

Context matters, but interactions matter too



The idea that ‘context matters’ has become a cliché in many scenarios, but it doesn’t make it less true in urban settings: the neighborhood you live in, the way you move through the city, the places you visit, all of these change the way we experience urban life. But context is not only about spaces; it also means people and how we interact with each other. A long commute could be just as lonely whether you are in an empty bus or surrounded by others in rush hour with everyone wearing earphones. This month’s issue puts the spotlight on both parts of the urban experience to paint a more complex picture.

City streets are sites of potential interaction with others, but after the COVID-19 pandemic, streets became empty... until cities had to take a hard look at economic resilience. In one of our first [Articles](#) using qualitative methodology, Rao and coauthors consider the case of Wuhan, China, to analyze the changes in the retail landscape after increasing digitalization of shopping and human interaction. Streets and parks are also sites of human and non-human interactions, but as the [Article](#) by Berdejo-Espinola and coauthors shows, not everyone enjoys nature in the same way. In another first for us, this study is about Paraguay and illustrates that green spaces can be sites of danger in informal

or lower-class settlements, contrary to the usual narrative that exposure to green areas inevitably increases wellbeing.

Interactions can also occur across cities. Zhu and Wei analyze [how mayors in Chinese cities influence carbon emissions in neighboring cities](#), uncovering a type of ‘catch up’ pattern to lower or increase emissions based on the emissions of surrounding areas. The changes brought by the Anthropocene require joint and targeted efforts, and, given that most of the world now lives in cities, the responses should include an urban focus. This is what Howe and Boyer’s Comment suggests by proposing a ‘[Sister Cities for the Anthropocene](#)’ network in which cities can share strategies to address climate change and other challenges of our age. For example, the Correspondence by Allam discusses a [recent SUV ban in Paris](#), and how it is inspired by other examples of car bans in cities such as Bogotá, as a way to foster urban sustainability. Similarly, the [Article](#) by Zheng and colleagues documents the effects of working-from-home measures on vehicle miles traveled, which has had positive consequences by reducing carbon emissions but also negative economic effects by reducing transit fare revenues.

Cities interact with global political processes as well, and these can sometimes be incredibly harmful. Hou and collaborators illustrate this point clearly in terms of building damage from war. This [Article](#) proposes a new way to assess the impacts of war in urban settings by leveraging satellite images, using the cases of Syria and the Ukraine. The situation is dire, and the responses are insufficient.

Fostering urban resilience should mean addressing the consequences of both natural disasters and human ones.

Rebuilding efforts take time, but new ways of using old materials promise a more sustainable way to do so. In this month’s Book and Arts section, in another first for us (as it is about a museum), we [review](#) a new exhibit at The Skyscraper Museum in New York City that focuses on a growing structural component of high-rise buildings, mass timber – wood engineered for added strength and durability. Even when so altered, wood is more sustainable than the most common high-rise structural materials, cement and steel. Rebuilding socially is also critical for urban resilience, as Beaumont’s [World View](#) touches upon in discussing postsecularity and its value to urban studies and action. By fostering dialogues between those with diverse values, religious or not, a postsecular spirit, one leavening reason with faith, can help to address social injustice in cities.

Understanding urban contexts and interactions can include aesthetically focused observations as well. That is what Gardawaj’s [I and the City](#) about Delhi shows, with its acute observations of the changes in the city through the lens of political events and film and theater depictions. Cities are sites of contexts and interactions, and so can be sites of tensions and solidarities. This issue showcases different ways of looking at this multiplicity, and we hope these perspectives will help readers to interpret their own urban contexts and interactions more deeply.

Published online: 2 May 2024