/public organizations. Following Healey (1997) and Fraser, Kember, and Lury (2005), we therefore approach the lived city as a *relational* endeavour, that involves social processes in which ways of thinking, valuing and acting are actively constructed. Third, the concept aims to add value in its focus on interconnections and interactions. In other words, cities are viewed as a collection of interwoven places and people, rather than as something we can understand through fixed typologies, spatial schemes, or physical structures in themselves (Wirth, 1938; Ploger 2016). Social and urban life can be viewed as a constantly moving, fragmented, disorderly and a messy interweave of interacting discourses (Bakhtin, 1981). From this viewpoint, *change* is ever-present, and relations are continuously emergent and in 'flux'. Finally, urban vitalism keeps a firm eye on *power relations* in urban systems, exploring if, how and when urban systems marginalise those who the (administrative, political and commercial) systems claim to serve i.e. its residents who often are seen as passive consumers and not active participants in (the making of) city environments.

Vitalism is not only concerned with the fluidity, the becoming and the process alone, but all the more with moments or places where such a process and relationality are enabled or obstructed. The concept of vitalism allows us to explore and understand how, when, where and why particular individual and collective urban dynamics and city concepts are allowed or enabled to develop, to self-organize, and become entangled with administrative and political dynamics or structures. Moreover, it helps us to identify where various types of rigid institutional structures, mental maps, or behaviours, actually obstruct or enable particular dynamics (Simone, 2004). Discussions of what a vital city entails – be it in the shape of smart, resilient, inclusive, sustainable just or other discourses – are inherently connected with issues of power, politics and participation in cities (Wittmayer et al., 2020). These concepts are not free from political meanings and intentions. The invention, marketing and use of these concepts often come with specific interests to develop cities and their communities in certain directions (Ma et al., 2019), from the idea of constant power struggles over who has the right to the city (see Lefebvre, 1996). Dominant public and/or private institutions may oppress vitality via city concepts when their rules and practices, in their rigidity, lose sight of the people they aim to serve. It is only by acknowledging these dynamics, captured by the concept of vitalism, that we can understand which factors and dynamics condition the vitality of urban residents and communities regarding the development of emerging city concepts.

3. The lens of vitalism applied

We understand the lens of urban vitalism as the collection of the four dimensions described above: life, relations, change and power relations. In this section, we will explore the value of the theoretical lens of urban vitalism by applying it to the context of ongoing concepts about cities. Specifically, we will explore the value of using the analytical lens of urban vitalism to understand and connect four current popular, and hence more normative, academic and political notions on cities and city life: those on smart cities, resilient cities, sustainable and just cities, and inclusive cities. In our systematically framework (see Fig. 1), we use vitalism as an encompassing lens that allows for an interdisciplinary exploration of urban development discourses. These discourses, in its turn, substantiate the more process-oriented focus of urban vitalism. It is on the intersection between urban discourses and urban vitalism that we can gain a deeper understanding of appealing notions of the city and at the same time understand developments of vital cities.

In the following sections, we will critically discuss and reconceptualise the four city concept discourses from the lens of urban vitalism. Please note that besides the four concepts we explore in this paper, the lens of urban vitalism can be applied to other popular, multi-interpretable and normative urban concepts as well. The four city concepts are much used and popular concepts in urban policies and city branding.

3.1. Smart cities

First, we will unpack the discourse on smart cities. Smart cities is an ambiguous concept, with many different perspectives, narratives and practices of smart urbanism leading to different urban development trajectories (Caragliu, Del Bo, & Nijkamp, 2011; Kummitha & Crutzen, 2017). This section describes the evolution of smart cities from the perspective of urban vitalism, leading to a reconceptualisation of a smart city. The section reflects on who defines smartness and how these definitions and power dynamics affect cities, citizens and urban communities (Engelbert, Hirzalla, & Van Zoonen, 2019).

When asked to describe their city, urban residents and firms would not necessarily use adjectives or assessments such as smart. The "smart city", however, is a powerful concept influencing urban development world-wide, and features explicitly in the language and objectives of many municipalities and technology companies across the globe. For example, the smart city is at the core of (local) governments' ideas and talks about governing cities more efficiently through digital technology and data. Moreover, the smart city is prevalent in nations and municipalities' ambitions and branding campaigns to attract lucrative residents, investors, or tourists to the city. It is at the core of urban knowledge economies, whereby creative entrepreneurs and start-up firms are attracted by smart technologies (Florida, 2005). And

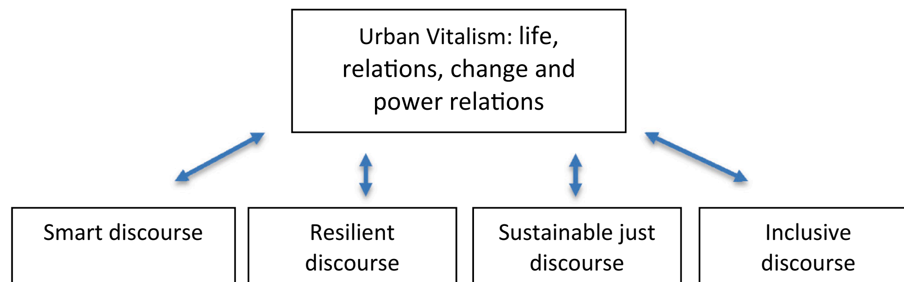

Fig. 1. Systematic framework.

technology companies present the smart city as an unavoidable urgency (cf. Datta, 2015) when they persuade local municipalities as well as national governments to procure their hard- and software.

