



Annotating key concepts of integrated spatial planning

Integrated Spatial Planning

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Mainstream/Conventional Definition

In mainstream academic and policy discourse, integrated spatial planning is understood as a **systemic, multi-scalar and multi-sectoral approach** that coordinates land-use, mobility, environmental, social and economic policies to guide the sustainable development of cities and regions. It emerged as an institutional paradigm within European and global planning frameworks, positioning “integration” as a tool for achieving coherence across fragmented governance systems and policy domains. In this view, integration operates through **horizontal coordination** across sectors, **vertical alignment** across governance levels, and **territorial cooperation** across administrative boundaries, creating a unified strategic direction for spatial development.

This conventional perspective frames integrated spatial planning as a largely **technocratic, evidence-based practice, in which data, modelling**, and interdisciplinary urban science support more rational and efficient decision-making. It emphasises participatory procedures primarily as a means of improving legitimacy and stakeholder buy-in, rather than fundamentally reshaping power relations. Overall, the mainstream definition presents integrated spatial planning as a coordinated, holistic and efficiency-oriented governance mechanism designed to deliver sustainability, resilience and the “common good” through coherent spatial strategies.

Contested Meanings / Debates in the Literature

Debates around integrated spatial planning revolve around deep tensions concerning governance, knowledge, justice, and the very purpose of planning. A **key fault line** concerns whether integration should be understood as a **managerial practice of policy coherence** or a **transformative governance framework oriented toward justice and empowerment**. Mainstream institutional approaches frame integration as technical coordination across sectors, jurisdictions, and scales, emphasizing coherence and efficiency. Critical scholars challenge this, arguing that such conceptions depoliticize integration by masking unequal power relations and overlooking the social and ethical dimensions of planning. Instead, they advocate for relational and justice-oriented interpretations, where integration becomes a vehicle for redistributing power and addressing structural inequalities in urban systems.

A **second axis of debate focuses on knowledge, participation, and epistemic authority**. Conventional integrated planning relies strongly on expert-led, technocratic knowledge practices, privileging quantitative metrics and scientific rationality. Critics argue that this model marginalizes everyday experience, situated knowledge, and the epistemic contributions of communities. Scholars working in participatory and collaborative planning emphasize that integration must also operate as an **epistemic practice**, bringing different ways of knowing into negotiation through co-production rather than tokenistic consultation. Concepts such as “in-between spaces” highlight the importance of shared problem-framing and iterative knowledge building between planners and communities—a move that redefines integration as plural, negotiated, and reflexive rather than purely technical.

Spatial justice represents a third major point of contention. While mainstream frameworks often treat equity as a presumed by-product of coherence and efficient service provision,

critical scholars insist that justice cannot be assumed but must be explicitly designed, measured, and institutionalized within integrated planning systems. Research operationalizing spatial justice through participatory mapping, multi-criteria analysis, and equity indicators demonstrates how integration can be redirected toward distributive, procedural, and recognitional justice. This work highlights a deeper critique: integration without justice simply reinforces existing inequalities, whereas justice-oriented integration seeks to transform how resources, opportunities, and decision-making power are distributed across space.

Global and cultural contexts add further layers of contestation. European and international institutions often promote integration as a universalized model, yet scholarship from postcolonial, Global South, and postmigrant contexts challenges this assumption. In many Southern cities, “integration” involves negotiating between formal and informal systems, addressing long-standing exclusions, and grappling with socio-spatial fragmentation shaped by colonial legacies. Similarly, in postmigrant contexts, integration becomes entangled with questions of belonging, recognition, and identity. These examples show that integrated spatial planning is never a neutral or uniform concept; it is deeply contextual, culturally mediated, and historically situated.

Finally, a **rapidly emerging debate centers on transformative and post-growth interpretations** of integrated spatial planning. While mainstream notions remain tethered to growth-oriented urban development and the optimization of infrastructure for economic competitiveness, post-growth thinkers argue that integration must instead align with sufficiency, solidarity, and ecological finitude. Concepts such as urban degrowth, prefigurative planning, and habitability challenge the foundational assumptions of “integrated” systems built around expansion and efficiency. They propose instead a project of coordinated socio-ecological transformation where integration is not about managing growth more effectively but about enabling alternative urban futures rooted in care, justice, and limits.

Selected References & Key Readings

- Creutzig, F. *et al.* (2024) “**Towards a public policy of cities and human settlements in the 21st century**,” *npj Urban Sustainability*, 4(1), p. 29. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1038/s42949-024-00168-7>.
 - ➔ *This article proposes a comprehensive, transdisciplinary framework for aligning climate action, public health, well-being, and digitalization in urban policy, positioning cities as central arenas for climate mitigation and adaptation and emphasizing people-centered, scalable approaches to integrated urban governance.*
- Acuto, M., Parnell, S. and Seto, K.C. (2018) “**Building a global urban science**,” *Nature Sustainability*, 1(1), pp. 2–4. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-017-0013-9>.
 - ➔ *This commentary argues that existing urban research is fragmented, uneven, and poorly connected to practice, calling for a genuinely global, interdisciplinary urban science capable of addressing complex sustainability challenges and reshaping science–policy interfaces. It highlights the need to reorganize urban data, research, and education to produce actionable, context-sensitive knowledge that supports*

cities' central role in global climate and development agendas.

- New Leipzig Charter (2020), ***The transformative power of cities for the common good***. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/information/publications/brochures/2020/new-leipzig-charter-the-transformative-power-of-cities-for-the-common-good.
➔ *This foundational EU policy document reframes integrated urban development around three transformative pillars—the just, green, and productive city—and advances a renewed commitment to multi-level governance, participation, and place-based strategies as essential tools for addressing climate change, digitalization, inequality, and urban resilience. It positions cities as key actors in delivering the common good, emphasizing integrated approaches, strong local capacities, and coherent national–EU frameworks to empower urban transformation across Europe.*
- Davoudi, S. (2023) “**Prefigurative planning: performing concrete utopias in the here and now**,” *European Planning Studies*, 31(11), pp. 2277–2290. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2023.2217853>.
➔ *This article develops prefigurative planning as a mode of urban practice that resists resignation and neoliberal “there is no alternative” narratives by performing hopeful, justice-oriented “not-yet” futures in everyday spaces. Drawing on concepts of concrete utopias, care, and emergent civic initiatives, it reframes planning as a collective, imaginative, and experimental practice enacted **here and now** rather than through distant, blueprint-based visions*
- Kaika, M. et al. (2023) “**Urbanizing degrowth: Five steps towards a Radical Spatial Degrowth Agenda for planning in the face of climate emergency**,” *Urban Studies*, 60(7), pp. 1191–1211. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00420980231162234>.
➔ *This paper sets out a programmatic framework for **spatial degrowth**, outlining five steps for translating degrowth principles into urban planning practice—historicising debates, engaging institutions, scaling-up without co-optation, mobilizing insurgent professionals, and addressing Global North–South inequalities. It positions degrowth as an urgently needed alternative to growth-driven urbanisation, offering pathways to reorient planning toward socio-environmental justice, well-being, and climate-resilient urban futures.*