Urban Europe, Precarious Futures? Introduction to the Special Issue

Around three-quarters of the European population live in urban areas, with more than 40 per cent living in cities, and future predictions suggest that this will continue to increase (European Parliament, 2019). Cities and urban areas are drivers of innovation, economic growth and change; however, they also face major challenges around the provision of housing, inequality and poverty, congestion and pollution. Different scenarios for urban futures arising from climate change, technological shifts, big data, the changing world of work, political (in)stability and a range of other factors have variously painted a broad spectrum of utopian and dystopian visions. While there remains much uncertainty about aspects of urban change, the future of cities will be characterised by increased complexity and ‘deep-seated changes that are intrinsically unpredictable’ (Batty, 2019; 5).

Rising uncertainties across aspects of economic and social life have led increasingly to growing discussions around the concept of precarity in different parts of urban experiences, and from different disciplinary perspectives. The notion of precarity emerged predominately from the field of employment studies (for example, Kalleberg, 2009); but recent accounts have argued for precarity as a multi-dimensional concept, encompassing precarity in both ‘labour’ and ‘life’, and the structures and factors which ‘render some lives more precarious than others’ (Strauss, 2018; 625). Across the social sciences, the concept of precariousness has broadly encompassed:

- Environmental change, global warming and public health in urban areas (Broadbent and Cara, 2018; Edwards and Bulkeley, 2018).
- Precarious labour markets, non-standard employment and the gig economy (Standing, 2011; Kalleberg, 2009; Thiel, 2017; Johnes, 2019)
- Housing affordability, situations and transitions/pathways (Dwyer and Lassus; 2015; Beer et al, 2016; Felicianonio, 2017; Borsuk and Eroglu, 2020)
- Insecure public services and the confluence of austerity and financialisation encouraging urban governments to engage in more ‘risky’ financial actions (O’Brien and Pike, 2015; 2018)
- The uneven impacts of austerity across cities (Gray and Barford, 2018; Vaiou, 2016) and the roll-back off social security to manage risk (Beatty and Fothergill, 2017)
- Precarious politics and the rise of populism in place (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018)
- Experiences of the urban periphery: marginalization, disconnectivity and vulnerability (de Falco et al., 2019; Pfosser, 2018)

To bring together some of these strands of thought on urban precarity a conference was held in December 2020 focusing on the theme of ‘Urban Europe, Precarious Futures?’ Of course by this time a new form of precarity had emerged in the form of the Covid-19 pandemic, with implications most obviously for health but also for employment, transport, patterns of mobility and consumption. The conference brought together contributions on urban precarity from a range of perspectives focused on analysing the drivers of precarity, the important societal impacts, and identifying responses to ameliorating risks at different spatial scales.
The conference brought together 19 presenters from 13 different countries across three continents. The keynote presentations for the day were provided by Professor Jürgen Essletzbichler (Vienna University of Economics and Business); Professor Janette Webb (The University of Edinburgh); and, Professor Guy Baeten (University of Malmo).

From the conference a number of contributions were subsequently submitted to contribute to this Special Issue. Together the three papers taken forward engage with different factors and spatialities of precarity. Jürgen Essletzbichler examines at the city scale the need to rework a municipal vision of the future which prioritises income sufficiency and equitable access to public services, as well as the challenges to progressing this. In examining the relationship between socio-ecological transformation and urban reliance, Essletzbichler establishes a link between precarity, three potential political-economic development scenarios, and consequential approaches to urban governance. In doing so, the paper suggests that the foundational economy offers a means of achieving necessary reductions in precarious living conditions and environmental destruction required for a socially and ecologically sustainable future. This notion is further explored through the concept of the Grounded City, with horizontal and intra-scalar relations in urban contexts argued as advantageous for the design and delivery of foundational infrastructure and universal basic services. Provision of universal basic services in the City of Vienna is used to illustrate that ignorance of inter-territorial and inter-scalar relations may neutralize the gains of social-ecological investment in cities. Instead, the paper posits that effective social-ecological transformation demands coordination, cooperation, and political change at all scales of governance.

