

# Unlocking Sustainable Cities

# Radical Geography

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# Unlocking Sustainable Cities

A Manifesto for Real Change

Paul Chatterton

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# Series Preface

The Radical Geography series consists of accessible books which use geographical perspectives to understand issues of social and political concern. These short books include critiques of existing government policies and alternatives to staid ways of thinking about our societies. They feature stories of radical social and political activism, guides to achieving change, and arguments about why we need to think differently on many contemporary issues, if we are to live better together on this planet.

A geographical perspective involves seeing the connections within and between places, as well as considering the role of space and scale to develop a new and better understanding of current problems. Written largely by academic geographers, books in the series deliberately target issues of political, environmental and social concern. The series showcases clear explications of geographical approaches to social problems, and it has a particular interest in action currently being undertaken to achieve positive change that is radical, achievable, real and relevant.

The target audience ranges from undergraduates to experienced scholars, as well as from activists to conventional policy makers, but these books are also for people interested in the world, who do not already have a radical outlook and who want to be engaged and informed by a short, well-written and thought-provoking book.

Danny Dorling, Matthew T. Huber and Jenny Pickerill  
Series Editors

# Introduction

In Detroit, Philadelphia and New Orleans, groups of people have set up Urban Consulates, a network of parlours for residents seeking urban exchange. In Liverpool, Granby Workshop has grown out of community-led neighbourhood rebuilding and makes experimental hand-made products. In Indianapolis, People for Urban Progress take unwanted goods and recycle them into items that contribute to the public good. In Berkeley, HackerMoms is the first-ever women's hacker-space, a collaborative space where do it your selfers share tools, intelligence and community. In Leeds, Playful Anywhere incubates, develops and designs playful participatory projects putting people and play at the heart of public engagement and place. In Mexico City, the Miravalle Community Council has transformed abandoned public spaces in marginalised communities through establishing libraries, low-budget lunch rooms, health and recreational centres and recycling facilities. In Dallas, the Better Block Foundation is developing open-source solutions to help cities, community groups and emerging leaders create rapid prototyping in the service of creative place-making and support of public life. In Rotterdam, Buurtflirt's (literally, Neighbourhood Flirts) develop temporary, creative meeting points in forgotten locations in the city, bringing people together for social action. In Buenos Aires, the cartoneros (or informal litter pickers) have created stable cooperative work opportunities for the city's most marginalised. In Oregon, the Walk [Your City] project encourages walking to tackle auto-dependency and community activists have covered the city with signs promoting walking and cycling routes. The Vancouver Public Space Network has developed projects to tackle the growing corporatisation of space and promote alternatives to it, such as community gardens, walkable communities and billboard activism.<sup>1</sup>

This list of inspiring examples could go on. Something largely unnoticed is happening in cities across the world. There are countless projects where people from all walks of life and city sectors are creating, resisting and intervening in their unfolding urban story. In spite of the overbearing weight of corporate power, loss of public space, bureaucratic hierarchies, ingrained inequalities and even the presence of war and

violence, people and projects are emerging to lay down markers for very different urban futures. They are unlocking the huge untapped potential of sustainable cities. They may be partial, small scale and ephemeral. Efforts might not have the answers to urban poverty, inequality or climate change, but they represent a swarm of civic innovation, seeking to harness potential wherever they see it. This is a constellation of activity, a many-headed hydra that takes inspiration from activities on the other side of the world as much as from next door. They represent a healthy, radical understanding and critique of business-as-usual urbanism that is pushing cities to their social, ecological and economic limits. They are sceptical of whether techno-fixes and smart digital solutions on their own can be urban saviours.

