

Breaking the spatial justice emergency cycle: The role of foresight planning

Rompiendo el ciclo de emergencia de la justicia espacial: El papel de la planificación prospectiva

Rompendo o ciclo de emergência da justiça espacial: O papel do planeamento prospectivo

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Abstract

This paper examines the critical need to integrate prospective planning into territorial development processes for achieving spatial justice and sustainable urban futures. It highlights the limitations of a reactive approach to urban governance, particularly prevalent in Latin America, where weak institutions and unstable political systems often hinder long-term perspectives. The research emphasizes the importance of strategic foresight as a complementary tool to traditional planning practices. Territorial foresight facilitates the exploration of complex future scenarios, fostering collaborative learning and a shared vision among stakeholders. The study proposes a shift towards a proactive, foresight-driven approach that can help break the vicious cycle of addressing only immediate crises. By embracing prospective studies, urban planners and policymakers can gain insights into potential future trajectories, enabling them to anticipate challenges, adapt strategies, and make informed decisions aligned with long-term goals. This paper draws on discourse analysis to examine the work of Latin American institutions and scholars engaged in foresight studies. Ultimately, the paper advocates for a paradigm shift in urban governance, prioritizing long-term strategic vision. This is essential for overcoming the fragmentation of urban planning, addressing systemic inequalities, and laying the groundwork for more just, resilient, and sustainable urban territories.

Keywords: Latin America; Territorial Foresight; Future Studies; Urban Governance; Prospective Planning.

Resumen

Este artículo examina la necesidad crítica de integrar la planificación prospectiva en los procesos de desarrollo territorial para lograr justicia espacial y futuros urbanos sostenibles. Destaca las limitaciones de un enfoque reactivo en la gobernanza urbana, especialmente prevalente en América Latina, donde instituciones débiles y sistemas políticos inestables a menudo obstaculizan las perspectivas a largo plazo. La investigación enfatiza la importancia de la previsión estratégica como una herramienta complementaria a las prácticas de planificación tradicionales. La previsión territorial facilita la exploración de escenarios futuros complejos, fomentando el aprendizaje colaborativo y una visión compartida entre los interesados. El estudio propone un cambio hacia un enfoque proactivo impulsado por la previsión que puede ayudar a romper el ciclo vicioso de abordar solo crisis inmediatas. Al adoptar estudios prospectivos, urbanistas y responsables de políticas pueden obtener perspectivas sobre trayectorias futuras potenciales, lo que les permite anticipar desafíos, adaptar estrategias y tomar decisiones informadas alineadas con objetivos a largo plazo. Esta investigación se basa en el análisis del discurso para examinar el trabajo de instituciones y académicos latinoamericanos comprometidos con estudios de previsión. Finalmente, el artículo aboga por un cambio de paradigma en la gobernanza urbana, dando prioridad a una visión estratégica a largo plazo. Esto es esencial para superar la fragmentación de la planificación urbana, abordar las desigualdades sistémicas y sentar las bases para territorios urbanos más justos, resilientes y sostenibles.

Palabras clave: América Latina; Prospectiva Territorial; Estudios del Futuro; Gobernanza Urbana; Planificación Prospectiva.