Smartness is a (strategic) concern for municipalities because smart technologies are seen to drive processes towards efficient urban systems and a competitive knowledge economy. For technology firms, the trend towards smart cities also represents a large and growing market opportunity. ICT firms therefore actively market the smart city brand and lobby for smart city initiatives, whereby their knowledge and budgets of powerful private players overshadows those of local governments. Much of existing smart city talk or discourse, thus, can be understood as *marketing speak*. The innovations which drive the new technologies are mainly high tech, developed in triple helix constructs between large firms, governments and universities. While the technology-led approach to urban development can lead to efficient urban systems and knowledge-driven economies, it easily marginalizes and excludes citizens who are less tech-savvy and results in the widespread (mis)use of private data for profit-making or control mechanisms. This technology-driven approach to a smart city leads to new forms of inequality and democratic deficits and may undermine existing community initiatives, thereby reducing the agency of urban communities (see for instance Albino, Berardi, & Dangelico, 2015; Nam & Pardo, 2011; Kummitha & Crutzen, 2017; Vanolo, 2016). Incremental innovations of local firms or communities often remain invisible. Smart urbanism is thus caught in between the drive for system efficiency, privatisation, triple helix constructs, inequality and democratic deficits.

More specifically, in envisioning the smart city, governments and technology companies typically infer the city as a system and infrastructure in which the flow of people, services and information can be monitored and optimized in order to instigate particular senses and kinds of control, efficiency and value. The prominence of so-called *dashboards* in smart city projects highlights such a mechanic and "sanitized" (Kitchin, 2014; McInroy, 2000) view of the city. It also underscores how governments and the private sector often regard the use of digital technologies as a means to increase the economic value of the city, either through cost reduction or through value extraction and capital accumulation. This approach optimizes the efficiency of urban systems but ignores the agency of urban dwellers and communities in constantly (re-)building, innovating and (re-)imagining urban life in self-organised bottom-up networks. Similarly, such mechanical approaches to flows and smartness in the city presuppose smartness as an external stimulus, and thus, as a disposition that is to be projected onto a city.

Approaching urban smartness through the prism of urban vitalism, however, firmly positions the desires, abilities and already existing practices of urban agents to self-manage, participate, live, meet and interact in the centre of thinking about what makes a city or a community smart. That means that it puts people and local firms at the core of deciding what makes something vital or what makes some flows in these cities or communities more productive and valuable than others. As opposed to only taking the "exchange value" of a city into account when ranking a city's smartness, the perspective of urban vitalism on urban smartness allows for a recognition of the "user value" of existing flows, exchanges, technologies and services that are actively carved out and treasured by urban communities themselves. Consequently, what is to be optimised and enabled by (local) government and other stakeholders is not just the smooth mechanical running of the city as a system, but also the endemic and heterogeneous types of urban smartness that are always already there, that are always in flux. These types of smartness would also benefit from (governmental or corporate) recognition and support.

This emphasis on conceiving how state and market can support "bottom-up" and endogenous urban vitalism through – but, importantly, also outside – digital technologies and datafication, is different from the one in much smart city research that considers itself as "people-centred". The latter seeks to close the gap between urban use value and city exchange value by thinking about how residents can become stakeholders in the economic smart city. This scholarship has been instrumental in opening up the scope of smartness to also include "soft smartness" domains, such as education, social learning and creativity (Huovila, Airaksinen, & Bosch, 2019). It has importantly sought to empower citizens by allowing for connections between smart city-making and sustainable city-making (Bosch et al., 2017; Höjer & Wanger, 2015). However, in so doing, that scholarship has also reinforced the idea that opportunities for citizens' agency can only be found in a game or project which underlying (neoliberal) rules and logic have been pre-established (cf. Irani, 2015). As a result, many of the proposed participatory practices in smart city-making tend to remain "tokenistic" (Cardullo & Kitchin, 2019), as they are, literally, not resulting in structural change. Moreover, these participatory practices tend to enthuse the "usual suspects" among resident groups: those that are technically skilled, or otherwise advanced in their (social or cultural) capital (cf. Zandbergen & Uitermark, 2020).

Smart urbanism from a vitality perspective starts with the existing desires, needs, talents, differences and (digital technology) practices of communities and small firms in urban blocks, streets, neighbourhoods or districts. Smart cities enable all innovations, including those of urban communities to improve the urban quality of life, sparked by the relationality of heterogeneous urban agents and their networks. Within cities, multiple networks constantly form and reform, leading to incremental innovations outside triple helix constellations. For researchers and policy makers to explore smart urbanism from the prism of vitalism is to explore if and where smart urban vitality can be supported without smothering it. It assesses how smart polycentric governance can enable the emerging and varied networks leading to innovation. That means that a whole new spectrum of research questions as well as roles for government, private actors and civil actors are opened-up. Aspects of such a broad programme could be the development of analytical and practical tools to identify, recognize, give voice and map "actually existing" (cf. Shelton, Zook, & Wiig, 2015) forms or imaginations of smart urban vitality, both in the global south and global north. Such recognition can lead to the development of radically new strategies, institutions and structures, which enable urban movements, city flows and informal economies (e.g. "municipalism", make-shift initiatives and frugal innovations). In turn, exploring these imaginary urban futures require a deep recognition and exploration of the complementarities,

conflicts, dilemmas and barriers between different approaches of smartness that co-exist within a city, and in particular between technology-driven, exchange value driven and bottom-up approaches.