#### WHERE TO START?

So why focus on cities? It is now well known that the majority of humanity on our planet live in cities and that over the next few years urban society will account for about three-quarters of total energy use and greenhouse gas emissions. Behind these headlines, there is a stark and disturbing agenda. It is a call to action about the very survival of our species and the ecosystems that we depend upon. For anyone intervening in how cities may unfold in the future, there are a whole host of complex and persistent problems that require urgent attention: climate resilience and adaptation; biodiversity and ecosystem protection; reductions in fossil fuel dependency; ensuring decent levels of prosperity and well-being; tackling generations of worklessness and poverty, building institutions that empower and enable; ensuring equality in terms of outcomes and procedures; figuring out how to incentivise changes in social practices; safeguarding children and vulnerable adults, reorienting work and education towards the challenges that lie ahead; and developing the financial, institutional and cultural shifts needed to underpin it all.<sup>2</sup>

To confound this, there is no agreed view on the task ahead. Interventions in future challenges are framed by how we see, and are positioned, in the world. A view of urban change and priorities for action from Bangladesh, for example, is radically different from those for Bradford or Boston. For some, urban sustainability challenges may mean avoiding death at the hands of an occupying army or scavenging for food and basic resources. For others, it might mean improving road safety or air pollution or using data to make public transport more efficient. At first



glance, it is hard to see what links these. They emerge from very different social, material and geopolitical circumstances. But digging deeper, we find common threads: a desire to develop alternatives to old paradigm urbanism, ingrained bureaucracies, corporate power and disconnected governments that have taken the control of cities out of the hands of its citizens.

This is not yet another book about sustainable, low-carbon, climate-friendly or resilient cities. It is intended as a manifesto for unlocking sustainable cities through what I purposefully call a manifesto for real change. This contrasts to many of the false solutions, weak promises and blind alleys masquerading as real change. I use the term real rather than radical, as this book is about transformative action that is also within our reach. As I explain in the coming pages, central to my theory of change is working towards sustainable cities through unlocking the great potential that comes from countless acts of transformative and disruptive civic innovation. But, at the same time, it requires the prevention of locking into dead-end routes or short-term gains and locking down socially and environmentally regressive tendencies that seek to privatise, commodify and individualise city life.

In particular, the book foregrounds the fact that one of the central problems is the way that we approach the very idea of sustainability. The concept of sustainable development has become so well worn that it has become meaningless. It largely concerns sustaining the status quo through a basket of reforms and a naive faith in the power of new socio-technical arrangements. Real sustainability can only be worked towards by embarking upon a deep and painful questioning, pulling apart and reorienting the dominant urban project of the human species during late capitalism's anthropocene.<sup>3</sup>

At a practical level, for cities, this is a serious call for radical action and is a fundamental step change in urban policy, institutions and action. Our cities are at a junction point. A generational challenge, and opportunity, is ahead. We need ideas, policy and action that can lay down radically different urban futures – those based on equality, prosperity and sustainability, but that also respond realistically to the enormity and interconnected complexities of the challenges ahead. Therefore, this book is not radical for the sake of being radical. Given the challenges we face, I'm reminded of the old anarchist saying, 'be realistic, demand the impossible'.

This is not a book that seeks solutions from top-down corporate-led, business-as-usual models, nor one that naively celebrates the power of small grass-roots projects, the power of a resurgent radical local state or lone mavericks who can break through old paradigms. Rather, it seeks to explore the power of rapidly emerging constellations of connected experiments that sit between and within all of these – that can harness the creative power of the many and have the potential to radically unlock the latent potential of cities. In particular, what these civic innovators point towards is institutional building that connects bottom-up and top-down change. Some of the most transformative innovation is occurring in this middle out or meso level.<sup>4</sup>

Responses, then, are multiple, contradictory and only partially clear. Are we trying to work with existing structures and institutions, set up utopian examples far away from them or confront and break them through more direct resistance? This book sits in the middle of these debates, for which there are no easy answers. Echoing the sentiment of political writer and activist John Holloway, action needs to be simultaneously in, against and beyond the contemporary city.<sup>5</sup> *Unlocking Sustainable Cities*, then, is a critical yet hopeful journey through what progressive urban futures might entail. It is a journey wrought with problems and contradictions, and at times, it will feel uncomfortable. The intention is not to provide a complete synthesis or road map to some utopian sustainable city, but to work with its complexity and messiness as essential resources.