Resumo

Este artigo examina a necessidade crítica de integrar o planejamento prospectivo nos processos de desenvolvimento territorial para alcançar justiça espacial e futuros urbanos sustentáveis. Ele destaca as limitações de uma abordagem reativa à governança urbana, particularmente prevalente na América Latina, onde instituições fracas e sistemas políticos instáveis muitas vezes impedem perspectivas de longo prazo. A pesquisa enfatiza a importância da previsão estratégica como uma ferramenta complementar às práticas tradicionais de planejamento. A prospectiva territorial facilita a exploração de cenários futuros complexos, promovendo o aprendizado colaborativo e uma visão compartilhada entre as partes interessadas. O estudo propõe uma mudança em direção a uma abordagem proativa, orientada pela prospectiva, que possa ajudar a quebrar o ciclo vicioso de abordar apenas crises imediatas. Ao adotar estudos prospectivos, planejadores urbanos e formuladores de políticas podem obter insights sobre possíveis trajetórias futuras, permitindo-lhes antecipar desafios, adaptar estratégias e tomar decisões informadas alinhadas com objetivos de longo prazo. Este artigo baseia-se na análise do discurso para examinar o trabalho de instituições e acadêmicos latino-americanos engajados em estudos de prospectiva. Em última análise, o artigo defende uma mudança de paradigma na governança urbana, priorizando a visão estratégica de longo prazo. Isso é essencial para superar a fragmentação do planejamento urbano, abordar as desigualdades sistêmicas e estabelecer as bases para territórios urbanos mais justos, resilientes e sustentáveis.

Palavras-chave: América Latina; Prospectiva Territorial; Estudos de Futuro; Governança Urbana; Planejamento Prospectivo.

Introduction

When discussing spatial justice, the emphasis often falls on the problems of the present. This creates a vicious circle where we constantly address issues inherited from the past. Resources are dedicated to solving immediate emergencies, and citizens demand solutions from political representatives. These representatives, seeking to maintain constituent support, try to offer quick—and sometimes ephemeral—responses. This pattern is prevalent in Latin America, where weaker institutions and fluctuating political systems hinder the development of long-term perspectives (Capra-Ribeiro, 2022). Consequently, this focus on the present-day comes at a significant, yet often overlooked, cost: the neglect of the future.

While planning for the future and investing resources in understanding its possibilities can be challenging, this discussion conceives that it is the only way to break the aforementioned cycle. Therefore, this research investigates how visions of the future can be applied to territorial planning. It explores the role of prospective planning in strengthening territorial planning processes. The paper aims to demonstrate how foresight and strategic vision, integrated into planning efforts, can facilitate the anticipation of future challenges and opportunities. This, in turn, fosters more informed, equitable, and sustainable urban governance.

To further this research objective, a discourse analysis was conducted. It centered on prominent Latin American institutions and scholars who have explored the use of foresight in territorial planning. This examination sought to extract their insights and identify common themes that illuminate the path toward our research goals. By analyzing these contributions, potential patterns and strategies emerged that can improve our understanding and application of prospective planning

in the realm of territorial development. This approach enriches the study with diverse perspectives and lays the groundwork for incorporating those insights into a cohesive framework. This framework can effectively guide future urban governance towards informed, equitable, and sustainable outcomes.

Studying the urban territory through its future

Being overwhelmed by the vast diversity of cities, regions, and their complex issues is a challenge, yet this diversity should spur further study and understanding, pushing us forward. Likewise, dismissing a catastrophic future as inevitable is a form of evasion, ignoring the longstanding duty of urbanism to address future challenges (Minninni, 2001, p. 63). Urban areas must rely on themselves for rescue and improvement, as no external savior will intervene (Katz & Bradley, 2013, p. 3).

The future's inherent open-endedness, not stemming from meticulous plans but from change and conflict (Holton, 1987, p. 505), complicates its study due to its uniqueness and unpredictability (Medina & Ortigón, 2006, p. 161). This unpredictability intersects with the complexity and diversity of urban phenomena. The challenge extends to our linguistic capabilities, with some arguing that we lack the appropriate language to discuss potential futures in our rapidly evolving urban landscapes (Harvey, 2014, p. 66). Cities serve as vital laboratories for developing pathways to a better future. Lara & Cook (2013, p. 32) emphasize that “The first step towards creating greater prospects for more sustainable cities in the future comes through understanding the challenges that exist and the sharing the ideas for improving transport, land use policy, urban design, and natural systems in cities.” The inevitability of the future means that, under current conditions, the urban phenomenon could significantly shape its direction.