3.2. Resilient cities

Second, we will discuss the discourse on resilient cities from the lens of urban vitalism. Urban resilience is “the capacity of cities to survive, adapt, and thrive no matter what kinds of chronic stresses and acute shocks they experience” (The Rockefeller Foundation & ARUP, 2019). This capacity has to be developed at multiple levels: individual, community, institutional, business and systems. Literature tends to assume that capacitated resilience at multiple levels reinforce each other within complex adaptive systems. Furthermore, more than just a capacity, resilience is considered a relational process of coping with multiple shocks and stresses. While the perspectives of urban resilience and urban vitalism both adopt a systemic approach to understand societal change, an urban vitality lens contributes to the academic resilience discourse in four ways.

Firstly, vitalism offers a critical outlook on the agency of individuals and firms. Reid (2016) argues that the dominant resilience discourse treats citizens and firms as adaptive subjects coping with a fundamentally dangerous world. This discourse assumes that residents and firms have the agency to become resilient, irrespective of the urban systems within which they operate (ICLEI, 2018; Vale, 2014). International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam (IABR) (2016) even argues that ‘resilient residents make a resilient city’. As a result, this discourse may be seen to encourage cities to devolve responsibilities to residents and firms through polycentric and adaptive modes of governance. This perspective turns a blind eye to the mechanisms by which urban systems condition the agency of individuals and may even lead to the destruction of social and natural life (e.g. Bourbeau, 2015; Schmidt, 2015; also see Hornborg, 2013; Hopkins, 2008).

The second contribution of vitalism lies in visualising the iterative interaction between psychological and system resilience. Whereas resilient people contribute to more resilient cities, within the conditions set by urban systems, people also adjust their emotional response and deal with trauma depending on their connections and contexts. Interpersonal connections and coordinated external support (Anshel & Gregory, 1990; Prince-Embury & Saklofske, 2013) enable self-efficacy and emotional reactivity, and strengthen interpersonal and problem-solving skills (Anshel & Gregory, 1990; Chesney, Chambers, Taylor, Johnson, & Folkman, 2003). This vitalism perspective thus shows that resilience cannot be understood from an individual nor a system perspective, but from their iterative interactions. This is akin to Ungar's notion of the “social ecology” approach to resiliency (Ungar, 2012). The ability to successfully navigate and negotiate the flow and flux of the city is unequally spreads across citizens and communities. Those lacking these navigational/negotiation skills will more often struggle. A wide range of protective factors facilitate the capacity of people to adapt and ‘bounce back’ in the face of adversity (Ahern, Kiehl, Sole, & Byers, 2006; Beckwith, Dickinson, & Kendall, 2008; Connor & Davidson, 2003; Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Masten, 2001; Windle, Bennett, & Noyes, 2011). These protective factors of individual resilience are psychosocial and developmental (Wu et al., 2013), such as childhood trauma, cognitive processes (like cognitive reappraisal), personality traits (like optimism), and coping mechanisms (like active coping, seeking social support, humor). A vitalism approach analyses the interactions between these developmental and psychosocial factors with the social interactions, support mechanisms and systemic power relations. As such a multidisciplinary and multisystem perspective cuts across psychology, sociology, public administration, and economics, it becomes clear that Lash's (2006) notion of self-organization and self-causation is highly complex.

Third, vitalism enables us to analyse the plurality and complexity of resilience initiatives. As Kaika (2017: 89) aptly writes in a call against urban paradigms: ‘don't call me resilient again’. Existing urban solutions based on blueprints render people invisible and produce and reinforce ‘ecologies of exclusion’ (Kimari, 2021), where the habitus of (political, social and economic) precarity shape particular attitudes, behaviours and practices among people living under conditions of adversity and uncertainty (Cooper & Pratten, 2015; Richardson & Skott-Myhre, 2012). The blueprint of resilience, mediated by varying abilities, social capital, power struggles and relationality, ironically reinforces unequal levels of resilience. Instead, a vitalism perspective considers the plurality of resilience initiatives. It analyses how support mechanisms may enable community initiatives to improve community resilience (Duijn, van Buuren, Edelenbos, van Popering-Verkerk, & van Meerkerk, 2019), but may also hamper these improvements due to red tape (Creamer, 2015), tendencies to take over the initiatives (Gonzales, 2010) or by political interference (Brandsen, 2016).

