Between Utopia and Dystopia: (Green) New Deals, Vulnerability and the Resilience of Political Imaginaries

Joern Langhorst

University of Colorado Denver

Jane Jacobs famously asked what kind of a problem a city was – and this framework still drives contemporary and emergent thinking on questions of climate change, social and environmental justice, of sustainability and resilience, of health, well-being and safety. This paper argues that the city – or landscape and space in general – has been and continues to be an instrument of and for all kinds of often highly contested agendas. This instrumentality operates in the duality of space being culturally produced and a result of socio-economic-ecological change (a very traditional view), but also being seen as an instrument to instigate, enable or enact socio-economic-ecological change. The paper critically investigates the “Green New Deal” and other big, utopian, grand scheme of design and planning projects and proposals and their often hidden, invisible or unseen underlying agendas and political imaginaries. It argues that big utopian schemes and values such as resilience are operating as rhetorical devices and spatialized means to pursue agendas that are ultimately more about the resilience of the status quo with all its inherent and intrinsic injustice, inequity and uneven development, and less about
addressing the very processes and actors that generate most of the causes of ecological, economic and social vulnerability and precarity.

The paper will focus on investigating the push for “resilience” and its impacts on the design, planning and performance of cities in general, and disenfranchised, marginalized and vulnerable neighborhoods and communities in particular (e.g. “green gentrification”), concluding that the expertist-apolitical stance of relevant professions and disciplines needs to be changed, and that consensus-driven design and planning methods and methodologies should be amended, or even replaced, by those that engage dissent in new, more inclusive and equitable ways, such as those based in assemblage theory (Latour 2005) or pluralistic agonism (Mouffe 2003). It presents the foundations for urgently needed counter-rhetorics that challenge the agendas of neoliberal governmentality and globalism in a pandemic and post-pandemic world.

- Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

**Joern Langhorst** is an Associate Professor in the College of Architecture and Planning at the University of Colorado Denver and a fellow of the Colorado Center for Sustainable Urbanism. Previously he has held faculty positions at the University of Oregon and Iowa State University. His research and teaching focus on theories of space, place and landscape, on media theory and issues of visualization and representation, emphasizing film, and on post-industrial and post-disaster sites with a focus on the cultural production and agency of space and place. A particular emphasis is on post-industrial, post-colonial and post-disaster cities and their mechanisms of de-development and re-development. He has been consulting on the recovery and redevelopment of post-disaster and post-industrial sites nationally and internationally, with a particular emphasis on the role of emergent technologies, alternative processes and the relationships between traditional and new actors and agents.