The concept of common knowledge is ever-evolving, with what was once established potentially becoming the ideological belief of a specific group, as is common in academic knowledge (Van Dick, 2003, p. 169). Similarly, perspectives on the future can quickly shift due to changes in current events, fragmenting a once common vision. It's crucial to recognize not just the envisioned future but also the learning process and insights into the present it provides. Imagining the future challenges our limited understanding of current events, and scenario building illuminates present possibilities (Tosi, 2001, p. 12). Moreover, the value lies not only in outcomes but in the process, interim solutions, and the resultant shifts in behavior and awareness, which can be more beneficial and lead to new objectives (Ceccarelli, 1992, p. 60). Despite the importance of considering the future, prospective planning and urbanism have faced discredit, resulting in a restructuring process excluding many countries.

From the future's crisis to rejection in Latin America

In recent decades, urbanism and urban planning have faced a crisis and ongoing debate, with future considerations also being impacted (Ciccolella, 2012, p. 11). The social and economic transformations of the latter half of the 20th century led to significant errors in urban forecasting, discrediting analysts and fueling the belief that complex urban phenomena cannot be explained through scientific laws and regular patterns (Fernández Güell, 2011, p. 14). The Fordist model's success brought about a functional separation and sectorization in urbanism, creating disconnected niches that hindered addressing urban complexity. Market dynamics and real estate logic eventually undermined planning, relegating urbanism to mere soil regulation (Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL), 2016, p. 7; Verdaguer, 2014, pp. 21–22). Consequently, late 20th-century urbanism became fragmented and focused on specific interventions, moving away from an integrated, multidimensional city concept (Ciccolella, 2012, p. 11).

The 21st century introduced even greater challenges. Profound shifts in socio-demographic structures, advancing globalization, disruptive technologies, new urban politico-administrative models, and the accelerating pace of change (Fernández Güell, 2011, p. 15) posed significant obstacles to any attempt at contemplating the future. Paradoxically, many medium and long-term forward-looking measures were quickly perceived as failures and this created a sense of short-sightedness, particularly within political cycles eroding trust in future studies (Mercado, 2013, p. 139). The crisis made it difficult to reflect on these disciplines and the internal factors influencing them and unfinished projects proliferated, leading to a perception of success simply by completing any urban transformation initiative (Palermo, 2014, p. 3).

When studies and future plans are prematurely dismissed as useless or impossible there are no substitutes and urban planning often reverts to a *laissez-faire* approach (Mercado, 2013, p. 139). This gap, alongside the realization that many anticipated problems did materialize after the dismantling of institutions and disciplines (Mercado, 2013, p. 142), necessitates a reevaluation of urban planning. It must adjust its interpretive paradigms and methods to address the complexity of contemporary socio-territorial systems (Bisciglia, 2001, p. 52). The urban crisis underscores the need for more, not less, planning (Verdaguer, 2014, p. 22). In response, there's a generalized revitalization of urban disciplines following the so-called lost decade of the 80s and market reforms of the 90s, with countries and international bodies establishing new networks and reviving dismantled institutions (Bárcena, 2016, p. 7; Fernández Güell, 2011, p. 14).

In Latin America, the process has been similar, although recovery is slower due to limited capital and human resources. Foresight studies in the region could be described as underdeveloped, concentrated, alienated, apolitical, underfunded, viewed with suspicion, unknown, dependent, and destabilizing (Concheiro, 2007, p. 14). This paints a detailed picture of the current state of this vital knowledge field, given the immense uncertainties about its future. It is worth emphasizing conditions like alienated, apolitical, suspicious, and unknown, which ultimately highlight a disconnect between the efforts being made.