The fourth contribution of vitalism is that it renders visible the fluid every-day forms of urban resilience, especially for those at the bottom of the pyramid. Households in resource constrained environments deal with shocks and disturbances on a daily basis, ranging from job loss to water shortages, robbery and murder. Radjou, Prabhu and Ahuja (2012: 59) argue that households in informal settlements become more resilient if they are able to turn scarcity into an opportunity. These often-mundane activities, such as applying for a micro credit loan to smoothen income, reinforcing the façade of a house with temporary materials or starting an informal business making face masks, lead to make-do solutions as found in ‘the makeshift city’ (Simone & Pieterse, 2017; Vasudevan, 2014). Such strategies ‘from below’ interact with hierarchical and network governance arrangements geared towards coping with, adapting to and/or transforming urban crises (Fransen, Peralta, Vanelli, Edelenbos, & Olvera, 2022). Community resilience initiatives adjust and interpret top-down initiatives to the local context, spanning the boundaries between governments, NGOs, residents and communities. Understanding how these fragments and pieces converge, collide and collate, and as such “articulate” with each other rather than being an ‘agglomeration’ (Scott & Storper, 2015) allows us to look at the way all kinds of shared experiences are shaped by and simultaneously shape ongoing struggles and negotiations over power and resources in the city (Yiftachel, 2009).

While the urban vitality perspective thus adds to the literature on urban resilience, the resilience discourse also contributes to our understanding of urban vitality. Coping with the Covid-19 pandemic has shown the importance of integrated approaches, which are often hindered by fragmentation and specialisation. Dealing with the multiple challenges of a pandemic and a social economic lockdown has shown the limitations of fragmented governance systems (Fransen, Peralta, Vanelli, Edelenbos, & Olvera, 2022). Adaptive, integrated, polycentric and responsive modes of governance are at the heart of a vital city. Second, the resilience discourse highlights multiple levels contained in the city as well as their complex interactions. This moves beyond the agency-structure dichotomy and the landscape, regime and niche levels of a multilevel perspective (Geels & Schot, 2007) and transition theory (Loorbach, n.d.).

3.3. Sustainable and just cities

Third, we will unpack the discourse on sustainable just cities by using the lens of urban vitalism. Sustainable development, as famously defined in the Brundtland report and by the United Nations in the current sustainable development goals programme, is a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This concept of sustainability is intrinsically complex, normative, subjective, and ambiguous (Kasemir, Jäger, Jeager, & Gardner, 2003; Rotmans, 2005). Some basic features of sustainability characterize the concept: it is an intergenerational phenomenon, it operates at multiple scale levels, and it covers socio-cultural, economic, technological and ecological dimensions. In

the broadest sense, sustainable development refers to both environmental concerns as well as "concerns of socio-economic well-being and equality" (Hopwood, Mellor, & O'Brien, 2005). However, critics have observed that in many discourses and practices on sustainability, there is a blind spot for socio-economic inequalities and political struggle of (re) distribution of costs and benefits (Agyeman, 2008; Jhagroe, 2016; Swilling & Annecke, 2012). Therefore it becomes necessary to refer to sustainable *and just* cities (Agyeman, 2013; Castán Broto & Westman, 2016).

Studies of environmental justice generally cover distributive justice (e.g. equitable distribution of material resources and services), procedural justice (e.g. participatory and democratic decision-making), and recognition justice (e.g. culturally inclusive practices) (Schlosberg, 2013). Recently, Anguelovski et al. (2020) proposed to move beyond this "framework of justice as a trilogy (…) toward a more fluid model for examining, analyzing, and addressing justice and equity" in the urban context, to provide more relational and intersectional attention for material and immaterial power structures. A more inclusive definition of justice refers to the "variegated set of conditions – substantially concerned with distribution of resources, political processes, and social recognition – that allows for full human flourishing [i.e. thriving within reasonable limits]" and the processes through which "societies mend (or exacerbate) social inequities that stop some people from flourishing, and the fundamental threads of justice are formed by the different types of inclusions and equalities, or exclusions and inequalities, that might affect the capacity to ensure equity" (Kotsila, Austin Matheney, Connolly, & Dommerholt, 2020).

When combining the two notions, sustainable and just cities are cities that (strive to) (1) improve the quality of life and well-being; (2) meet the needs of both present and future generations; (3) enable justice and equity; and (4) live within ecosystem limits (Castán Broto & Westman, 2016: 637–638, Agyeman, 2013; Agyeman et al., 2002). These are not objective criteria, but rather orienting principles that guide processes of societal transformation (Patterson et al., 2018) and sustainability transitions (Köhler et al., 2019). In these processes of long-term change, societal systems are structurally transformed towards more sustainable and just directions (Grin, Rotmans, & Schot, 2010; Loorbach, Frantzeskaki, & Avelino, 2017; Markard, Raven, & Truffer, 2012).

Ecological sustainability and social justice are often integrated as twin directionalities of urban transitions, especially in policy and civil society discourses. However, there are considerable tensions, challenges and contractions between ecological (un)sustainability and social (in) justice, as illustrated by e.g. processes of urban green gentrification (Anguelovski et al., 2018) or rising energy prices. In their article on "transition tensions", Ciplet & Harrison (2019:3) identify three categories of tensions between justice and sustainability: (1) 'sustainability-inclusivity' tensions (between "rapid and bold policy action in time-sensitive contexts and inclusive governance processes"), (2) 'sustainability-recognition' tensions ("between sustainability performance and recognition of diverse value systems and rights"), and (3) 'sustainability-equity' tension (between "achieving sustainability performance and equitable distribution of benefits and burdens"). These tensions highly increase the complexity of assessing the potential of initiatives to contribute to sustainable and just cities, for they may contribute to one goal while simultaneously reproducing or even worsening structural challenges in another dimension. Rather than trying to solve this paradox, it is about understanding and navigating these tensions, contradictions and trade-offs that underlie the attempts to make urban environments more sustainable and just.