#### UNLOCKING REAL CHANGE IN SUSTAINABLE CITIES

We need to begin with the problematic of approaching different visions of possible urban futures as well as road maps to get there. A variety of visions are pitched, often against each other, ranging from the prospect of future conflict and collapse, liberatory or utopian transformation, business as usual, as well as technocratic-led ecological modernisation and renewal. Contained within these debates are assumptions and struggles over very different forms of social relations, agencies and power structures, deployments of technologies, levels of corporate control, institutional realignment, values and forms of governance, and changes in social practices. In particular, different visions of the future contain assumptions about what needs to be promoted and demoted, created and resisted.

I frame this whole book through a dual movement: to lock down and unlock. First, I point towards the need for resistance and action in the face of aspects of urban life that need to be locked down to avoid damaging and unsafe versions of urban sustainability. Many features of the contemporary city have become bound up with unproductive and wasteful options. Think of moves to automated cars rather than a wholesale shift away from automobile dependency; centralised and corporate controlled low(er) carbon energy systems rather than localised, green civic energy; mass eco-city developments rather than integrated, affordable, green infrastructures; corporate control of land rather than the creation of common resources; and a focus on digital innovation at the expense of material inequalities. As we seek to unlock potential, we must not forget the task of locking down what is damaging.

Second, there needs to be a process of creation to enable and empower, or unlock, a whole parallel series of practices and institutions that foster greater levels of environmental sustainability, social justice and economic equality. The idea of unlocking is a powerful metaphor for our times. Huge civic potential is bubbling under the surface, but is constrained through a whole host of complex mechanisms related to power, greed, fear, paternalism, division, mistrust, the unevenness of educational opportunities, resources and social networks. Unlocking includes simple everyday tasks such as building social connections and speaking up for how things could be different, and more formal and complex tasks such as fighting for more resources and legislative changes. These activities which unlock, replicate and spread potential are the major focus of this book.

This process of unlocking and lock-down is not easy or straightforward. One person's problem is another person's solution. Cities are literally full of power and politics and any process of change that is substantial and transformative will entail differences and conflicts between vested interests, as well as overcoming social and institutional inertia. Given the complexity of our social world, there is little certainty in terms of outcomes and there is an important element of watching and waiting for emergent properties. This landscape is peppered with unintended consequences and perverse outcomes. Causality is thrown into disarray.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, we need to watch for alternatives, which might not turn out to be real alternatives at all. Real choice comes from the ability to direct finances, control resources, make and scrutinise decisions, and steer the planning system. In the conclusion, I explore some broader issues of

urban movement building, strategies and tactics against this backdrop of greater urban complexity.

#### FIVE THEMES FOR REAL CHANGE

I use five themes that shape and guide this great process of unlocking sustainable urban futures: compassion, imagination, experimentation, co-production and transformation. In some way, all the examples I explore in this book illuminate these themes.

The first is compassion and the urgent need to inject empathy, shared understanding and solidarity into the way we construct city futures. Compassion is commonly defined as a sensitivity to suffering of oneself and others with a commitment to try to alleviate and prevent it.<sup>7</sup> What would this mean for how we approach sustainability in cities? If we regard cities as connected and complex ecologies of people, resources, artefacts and infrastructures, then we start to understand the need for a compassionate approach to our daily lives. We have all simply found ourselves here, dealing with our own pasts and doing the best we can. But the conditions for compassion are being further eroded. Intense individualisation, performance and reward cultures and status anxieties built into fast-paced urban living blinds us to the needs of those around us. A compassionate city is also a slower city.<sup>8</sup> More humane, durable and legible solutions to an increasingly complex urban world can be better explored by slowing down.