The recovery of future-oriented studies in Latin America has been gradual, following the dismantling of most regional prospective offices in the late 20th century. This progress is evident in the creation of postgraduate programs, institutions, and projects focusing on prospective studies, though many are still in their early stages of development, while others have not persisted (Comisión Económica para

América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL), 2016, pp. 7, 17, 75). But it is important to note that most future studies initiatives in Latin America are national in scope, with very few existing at the sub-national level (Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL), 2016, p. 47). This is particularly concerning given the increasing complexity of urban environments today. This disparity likely stems from the general availability of more information at the national level compared to sub-national segments, regardless of their scale. While a growing interest in the future is evident, driven by factors like financial crises and climate change, short-term perspectives continue to dominate, and many initiatives remain sporadic and disconnected from government entities (Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL), 2016, pp. 15, 180–181). This is further highlighted by the fact that while 55% of institutions linked to prospective studies were established after 2000, 63.6% of these had fewer than 20 projects by 2014 (Medina Vásquez et al., 2014, pp. 222, 224). This

suggests a disconnect between the expressed interest and the tangible results achieved.

In recent years, there seems to be a general regional consensus on the importance of strategic vision for Latin American countries (García, 2005, pp. 183–184). However, considerable effort remains to implement this vision successfully. Medina, Becerra, and Castaño (2014, pp. 285–291), in their book on prospective studies for structural change in Latin America, highlight key challenges for developing future studies within the region:

Harmonizing supply and demand: Improving the alignment between the availability of prospective research and long-term thinking with the actual needs of policymakers.

Institutional barriers: Overcoming institutional, political, and cultural hurdles that may hinder shifts in paradigms and effective strategic management.

Linking research to decision-making: Creating stronger connections between prospective studies and decision-makers within governmental bodies.

Developing expertise: Fostering a robust community of prospective specialists while promoting professionalization and the continuous improvement of quality in prospective processes.

Education for future leadership: Harnessing the potential of prospective studies to educate a new generation of citizens and public administrators.

Foresight to confront uncertainty

Traditionally, we have viewed the future as something that will unfold without our influence, but prospective studies challenge this notion. Instead of a predetermined chain of events stemming from the present, prospective studies recognize the multitude of potential futures and, by exploring these possibilities, we gain the opportunity to prepare for what may come (Scheele, 2002, pp. 46–47). This exploration of the future holds value for individuals, businesses, institutions, and governments alike, and prospective studies provide a structured way to harness that interest.

Foresight is a discipline that analyzes social systems, enabling us to better understand the present, identify potential trends, and study the impact of future changes in fields like science and technology (Medina & Ortégón,

2006, p. 85). Unlike technical forecasts that strictly project current data, foresight provides a reasoned approach to envisioning the future and gathers perspectives from diverse fields of knowledge to explore technological, economic, and social evolution (Pereda, 1995, p. 6; Rodríguez Cortezo, 2001, p. 14). The aim of foresight is not to predict specific events but to contemplate the future, understand potential alternatives, and create options shaped by our present choices to help us comprehend our current potential to influence the future (Medina & Ortégón, 2006, p. 130). Consequently, foresight focuses on the broader contours of the future rather than unverifiable minute details (Cecchini & Indovina, 1992, p. 50).

The general interest in the future is linked to the understanding that, even if future considerations unfold as anticipated, their significance may differ due to changing perspectives (Scheele, 2002, p. 43). Thus, the endeavor is not about prediction but about exploring and understanding

complex relationships to identify truly possible futures, assess their likelihood under various conditions, and decide on the most desirable ones while determining actions that could lead to these potential futures (Medina & Ortégón, 2006, pp. 130, 182).

While high instability makes projecting trends difficult, and certainly poses challenges for future studies, prospective approaches can actually aid in tackling such unpredictable situations. Among other benefits, foresight allows us to “enhance our capacity to deal with uncertainty” and “think the unthinkable” (Serra, 2005, p. 84). These skills are crucial when building potential future scenarios, as uncertainty and the unexpected will always be present. We can never fully eliminate uncertainty, only reduce it to inform our choices with a higher degree of confidence (Salas Bourgoïn, 2013, p. 28). Similarly, predicting the unpredictable is unreasonable; instead, we must learn to adapt when the unforeseen arises. For these reasons, prospective studies

aid in understanding both the probable and the desirable, but it's important to remember that it's not an exact science. All models of prediction ultimately face instability when significant disturbances occur (Cecchini & Indovina, 1992, p. 50).