The concept of vitalism can help bridge ecological sustainability and social justice by considering its underlying shared appreciation of life and living beings. It can help to reaffirm the importance of acknowledging and studying the relational interconnections between different living beings, not seeing nature and humanity as separate entities but rather as deeply entangled within socio-ecological systems, thereby also challenging functionalistic views of ecosystems as pure economic resources. From the perspective of urban vitalism, we can reconceptualise sustainable just cities as human settlements that strive to enable life – not only the life of present generations but also of future generations, not only of human beings, but also of other living beings, current generations and future ones – and enable these living beings not only to survive but also to thrive and flourish on the short and the long-term. Such definition resonates with recent definition of justice as human flourishing as the abovementioned definition by Kotsila et al. (2020). As many living beings inherently survive and thrive at the cost of other living beings, our cities become a stage for deep political power struggle over life (and death).

At the same time, an important insight from the theme of just sustainability also adds to our understanding of urban vitalism. Specifically, the systemic perspective underlying the research on sustainability transitions invites us to perceive of cities as being part of wider ecosystems, including a variety of functional socio-technical systems that supersede urban boundaries (e.g. energy, mobility, housing), as well as their broader ecological, geographic and political contexts. By definition, any assessment of how (un)sustainable and (un)just a city is, never solely refers to what happens within the boundaries of the city in the here and now, but also explores (in)just and (un)sustainable implications (whether intended or unintended) by/for other localities, now and in the future (e.g. where do urban energy, food and other resources come from and at what cost to other places and people outside the city's boundaries?). While the notion of urban vitalism re-affirms the need to understand cities as living social and political processes, urban transitions research reminds us of the socio-material relationality both within cities (between e.g. human beings, technology and ecology) as well as between cities and other socio-material systems. If we view a city as part of broader ecosystems, including the planet and its "planetary boundaries" we can argue that the 'vitality' of a particular city and its citizens depends at least as much on the vitality of the planet as a whole and its intricate global relations, as it does of the particular vitality conditions within the city itself.

3.4. Inclusive cities

Finally, we will use the concept of urban vitalism to critically discuss the discourse on inclusive cities. Few would question the diversity of contemporary cities. Cities are spaces where socio-economic differences manifest and are tangible to their inhabitants on an everyday basis. Cities provide the breeding ground for different life forms and lifestyles; it is here where social movements and scenes can develop and thrive. Today's urban space allows, for example, for the gathering of critical masses to participate in gay pride parades, #MeToo rallies and Black Lives Matter marches. Last but not least, cities are often the first place of arrival and settlement for immigrants, and it is in cities where people from different countries of origin, legal statuses, languages, and cultural and religious repertoires live and work side by side.

Encounters across differences are not neutral but ascribed with value. Connotations of diversity could be positive (celebration of urban diversity) or negative (conflicts or challenges of diversity). Scholarship has captured such encounters as new sociabilities of togetherness and community (Valentine, 2008), as migrant urbanism (Hall, 2015), as conviviality (Wise & Velayutham, 2014) or as commonplace diversity (Wessendorf, 2013). When negotiating differences is evaluated negatively this can manifest in feelings of displacement among parts of the populations (Mepschen, 2017). For example, in the context of migration, established residents can experience the settlement of newcomers as increasing the competition over resources such as housing and education, sparking frustrations and conflicts in the process of living together (Vollebergh, 2016). Migrants, on their part, can encounter many obstacles in carving out a place in the city, often also referred to as emplacement or place-making, for instance through experiences of discrimination.

We do not deny that there have been very important historical

transformations in the social composition of cities. However, urban vitalism's emphasis on relationality helps us move away from narratives that treat diversity as a relatively unique contemporary phenomenon to be lamented or celebrated. Cities are and have always been characterized by difference and have constituted spaces for "the being together with strangers" (Young, 1990: 237). In other words, today's social diversity cannot be understood in contraposition to the assumption of a homogenous past. The nostalgia for a unitary and harmonious city life, as convincingly argued in feminist and other critical scholarship, is unfounded and oppressive: It obscures how those in power have historically denied others the agency to fully participate in, and shape, the city; it reinforces inequalities through demands for assimilation and market mechanisms. When social homogeneity is treated as possible and even ideal, social differences are translated into social and economic hierarchies. Limiting or containing differences – that is, assimilating – becomes a condition for acceptance and belonging.

