



Circularity for Educators

04. An Interdisciplinary Approach to Circularity

Radically Inclusive: The Just Transition to Circular Urbanism

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As we grapple with global challenges like climate change and rising inequality, it's imperative to understand that any transition towards sustainability must be just and radically inclusive. Let's delve for a moment into the essence of this inclusivity in the context of circularity.

We find ourselves at a pivotal historical moment, facing global challenges such as *climate change*, *migration*, and *escalating inequality*. These issues, as Giddens aptly points out¹, often lack immediate tangibility in daily life, leading to a general sense of complacency. However, the consequences of inaction today could render these challenges insurmountable in the future.

The repercussions of climate change are becoming increasingly evident. Extreme weather events across the globe are a testament to this, and the rising uncertainties they bring are causing turbulence, protests, and fear on a global scale. Such *crises, while daunting, also present opportunities*. They allow us to question existing institutions and ways of doing things, prompting a search for new value systems. The deep-rooted nature of our current challenges means that transitioning to new systems will require both innovative practices and significant structural changes in our daily lives.

Historical transitions, such as the Industrial

Revolution, serve as pertinent examples. The shift from a pre-industrial to an industrialized society brought about monumental changes, with innovations like the steam engine and electricity transforming daily life. However, this period also saw a widening gap between the rich and the poor, leading to significant socio-economic challenges. The Communist Manifesto emerged during this time as a beacon of hope, advocating for a society rooted in solidarity and shared ownership, challenging the capitalist status quo.

In contemporary times, the primary focus of envisaged changes centres on sustainability, with climate change and related ecological concerns at the forefront. Addressing these challenges requires resilience, foresight, and adaptability.

While technological advancements are often hailed as potential solutions, a holistic transition must also consider the social, economic, and cultural contexts. Moreover, echoing Swilling and Annecke's sentiments², the envisioned transition should not only aim for sustainability but also for justice, addressing socio-economic inequalities and global poverty.

The importance of linking circular thinking with spatial planning

The success of mainstream circular thinking can be



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attributed to its integrative approach, connecting materials, techniques, people, and ideas. It fosters creativity, innovation, and encourages interdisciplinary collaboration. However, a notable gap exists between circularity strategies and spatial knowledge. Many circular initiatives focus on resource efficiency or waste management, often neglecting the spatial dimensions of urban development and the social implications of sustainable choices. This is also evident in recent academic research that underscores the growing interest in the circular economy but fails to discuss its relationship with Spatial Planning. This oversight limits the potential of circular practices. Spatial planners and designers play an indispensable role in addressing this gap, integrating spatial knowledge into circular strategies.

Urban experimentation is crucial for transformative urban change. It offers a platform to test innovative ideas, policies, and practices, reshaping urban landscapes to address pressing societal challenges. Spatial planners and designers, with their expertise, ensure that such experiments are in line with sustainable and equitable principles.

Examples from the field

Circular principles are foundational for the future urban landscape. Numerous local initiatives worldwide are exemplifying innovative, inclusive, and sustainable solutions.

For instance, *Amsterdam's Kolenkitbuurt* and *Mechelen's Potterij* demonstrate the transformative power of community-driven, sustainable initiatives, emphasizing the principles of the Circular Economy transition, sustainability, and justice.

Kolenkit in Amsterdam, once unpopular due to socio-economic issues, was revitalized by Cascoland's "bottom-up" approach. Collaborating with residents since 2010, they launched community projects emphasizing sustainability, resilience, and Circular Economy principles, including innovative waste repurposing.

The Potterij in Mechelen, previously contaminated, was acquired by OVAM in 2015. Instead of luxury lofts, it's being transformed into the "Impact Factory", a circular economy lab with workspaces and community areas, emphasizing sustainability, repurposing, and societal benefit.

So, what do these practices tell us?

Firstly, they make explicit that *urban development necessitates a comprehensive understanding, encompassing both spatial and socio-economic dimensions.*

They also help determine that *emphasis should be on synergy, proximity, and a reimagined spatial planning approach.*

Furthermore, *the transition toward a circular built environment involves both fostering new systems and phasing out outdated practices.*

And last but not least, examples like the ones mentioned here tell us that *governments should actively support experimentation and policy-preparing design research.*

In conclusion, our approach to crisis can be two-fold: one rooted in immediate concerns and the other in optimism for the future. As Pieterse suggests, we need an "ethics of transgression,"



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pushing boundaries for a sustainable and just urban future. *Sustainability, devoid of justice, remains a mere illusion.*

1. *“No matter how much we are told about threats, it is hard to face up to them, because they feel somehow unreal -and, in the meantime, there is a life to be lived, with all its pleasures and pressures. The politics of climate change has to cope with what I call ‘Giddens’s paradox’. It states that, since the dangers posed by global warming aren’t tangible, immediate or visible in the course of day-to-day life, however awesome they appear, many will sit on their hands and do nothing of a concrete nature about them. Yet waiting until they become visible and acute before being stirred to serious action will, by definition, be too late.”*

- Giddens, A. (2009). *The Politics of Climate Change*. Polity Press.

2. *“What is at stake is not simply a transition to a mode of production and consumption that is not dependent on resource depletion and environmental degradation, but as important is the challenge of a just transition that addresses the widening inequalities between the approximately one billion people who live on or below the poverty line and the billion or so who are responsible for over 80 per cent of consumption expenditure.”*

- Swilling, M. & Annecke, E. (2012). *Just Transitions. Explorations of sustainability in an unfair world*. UCT Press