Other key characteristics of foresight include:

- **Blending Creativity and Objectivity:** Foresight combines creative, subjective approaches with techniques borrowed from the hard sciences, seeking a balance between imagination and rigor (Medina & Ortigón, 2006, pp. 249–250).
- **Demanding Time and Collaboration:** Lengthy foresight exercises often involve diverse groups of individuals. This collaborative process can potentially hinder the speed of new initiatives (Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL), 2016, p. 178).
- **Fostering Dialogue and Shared Vision:** Successful foresight processes enhance dialogue, align efforts, and cultivate commitment to a shared (yet dynamic) vision of the future (García, 2005, p. 184).
- **Challenges of Short-Term Focus:** Like other future-oriented practices, including planning, foresight often lacks sufficient medium- and long-term incentives. Political pressures frequently prioritize short-term gains over the future benefits of foresight (Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL), 2016, p. 177).

At this point, it is important to point out the different between prospective and planning:

The first thing we have to acknowledge is that there is a hierarchical difference between futures or prospective and planning. The first two concepts refer

to disciplines, or even activities if you wish, with an intellectual domain and tools to apply it. Planning is firstly and foremost a method, that is, one of the tools we could use in futures or prospective to implement the selected future. We have to realise that, conceptually, either futures or prospective are a previous step to that of planning (Serra, 2005, p. 82).

The explanation is clear, a few key points are important to emphasize. Prospective and planning are complementary aspects of the same strategic process (Cecchini & Indovina, 1992, p. 53). Prospective analysis must come first, envisioning possibilities and outlining desired outcomes, followed by planning to chart the path toward those goals (Godet et al., 2000, p. 6). The true challenge lies in transforming prospective insights into actionable tools that directly support planning and drive development policies (Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL), 2016, p. 27).

The interconnectedness between what can happen and what we should do in anticipation of those possibilities gives rise to the prospective-planning duet (Salas Bourgoin, 2013, p. 31). This approach has several key benefits (Medina & Ortigón, 2006, p. 80):

- **Preventing Reactive Governance:** It breaks the cycle of public administration constantly reacting to immediate crises.
- **Fostering Responsibility:** It promotes a broader sense of responsibility for the nation's future direction.
- **Building Collaboration:** It encourages cooperation between sub-national governments, enabling the collective thinking that underpins successful public policies.

These benefits are especially relevant for Latin America, where a preoccupation with immediate challenges often overshadows long-term thinking. The value of the prospective-planning duet is clear in this context.

To address the challenges of the near future, Latin American countries must prioritize foresight and strategic thinking, developing scenarios that anticipate potential risks and opportunities, especially amidst accelerating global change (Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL), 2016, p. 179). Success requires overcoming existing obstacles, such as extending prospective studies to the sub-national level. In other words, building future perspectives not only helps break the cycle of constant crisis management but also directly supports this research's core objective: exploring the role of prospective planning in enhancing territorial planning processes.

Territorial foresight as spatial based practice

Exploring future possibilities in a territory involves assessing the limits and potential of existing physical, economic, social, and cultural resources, while also identifying factors primed for change and those likely to resist it (Tosi, 2001, p. 12). Territorial foresight analyzes potential future scenarios within a specific area (municipality, region, special zone, etc.) and aims to inform better societal decisions for sustainable development (Medina & Ortegón, 2006, p. 109). It encompasses four key elements (Fernández Güell, 2011, pp. 18–19):

- **Anticipation:** Forecasting change through long-term projections of social, economic, and technological trends.
- **Vision:** Providing strategic guidance to inform policies and development plans with a long-term perspective.
- **Participation:** Utilizing interactive, participatory methods involving diverse experts and territorial stakeholders.
- **Networks:** Fostering collective learning through social networks within the territory, enabling strong communication between public bodies, social institutions, companies, and researchers.