Vitalism helps us understand social diversity as an inescapable and valuable dimension of the urban, and inclusion, as the necessary condition for life to thrive in cities. Vitalism is also shaped individually and collectively in everyday interactions and there is agency in how individuals and collectives negotiate diversity. From a relational perspective, social differences are not a given, they are not attributes that people hold and carry around. Social diversity, as suggested above, does not result from the arrival of "new" people. It results from the ways in which people – "new" or not – relate with each other. Social groups, explains Young (2000: 90)

> "emerge from the way people interact. The attributes by which some individuals are classed together in the 'same' group appear as similar enough to do so only by the emergent comparison with others who appear more different in that respect."

What is more, vitalism allows considering social differences as non-static. Differences do not necessarily match any set of pre-given characteristics — be it nationality, colour of the skin, religious, gender, sexual orientation, and/or class. They are not exclusive in the sense that belonging to one category would prevent someone from belonging to another. What members of a group share with each other is a "social perspective" linked to commonalities in "experience, history, and social knowledge" (Young, 2000: 136). As experiences, histories and knowledge change or evolve, differences may be given new meanings, new affinities and new (even if partially) shared perspectives may emerge.

A relational understanding of social difference among those who live in the city also translates into the city's spatial composition. The alternative to urban segregation is not the homogeneously integrated space, argues Young, but the existence of distinct areas and ways of being without strict divides between them. "In the good city one crosses from one distinct neighbourhood to another without knowing precisely where one ended and the other began. In the normative ideal of city life, borders are open and undecidable" (1990: 239). The social map of this good city should thus reflect processes of differentiation that are "voluntary, fluid, without clear borders, and with many overlapping, unmarked, and hybrid places" (Young, 2000: 197).

Thus, while the myth of the homogeneous and harmonious community treats diversity as a problem and social differences as undesirable, urban vitalism underscores the need and the actual possibilities for inclusion. By urban inclusion we mean the – among others – symbolic, political, economic, and judicial recognition of differences, what Young (1990: 127) describes as the ideal of "city life as an openness to unassimilated otherness." This conceptualization helps to fill the conceptual container of "urban vitalism" by promoting the recognition of difference: City life – living with strangers – is not seen as a problem we have to struggle with, but a reality that carries significant potential for social justice. Young acknowledges, however, that this potential is observable only "incidentally and intermittently" (1990: 241) in cities around the world. Inclusion is lacking when an uneven distribution of power among members of different social groups manifests, for example, through segregation or gentrification, and when life chances are diminished because of someone's class, gender, age, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, etc. While Young's scholarship can and has been criticized for its communitarianist underpinnings, we still think that her ideas about cities, difference and recognition serve as important starting points for conceiving urban vitalism. In doing this, we side with others who have found Young's work "guiding inspiration and philosophical foundation for research in urban and social geography" (Iveson et al., 2018: 287).

Notably, just like exclusion, inclusion is not a natural phenomenon. It is nothing that once achieved, can be taken for granted. It is something that societies and economies create and that needs to be constantly fought for, defended and fortified through individual and collective action. Governmental, private and non-governmental organisations can enable or obstruct such inclusion. For example, municipalities nowadays often have explicit policy commitments and programs as well as councillors and municipal departments in place to address diversity and arguably foster inclusion (Schiller, 2016). Diversity and inclusion have also become cross-domain issues, addressed in, among others, urban planning and housing (Sandercock, 1998; Fainstein, 2005; Thomas, 1997, 2008), economic development, education, and social affairs. It is on the local level where immigrants in some countries enjoy voting rights without permanent residence or citizenship. Moreover, local institutions, such as city councils and city administrations have worked on institutionalizing diversity and hence making their composition more reflective of the diversity of local populations.

To sum up, a conceptualization of cities as places that have always been diverse and where inclusion needs constant fostering helps to refine our understanding of urban vitalism. Firstly, we see urban vitalism not as something that has to be implanted in cities, as the foundations for vitalism are always there: with the presence of human beings from different walks of life, capable of building relationships between each other, despite or because or irrespective of their differences. Second, this discussion points to how failures to acknowledge urban vitalism run the risk of legitimizing exclusionary power structures aimed at fixing and containing possible forms of life and their interactions in the city.

4. Conclusion and way forward

In this article, we have demonstrated the value of using urban vitalism as a lens to critically discuss and reconceptualise different notions on smart, inclusive, resilient and sustainable just cities. As we have seen, the lens of vitalism can serve to enrich popular notions on cities. A relational ontology helps us to understand to a much deeper and fuller account how, when, where and why particular individual and collective urban dynamics emerge and are allowed or enabled to flow, as well as obstructions to these dynamics by human and non-human actors and structures.

4.1. Urban vitalism in relation to smart, resilient, sustainable just and inclusive city discourses

With regards to *smart* cities, the lens of urban vitalism allows for a recognition of the "user value" of existing flows, exchanges, technologies and services that are actively carved out and treasured by urban communities and firms themselves. Smart technologies may not only enhance the efficiency of urban systems but may also exclude and alienate urban residents and local firms. The notion of vitalism allows for a more inclusive take at smartness and in this way expresses the interconnection between the concepts smart and inclusive and just cities, as not only related to a city's data flows for capital accumulation, but also to more marginalized citizens whose data are being collected and exploited. A vital smart city therefore places the heterogeneity linked to people's positions and interactions at the core of the analysis. There is no 'one size fits all' form of smartness, but a wide variety of interacting top-down and bottom-up initiatives.

