Fast urbanism and spatial injustices in the Global South

Coordinators: **Agnès Deboulet | Gülçin Erdi | Gabriel Fauveaud**

By exploring a variety of case studies, this special issue aims to shed light on the diverse mechanisms through which models of fast urbanism (rapid and/or spectacular urban development) are implemented in different cities marked by economic, political, and social turning points, often associated with forms of illiberalism, authoritarianism, or both, as well as on their effects in terms of spatial justice and injustice.

Fan Yang (2017), in his study of Shenzhen, quoted the motto *"Time Is Money, Efficiency Is* Life", emphasising that no other slogan better expresses the city's relationship to time. Theorists of speed such as Paul Virilio and Marcel Roncayolo would call this the "cession of space to time", which "not only dissolves the anchoring of politics but also gives rise to a way of being in time that is contrary to a political public sphere" (Sharma, 2014, p. 6).

Originally theorised by Ayona Datta and Abdul Shaban (2017) with reference to Indian and Asian cities, "fast urbanism" is analysed as a form of urban planning that is most often subsumed within project-based urbanism. Speed and acceleration are seen as crucial to tackling the economic, social and environmental crises and political risks prevalent in the Global South and emerging economies, and/or of transforming prevailing regimes of accumulation. For example, following the economic crisis of 2001, massive urbanisation was undertaken in Turkey through large-scale development projects–such as airports, motorways, bridges and integrated housing estates–rapidly flourishing across the country. This contributes to reinvigorate the country's economic growth for over a decade (Erdi, 2014; 2017).

More than just a concept, "fast urbanism" represents a way of thinking and managing urban projects that is detached from urban policies and underpinned by an ideology of speed and efficiency (Datta, 2021). Fast urbanism is played out in the interconnected spheres of the state, business and expert collaborations. Inspiring new urban visions and operational know-how, it harnesses speed as both a justification and an ideological framework for urban entrepreneurship, innovation and regional progress (*ibid.*). It is very often accompanied by spectacular projects whose showcase effect and speed of construction justify a state of exception that fully legitimises the absence of public and citizen's oversight, notably in Abu Dhabi or Cairo.

Guy Debord emphasised that capitalism has "become part of the fabric of life", reshaping cities through "the organisation of motor traffic", or restoring a few isolated historic urban enclaves to turn them into "objects of tourist or cultural spectacle, a mere extension of the traditional museum" (1964, p. 12). Half a century after this observation, we see the same logic embedded in urban strategies linked to the construction of countless "artifact-places", such as the "cultural district" on the artificial island of Saadiyat in Abu Dhabi, the Abu Dhabi Plaza in Astana, and the Grand Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

It is hardly surprising that all these processes are being pursued with unprecedented determination under undemocratic or authoritarian regimes, yet at the same time committed (albeit only recently) to the neoliberal economic system. Democratic decision-making tends to involve controversy and political debate; it takes time and is sometimes seen as an obstacle to urban governance, as it is regarded as slow, disorderly, and inefficient. Deliberation on societal and urban projects even appears to be at odds with urban strategies designed to encourage bold entrepreneurial coalitions that attract and retain capital. Whilst democratic regimes are never entirely free from these tendencies towards a proliferation of projects aimed at accelerating growth, such urban initiatives can be challenged. Conversely, these large-scale, high-intensity development projects, by their very nature, tend to marginalize social demands and fall outside the scope of regulation governing the ordinary processes of housing provision.

In many countries of the Global South, these projects are regarded as symbols of modernity and serve as tools for projecting a positive image of the state, particularly in the shaping of urban space in capital cities (Fauveaud, 2015). The practices leading to the mass demolition of informal settlements and their replacement with gated communities or high-rise towers reserved for commercial activities or the elite in Ankara (Erdi, 2025), Tehran or Cairo (Khalil, 2023) certainly find parallels in some European cities (Drozdz, 2022). "Fast urbanism" also applies to the creation of large urban parks featuring tamed nature (as in Abu Dhabi and Astana), or the relocation of capital cities from the city centre to the outer suburbs. The desire of states to embrace a new cult of modernity leads to a combination reinvented national heritage, accelerated development, and the production of spectacle. It relies on the manipulation of foreign capital and sovereign wealth funds, which assert a new power whilst asserting an unrivalled speed of implementation (Fauveaud et al., 2026).

In addition to examining new configurations of top-down urban planning and the tensions between acceleration and existing urban and social fabrics, this special issue also explores the practical mechanisms and key actors involved in the transfer of

power and added value generated by the large-scale demolitions that frequently accompany such forms of urban development. Whether in precarious neighbourhoods or historic areas –recognized, listed or not– the endless, high-speed expansion of these cities comes at the expense of entire swathes of architectural and urban history. It also increases the forced displacement of populations at a pace that is, too, unprecedented.

In this issue, "fast urbanism", also described by several authors as "fast cities" (Datta and Shaban, 2017), will be critically examined through the ways in which it crystallises, and, in some cases, intensifies socio-spatial inequalities. Particular attention will be paid to the forms of spatial injustice experienced by social groups who are confined, re-segregated, marginalized, or displaced by these transformations (Marcuse et al., 2009). In this issue, we invite authors to examine precisely how not only the right to the city, but also the very meaning of justice is played out, negotiated and reshaped, and how it is redistributed in the context of fast urbanism.