The complexity of the contemporary territory presents significant obstacles and dilemmas that can make prediction unreliable, but ignoring these challenges entirely risks perpetuating existing problems (Gottmann & Harper, 1990, p. 19). Furthermore, plans often take decades to implement, and in that time, societal needs and challenges can shift. This process can be further hindered by resistance to change. Consequently, time itself becomes a major threat; it can lead to delays,

outmoded responses, and a repetition of past failures within urbanism and planning. This situation intensifies day by day, with the constant acceleration of changes:

Ten years ago, few metropolitan areas were self-financing large infrastructure systems. Five years ago, no metropolis in the United States had a comprehensive approach to climate change or the clean economy. Three years ago, no city in the United States had a deliberate export or trade strategy. A year ago, innovation district was not even in the professional lexicon of city builders and economy shapers (Katz & Bradley, 2013, p. 203).

While territorial foresight often involves medium-to-long-term endeavors (essential for understanding complex urban dynamics), it offers a distinct advantage: the ability to adapt to changing conditions rather than requiring extended periods of stability (Fernández Güell, 2011, p. 18).

To fully leverage this adaptability, frequent adjustments to underlying assumptions are vital. Essential practices include choosing a foresight method that aligns with territorial needs, viewing foresight as a tool complementing traditional planning, clearly defining prospective goals and values, establishing implementation roadmaps, and forming a dedicated team for future-oriented thinking and comprehensive monitoring (Fernández Güell, 2011, pp. 29–31).

This work arises in a context where future-oriented exercises, particularly in territorial foresight, remain scarce. Furthermore, the complexities of urban development are often hampered by fragmented governance across different levels. While challenges may seem daunting, this discussion urgently advocates that they should serve as catalysts for change rather than barriers to forward-thinking. It is imperative that we continue looking ahead, adjusting processes and strategies as needed.

Final thoughts

Territorial foresight enhances planning by providing coherence and direction; it does not act as a substitute for the planning process. By integrating foresight and strategic vision, planners can better anticipate and prepare for future challenges and opportunities. This proactive approach ensures long-term implications weigh heavily in the planning process, fostering more informed decision-making.

This study emphasizes the critical need to incorporate prospective planning into territorial development, especially within the Latin American context. It advocates for a shift from reactive governance to a proactive, foresight-driven approach in urban management. Embracing prospective studies enables planners and policymakers to navigate future complexities, ensuring equitable and

resilient urban development aligned with long-term societal goals. This paradigm shift towards a long-term strategic vision is vital; it can break the cycle of focusing solely on immediate needs and lay the foundation for just and sustainable urban territories.

Understanding the paramount importance of studying the future, even when faced with pressing present-day needs, is crucial. Analyzing possible future paths can also aid in comprehending and addressing current challenges. Acknowledging that instability is merely one among many difficulties this research tackles underscores the commitment to exploring potential futures. This approach is essential for informed decision-making, strategic urban governance, and leveraging insights from future studies to build more equitable and sustainable urban territories.

As this research demonstrates, there is considerable work to be done, particularly in Latin America. Future research contributing to this field should focus on creating future scenarios in highly uncertain contexts, developing strategies to strengthen institutions in Latin America, conducting case studies on adapting methodologies from other regions, and analyzing existing legal frameworks along with their impact on the perspectives of current governments. Given its complexity, breadth, and multidisciplinary nature, this subject presents challenges for research, yet it remains critically important.

Final notes

Article final approval

MA. Arch. Andrea Castro Marcucci approved the final version of this article.

Author contribution:

PhD. Arch. Fabio Capra-Ribeiro is responsible for the entire preparation of the article.

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