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Title: Urban Sustainability Amid Neoliberalism: the Tensions Between Capital and Welfare in the Contemporary City

Research Overview: We live in a period of catastrophic environmental collapse, encompassing climate change, while our economies are increasingly unequal. As hubs of human activity, cities are the sites of greatest intensity. Although cities are more responsive to democracy, national governments have been co-opted by the interests of capital. The ensuing shift toward neoliberalism has seen reduced embedded welfare and the greater mobility of capital. Consequently, cities increasingly compete for mobile capital to provide welfare for their citizens. Therefore, urban sustainability is not only critical, but must be understood amid neoliberalism.

Despite this, existing methodologies are inadequate. The 'visions' cities create are unrealistic 'wish-lists', while academic research is narrowly focussed on individual aspects of urban sustainability. Consequently, this study employed grounded theory methodology in which 89 interviews with policymakers and key stakeholders were conducted in York, Bath, Bristol, Edinburgh, Freiburg (Germany), Plymouth and Preston from which an understanding was constructed of each city.

From these it was found that the need to provide welfare was the priority of a city's public institutions. However, due to mobility, the need to (re)attract such capital dominates their resources. Furthermore, owing to its private nature, mobile capital is unequal, therefore inefficient in providing welfare across a city. Accordingly, even 'wealthy' cities lack welfare.

However, a strategy devised by Defilippis (1999, 2004) and partially enacted in Preston counters this. By using the land, investment funds and budgets of a city's anchor organisations to favour local, democratic control in land-use, investment and the procurement of services respectively, more egalitarian and embedded welfare may be provided. Additionally, as was observed within the case-studies, with greater welfare comes a cultural impetus for sustainability. Therefore, a city's resources are free to pursue less immediate priorities around quality of life and the environment, making urban sustainability amid neoliberalism possible.