Approaching *resilient cities* through the lens of urban vitalism represents a shift away from understanding resilience as a quality that a city as a system (does not) have or should (not) have. It emphasizes a multisystem perspective that considers the capacities of and power-laden interactions among individuals, communities, firms, and organizations to absorb shocks, learn and transform towards more resilient cities. Vitalism enables the study of power imbalances between actors that produce and reinforce 'ecologies of exclusion' that constrain the enactment of agency of those with little resilience capacities. We see crossovers with the other city concepts, as resilience is not a capacity easily available for all people (inclusion, equality and justice).

From the perspective of urban vitalism, we can reconceptualise *sustainable and just cities* as social and material configurations that strive to enable life of present and future generations. This applies to all living beings, and it is not only about enabling these living beings to survive, but also to thrive and flourish on the short and the long-term. As many living beings inherently survive and thrive at the cost of others, our cities become a stage for deep political power struggle over life (and death). Vitalism offers a suitable lens to understand the challenges, tensions and contradictions between urban in/justice and ecological (un)sustainability, and how citizens are empowered to transform their cities into sustainable and just environments. It underscores the importance that inclusivity is also important aspect for sustainable cities, making this a feasible goal for many people living in cities. Transformation of cities towards sustainability stresses the challenge of making everyone part of this newly transformed situation.

Finally, we used the lens of urban vitalism to redefine the perspective on *inclusive cities*. Inclusion is lacking in cities when social differences translate into hierarchies that justify the uneven distribution of power and other resources. Historically those in charge have marginalized others, which means that today's social diversity cannot be understood in contraposition an assumed homogenous past. The dynamic nature of urban vitalism allows us to approach inclusion as something that societies can aim at and that needs to be constantly fought for, defended and fortified through individual and collective action. Efforts of public, private and societal/non-governmental stakeholders can be crucial in this respect. Cities might brand and promote themselves as being inclusive, but in fact people living in the cities might see and feel differently. People want to become part of the city but see or feel that they don't have the opportunities and abilities.

What stands out from our theoretical analysis, is that the four notions are highly connected. For instance, smart cities are inherently tied to discussions on inclusiveness, sustainability and resilience — and vice versa. For example, smart technologies to develop sustainable use of heating of houses is not available for everyone implying that people have unequal opportunities to become resilient or to move towards sustainable energy sources. The overarching concept of urban vitalism allows us to not only explore these overlaps, but also use it in explaining what conditions need to be in place for cities to thrive. Next to identifying what the concept of vitalism has to offer for these specific discussions, the four concepts, and particularly their relationships, have something to offer for the conceptualisation of vital cities as well. The city concepts provide insights, for example that people residing in cities need not only to survive or bounce back to existing situations after certain shocks but also grow and develop and therefore bounce forward to improved living conditions in a just and sustainable way (cf. Adams & Tiesdell, 2007). In this reciprocal way the concept of urban vitalism is enriched as well. By reclaiming these concepts, a vital city moves beyond artificial contradictions and trade-offs beyond notions such as just sustainable, resilient, smart, inclusive.

4.2. Limitations

This articles also has its limitations. First, the proposed lens of urban vitalism cannot address all criticisms on the smart, sustainable just, inclusive and resilient city concepts. What it, however, can do is to make power struggles over who has the right to the city more visible, and enable a critical reflection on the effect of certain dominant structures and narratives have on the development of (power) dynamics within cities. We explicitly don't intend the theoretical lens of urban vitalism to be used as yet another city brand to assess and make claims whether or not a city is vital. By using urban vitalism as a theoretical lens, we aim to unpack city concepts like smart, sustainable cities by paying attention to the way how agency and structure are enacted or hindered through configurations and emergences of human behaviours and structures in ways that tune into the affective dispositions of people and the atmospheres of places that they inhabit or transit. This awareness allows both researchers and practitioners to redefine the concepts to enable or obstruct certain existing (power) dynamics. Second, we have applied the lens of urban vitalism to resilient, smart, sustainable just and inclusive city discourses. These discourses are selected because of their popularity in current urban and international policies. We acknowledge that the lens of urban vitalism could certainly also be applied to other, similar, city concepts as well. Hence, we explicitly encourage researchers to expand the usage of the perspective of urban vitalism to other concepts and discourses in future theoretical and empirical endeavours. Despite these limitations, we believe that this article makes important contributions to urban theories and practices. Third, we don't claim that the one city is more vital than the other. In theory, the foundations for vitality are inherent to any city due to the presence of diverse groups of living beings who relate with each other, despite or irrespective of their differences. However, the type of vitalism might be different based on the differences in the dimensions of vitalism. For example, processes of change are an important dimension of a vital city. Sometimes there are only small changes, and the city as a whole finds itself in a state of 'dynamic equilibrium'. Other times there are processes of radical innovation and transformative change where the entire urban system is transformed. Vitalism is about the role that living beings can play in that dynamic context and to go beyond 'the engineering and instrumental perspectives on how to make a city', including human actors ranging from residents to public and private organizations who affect the city with their behaviours, investments and policies. As such, vitalism can revolve around activism, community initiatives and support, but also violence, aggression and protest (Healey, 2021).