Papatzani, Psallidaki, Kandylis and Micha focus in on housing as a site of precarity for migrants. Since 2015, in a movement widely characterised as a refugee crisis, Greece has become a destination for migrants escaping conflict and poverty in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and elsewhere. In exploring the quotidian socio-spatial relationships and processes of belonging amongst asylum seekers in Athens, Papatzani, Psallidaki, Kandylis and Micha frame precarity as the absence of ‘a right to remain’ and to determine one’s own mobility and habitation. Their analysis shows that uneven geographies of accommodation amongst such communities are translated into a hierarchy of precarity. Moreover, this precarity is entrenched by three sets of mechanisms. First the filtering of asylum seekers according to vague notions of vulnerability. Second, regulations that impose spatial isolation and segregation through the placement of already filtered categories of asylum seekers into different types of accommodation in different places, and third, extensive control of everyday habitation exerted by those in charge of the accommodation system. Interestingly, and unusually, in the Greek context, the southern European model of informal urban development, with its prevalence of social mixing, has created room amongst the variety of categories, types, places and rules that govern asylum accommodation, for informal practices of accommodation to arise, and for networks of mutual aid and solidarity to emerge.

Reuschke and Zhang extend debates on precarious work into the domain of solo self-employment – providing new cross-national evidence. Reuschke and Zhang’s paper questions the dominant narrative of contemporary urban and regional research, which establishes entrepreneurship as a fundamental mechanism for growth. They argue that such narratives largely overlook increasing levels of precarious self-employment, typically forms of ‘solo’ self-employment, often necessity-motivated rather than preference, and frequently linked to ‘new’ industries, for example, the creative sector. Utilizing data from the 6th European Working Conditions Survey, covering the then EU28 along with Norway and Switzerland, the paper offers a multidimensional empirical framework of precariousness of self-employment. The findings highlight significant spatial variations in the prevalence of precarious self-employment, as well as differences linked to individual characteristics such as gender, industry and location of work. Based on these insights, the authors conclude that employment policies must move beyond regulatory and legal frameworks to include location-oriented policies which target specific local conditions of self-employment.
Although the papers adopt different perspectives, they collectively highlight some of the building blocks of stability and resilience for individuals, communities and cities – high quality public services, access to decent housing and stability of employment.

The papers demonstrate a number of wider lessons for the study of precarity. In viewing housing precarity as a process, Papatzani et al highlight the idea of precarity as viewed in a longitudinal sense, and as an evolving lived experience. This has important potential implications for methodology and the need to better understand experiences of precarity as dynamic, changing and cumulative. The networked nature of precarity is also highlighted in the paper as precarity flows between nations and regions (for example through migration flows and global environmental and political crises). Reuschke and Zhang’s work speaks to a wider fracturing of the established employment relationship, but also to the important of place and context in understanding the reworking of this. Cities have been at the forefront of new trends in non-standard work, such as the growth of the gig economy. Essletzbichler’s paper moves beyond the thematic and discusses a more integrative treatment of systemic precarity as embedded in the economic system. Collectively the papers raise important questions about the relative role of the state and formal policy, vis-a-vis the role of communities and informal practice, in managing and ameliorating precarity. For urban development, Essletzbichler’s appeal for a greater emphasis on the Foundational Economy as an organising principle adds to a growing call from regional scholars on the potential of a new way of thinking about development (Engelen et al, 201; McKinnon et al, 2022). However, the scale of challenge in this area is also elucidated in the case study Vienna, demonstrating that while cities and urban areas are seen to be potential sites of transformation, location-specific factors and ‘inter-territorial and inter-scalar relations’ enable and constrain the prospects for change in powerful ways.

As European cities and regions continue to recover from impacts of the pandemic, and as urban spaces continue to be reshaped by technological, environmental, social and political change, a central challenge for policymakers will be maintaining, or re-establishing, core building blocks of stability for lives and livelihoods. A plurality of models have been suggested for how to do so, including a growing emphasis on the Foundational Economy, however the translation of ideas into action and practice has tended to be both slow and uneven.

References


Strauss, 2018; 625).