Moreover, the contemporary ecological and social footprint of a city connects us to a complex range of people and places. An appreciation of these diverse links is a starting point for creating greater compassion and an ethics of care for distant others: the coffee plantation worker, the Thai seamstress, the Bolivian tin miner, the Korean microchip maker. What responsibility do we have to them? How do we unravel these connections? Similarly, a broader sense of ethics means challenging local and national governments, local elites and organisations implicated in all this. Knowing your local elite and how they operate is key to understanding how a city is run – and in whose interests. In every locality, we can unravel how firms, institutions and universities create and perpetuate webs of inequality. Structural patterns of inequalities from legacies of imperialism and colonialism continue to shape urbanity in such profound and largely invisible ways. In this context, compassion also means recognising these uneven historical geographies and finding

ways to cross and connect these social and spatial lines of inequality that divide cities.

The second theme is imagination, and the need to envisage the urban, which might seem impossible beyond the current frame of reference.<sup>9</sup> Sustainable cities emerge as much through locking down and unlocking various imaginative tendencies as material ones. Which imaginations, or narratives and stories about the future, gain traction will determine the kind of futures that become more likely. In this terrain of speculation, advocacy and imagination, a hopeful approach becomes a useful antidote to the despondencies of our age. The writer and activist Rebecca Solnit has called this: finding hope in the dark.<sup>10</sup> There are so many urban problems and pathologies that shape our thinking and action. Not only do we need rapid structural material changes that address these, but we also need to hopefully reimagine what a more prosperous and sustainable urban life could be like. Solnit's work is part of a broader tradition that rejects top-down thinking and linear relations. She encourages us to find hope in everyday actions, and stresses that we are making history all the time.<sup>11</sup> In this reimagining of sustainable cities, the means are as important as the endpoints.

In a context of a mounting sense of uncertainty around climate breakdown, energy security, migration, permanent war or the future of public services, it is easy to fall back on familiar hierarchical command and control ways of being and doing – but it becomes especially important that we do not retreat from freedom and imagination. They will be the lifeblood of opening up opportunities for more empowering, collaborative forms of action that can unlock and successfully respond to the challenges ahead.

This reimagining process has become a battleground between different political voices on the left and right. Developing the kinds of sustainable cities we want to see will require acknowledging but not getting caught up in these differences, and creating common sense arguments that weave together what needs to be locked down and unlocked into convincing and inclusive storylines. There are no easy answers or blueprints – and nor should there be. Along the way, there will be ideas and values that might be uncomfortable and unmanageable, but that is the rawness and energy of being involved in social change. Feasibility is important, however. Novel ideas have to be accessible, inspiring and viable, but have to make the status quo look absurd. Incremental steps which prefigure future changes are likely to provide traction. Moreover, humour, play

and satire will have a key role. For example, studies have shown that the imagination and creative play that we use during childhood is an incredibly important base for future adult creative potential.<sup>12</sup> Encouraging greater play in our future cities then is one of the great ingredients of creating a more compassionate, active and imaginative citizenry.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, education is key to harnessing imagination in ways that create practical steps for action. Learning about workable alternatives, providing practical exercises and resources, helping with action planning and campaign building can all help. Educators take on the responsibility of guiding groups beyond common fears to reveal answers and exit routes, and laying possible options on the table. Essential is the ability to make connections and establish bridges between people's everyday realities and what they can start to think is possible in the future. Hence, different options are presented slowly and gradually, with honest reflection, compromise and set backs along the way. Part of the learning experience is sharing what is feasible. Ways of urban living beyond the status quo already exist. On their own, they may seem weak or irrelevant, but gathered up and presented and experienced collectively, they can provide excitement and hope for an achievable creative, empowered life.

The third is experimentation, and the need to take bold action to explore novel possibilities through radical forms of prototyping and exploration beyond the business-as-usual approach. The term experimentation traditionally refers to the more common act of experimenting undertaken to verify or falsify hypotheses between phenomena in controlled environments. However, lab experiments have never been the removed places that traditional images of men in white coats might evoke. They are in fact highly open and negotiated spaces – far from being immune to external pressures, they are indelibly mixed up with the outside world. Cities, as complex systems represent something similar – almost live field experiments.<sup>14</sup> Flows of people and resources constantly come together in novel ways to experiment with different arrangements and possible outcomes. Given the stalemate of policy in the face of the scale of the challenges, creating zones of experimentation offers great opportunities for: entering into the flow of city life to insert novel and disruptive values and habits; and then observing, analysing and evaluating the outcomes, and how they can destabilise the status quo.