4.3. Way forward: future research

Interpreting topical notions on the city (smart, inclusive, etc.) from a vitalism point of view, allows us to identify recurring and cross-cutting themes which we see as important ingredients for a future research and discussion agenda on urban vitalism. Our first contribution to such an agenda lies in the theoretical value of conceptualising urban vitality and unearthing its added value. From the perspective of vitalism, cities are characterised by dynamic, varied, power-laden, multilevel and often contradictory interactions among urban actors. The city as a living entity underlines the process of becoming, a process that is plural, fluid and relational. Vitality equates to activity and life (Montgomery, 1998) but a vital city doesn't exist in one particular activity or component of the city. It is about the relationships among a diverse set of spatial, social, economic and cultural components and activities; in fact, many activities co-exist next to each other and often compete with each other in close proximity (Adams & Tiesdell, 2007). This is because it is produced and experienced by different people, communities and institutions. The foundations for vitalism are inherent to any city where there is the presence of human beings from different walks of life, capable of building relationships between each other, despite or because or irrespective of their differences. Future research endeavours could profit from the normative-critical focus on inclusive and just processes within cities that the urban vitalism lens adds, related to the sustainable development goals' notion 'leave no-one behind'. It is important to critically scrutinize the influence of industrialization, modernization, digitalization and technocratic viewpoints and approaches in

conceptualizations of cities as primarily depersonalized systems – composed by buildings, roads, and other hard infrastructures – and in the marginalization of human perspectives and social activities. The concept of urban vitalism starts off from cities as organic entities in which residents and other actors are the core of the city and in which both lifeworld and system worlds come together.

A second contribution to this research and discussion agenda is to approach and understand cities as power constructs which condition the vitality of urban residents and communities**.** As mentioned above, urban vitalism implies co-existence of activities which don't always live in harmony next to each other. Discussions of what a vital city entails – be it in the shape of smart, resilient, inclusive, sustainable, just or other forms– are inherently connected with issues of power, politics and participation in cities. When dominant public and/or private institutions try to oppress or conceal vitality, their rules and practices lose sight of the people they aim to serve. Empirical studies could focus on identifying, from the viewpoint of power and conflict, how urban development frustrate or facilitate urban diversity, and the role that individuals such as local politicians play in determining the conditions of urban participation (Nederhand & Edelenbos, 2022). How do city or neighbourhood brands/discourses of public, private and societal/non-governmental stakeholders align with the experiences of urban residents — are they able to participate and who determines this? How to make governmental participation processes (on for instance ecological sustainability or smart urban innovations) more appealing for marginalized residents?

A third contribution to such a research agenda is to investigate and critically discuss the adaptive and transformative capacities of urban residents and communities. Vital communities can absorb shocks (like disruptions from pandemics, climate change and new technologies), to bounce back (recover) and bounce forwards (thrive, transform). As residents and communities face many pressures and challenges, they must be adaptive to these challenges and ready for change and transformation to absorb pressures in social, institutional and technological innovations. Empirical studies could focus on discerning important conditions (stimulating and hampering factors) for the development of adaptive and transformative capacities of urban residents and communities. Specific case studies could focus on dealing with the effects of climate change, pandemics, but also the energy and refugee crisis. What kind of bottom-up initiatives are being developed at the local level and how do they seek connections with or seek to change established urban dynamics and organizations? How are urban policies developed and implemented to deal with these shocks and who are left out, and why? How can vulnerable residents and communities be made more resilient and be included in policymaking on for example how to make their houses more energy-neutral?

A final contribution is a primary focus on urban private and community-based initiatives. Adams and Tiesdell (2007, 676–677) already argued that the perspective of vital cities brings a different urban planning and management approach to the fore, seeing the city and their residents as an organic process, with an emphasis on the self-organization, dynamic and adaptation. We take this a step further by bringing in the viewpoints, values and interests of residents more explicitly through bottom-up processes and community-based initiatives (see also Healey, 2006; Nederhand, Bekkers, & Voorberg, 2016). The emergence and growth of community-based and private initiatives could possibly unleash the vitality of some residents within or even beyond an imposed ‘top down’ order (Edelenbos & van Meerkerk, 2016). These initiatives are deeply relational and reflective of the plurality, dynamics and conflicts within cities. They operate in an urban governance context which may offer support mechanisms but may also jeopardize or harm them (Nederhand, 2021; Nederhand, Van der Steen, & Van Twist, 2018). Empirical studies could focus on examining the relationship between these initiatives and their social and governance context and identify factors that determine whether this relationship is productive or conflicting. Understanding this relationship is crucial for unravelling how, at the intersection of markets, governments and societies, individuals and communities strive to contribute a smarter, more resilient, sustainable and inclusive city. This points to the topic of effective and legitimate urban governance arrangements to create and maintain vital urban places where activities, conceptions and physical attributes reinforce each other.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

José Nederhand: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration. **Flor Avelino:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Isabel Awad:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Petra De Jong:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing. **Michael Duijn:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration. **Jurian Edelenbos:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration. **Jiska Engelbert:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Jan Fransen:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Maria Schiller:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Naomi Van Stapele:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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No data was used for the research described in the article.

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