As I explore in Chapter 4, city labs represent a commitment to this kind of experimentation, generating knowledge in new ways, via citizen engagement, co-production and partnerships. These share in common a

vision of cities as novel open-experimentation platforms for meeting the grand challenges of our age, such as climate adaptation and mitigation, energy scarcity, financial austerity or social unrest. This is especially pertinent in an increasingly globalised and interconnected age. Cities are the sites of disruptive innovations at various scales, from the neighbourhood to the city-region and beyond. Such disruptive innovations can take many forms: novel horizontal institutions, decentralised neighbourhood organising, land occupations or indeed organising to protect frontline public services.

There are also dangers of open experimentation in cities. Consistency, durability and repetition are also crucial to many of the aspects which allow us to flourish such as reliable transit systems or welfare services. Moreover, there is a danger that experimentation could depoliticise discourse and action, if it becomes overly associated with detached technocrats attempting to orchestrate people and resources or identifying and fixing certain inputs, as well as relying on a naive local bounded politics of scale, where everything that happens in the city can be controlled by the city. While we take an experimental attitude to unlocking sustainable cities, we need to keep in mind the longer-standing traditions of redistributive politics and social inequalities. In particular, we need to establish who is doing the experimenting, to what ends and who will control the outputs. We need experiments that solve perceived societal crises but in ways that foreground equality, openness and social justice rather than the free market.

The fourth aspect is co-production and the need to harness collaborative forms of co-working and co-design to urban problem-solving. Co-production is a term which has risen to recent prominence amongst academics and practitioners, and which is used in a range of areas, including the provision of services and goods, as well as research and working practices. Its basic contours relate to a deep commitment to: equality and equal participation; developing shared learning and understanding; building bridges between different institutional contexts and positionalities (especially academic and non-academic, public and private, communities and institutions); developing shared understandings and responsibilities for problem-solving and service delivery; and attempting to find novel solutions to persistent problems. Co-production normally assumes mutual respect, reduced hierarchies between different knowledge contributions, fluid and permeable disciplinary and pro-

fessional boundaries, and a normative concern with action. It provides opportunities to explore and test knowledge in the context where implementation will take place. Co-production redefines relationships from being extractive or transactional to being interactive. There is a collaborative, iterative process of shared learning. Co-production can help to democratise how we research and in turn lead to socially just change and greater public benefit.<sup>15</sup>

Co-production in cities is flourishing as there is a growing recognition that no single institution has the capacity to diagnose challenges and solve problems on their own. In this context, radically different institutional personas and forms of knowledge production are needed. This opens up participants to a different emotional register, based on vulnerability, partial knowledge and compassion. Co-production flourishes in novel institutions that avoid dichotomies such as public and private and bottom-up or top-down. Sustainable cities, then, will require drastic institutional reinvention as different sectors and citizens come together in novel ways.

The fifth, and perhaps most significant, theme is transformation and a commitment to feasible changes beyond the current paradigm of carbon-dependent and pro-growth economics as the structural conditions that reproduce urban inequality and injustice. Urban society is running out of options to merely 'adjust', and therefore has to look into options for deliberate transformation in the face of multiple crises. This will involve naming and confronting power as well as the historic structural tendencies that continue to shape our world across, such as imperialism, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality and gender.

Moreover, we need to situate the various choices embedded in unlocking sustainable cities within the long-standing critiques of urban industrial society, especially in the context of a rapidly globalised and urban world. Since the 1972 *Limits to Growth* report and the foundational work of E.F. Schumacher,<sup>16</sup> a body of thought and action has emerged across the globe, which presents a sustained argument against globalised and neoliberal urban growth.<sup>17</sup> What we can take from these debates is a need to set a course for progressive urban futures beyond business-as-usual capitalist growth, towards a radically different localised, egalitarian, participatory and people-centred vision for human development. Cities which are more environmentally sustainable are all well and good.