In this special issue, we would like to we focus on cities that have received comparatively limited attention in urban studies for a variety of reasons. Their location might be in areas that are difficult to access or study due to the nature of the political regime (Planel, 2015), ongoing conflict, or an economic embargo. It is also interesting to examine how rapid urbanisation intersects with the political and symbolic production of space, a hallmark of capital cities since the late nineteenth century. National self-assertion has spread to the capitals of countries such as the United Arab Emirates, North Macedonia, former Soviet states such as Kazakhstan, and countries such as Algeria, Cameroon and Malaysia, which are seeking to develop their regional and international standing. In their quest for political legitimacy and international recognition, authoritarian urban regimes are attempting to link the transformation of their capital cities as closely as possible to transnational or trans-regional financial flows, even beyond their own sphere of regional influence.

In the context of metropolisation, "fast urbanism" immediately raises the issue of spatial justice on several complementary levels: the distribution of resources; perceptions of equity between the various sections of society and urbanised or soon-to-be-urbanised areas; and, more fundamentally, the place of human rights in urban development processes.

Urban planning models, whilst often described as increasingly standardized (notably through references to Dubai in the Middle East), are in reality increasingly diverse (Stadnicki, 2026). Forms of urban planning as "state architecture" (Iosa, 2008) are giving away to more pragmatic and utilitarian approaches, often combined with a focus on short-term profitability. The sometimes radical changes in patterns of land and property accumulation are thus intertwined with emerging symbolic frameworks,

as well as media and even diplomatic narratives. We argue that these changes also question the need for unravelling the forms of justice that these governments have chosen to promote or set aside. How, and through what means, does *"fast urbanism"* adapt to the local context and expectations?

Expected proposals could explore the existence of cross-cutting factors, such as the impact of the international circulation of models, the dominant role of certain national or local actors, and in particular the new figures of property developers. How do more or less closed urbanisation circuits, within authoritarian contexts, emerge and adapt to fast urbanism, and what are the implications on the very conception of spatial justice, urban injustice and environmental injustices? What are the forums or venues for debate, mediation and the balancing of these new urbanistic and architectural equations? In what ways and to what extent do they also impact public action in the areas of social justice (Marcuse et al., 2009), as well as social policies and the integration of social groups into reshaped territories? Contributions may also address the unpredictable timeframes of these projects, and the way in which cities and their inhabitants coexist with the major uncertainties of this rapid urbanisation, encompassing environmental issues as well as those of identity (Deboulet, 2022). The aim would therefore also be to explore the relations between spatial justice and new urban reconfigurations in cities characterised by strong urban growth, intermediate economies and authoritarian regimes to varying degrees.

All methodological approaches –whether quantitative, qualitative or mixed– are welcome in contributions to this thematic issue. Without claiming to be exhaustive, and in addition to engaging with the debates outlined above, submissions may address any of the following themes, whether through comparative, case-based, or more in-depth single-case approaches.

• The consequences of this "fast urbanism" on forms of economic restructuring within contexts of neoliberalisation, which nevertheless merit further clarification and should not be taken as a given (Choplin et al, 2023). What is the impact of these partial reorganisations on the urban fabric and spatial practices as a whole? How do city-dwellers (Joseph, 1997) engage with this urban, infrastructural landscape, which relies on the upheaval of visual and memorial experience, and on the contraction of regimes of familiarity, to establish a new legitimacy? Beyond the multifaceted violence inflicted upon fragments of the city (Allaverdian et al., 2023), the still sparsely inhabited fringes and the erasure of non-humans, what strategies have been devised to "bring these projects to fruition" and secure their acceptance? What are their implications for hospitality and accessibility?

• The massive transfers of public land to the private sector or to quasi-public consortia, often characterised by a lack of transparency, raise a great many questions: what are the rationales behind them, and what are their implications in terms of justice? This issue also questions the type of distributive or redistributive justice promoted by regimes seeking public support: who are the key players involved, and how does this affect the influence of these capital cities in the realm of international relations?

• The promises of modernity are often out of reach for the majority, particularly as they are frequently built at the expense of the working classes and can provoke resistance: how do city dwellers reinvent themselves within this process? How do these trends coexist with local or national public policies that sometimes favour a more equitable approach to the distribution of urban spaces? How is "fast urbanism" perceived and challenged by those not intended to benefit from it, who see their living space, their city or their metropolitan area being disrupted and given new meaning?

Guidelines for authors

Authors must submit their full articles to the thematic issue coordinators by **April 9, 2027**.

Justice spatiale | Spatial Justice is a bilingual, peer-reviewed journal. Articles may be submitted in French or English. They may be based on a case study or offer a more theoretical perspective. The journal employs a double-blind review process, which means that all articles will be assessed anonymously. Finally, articles must not exceed 7,000 words, including the abstract and bibliography. Please follow the JSSJ article template available online on the journal's website: http://www.jssj.org/recommandations-aux-auteurs/.

Authors who have any queries regarding the suitability of their proposals may contact the issue coordinators.

Contacts

Agnès Deboulet (agnesdeboulet@orange.fr) | Gülçin Erdi (gulcin.erdi@cnrs.fr) | Gabriel Fauveaud (gabriel.fauveaud@unige.ch)

References

Allaverdian Céline, **Fauveaud** Gabriel, **Tulumello** Simone, 2023, « Violence et production de l'espace » ["Violence and the production of space"], *Justice spatiale / Spatial Justice*, 18 (http://www.jssj.org/article/violence-et-production-de-lespace/, consulté le 28/04/2026).

Choplin Armelle, **Harris** Richard, **Goodfellow** Tom, **Ortiz** Catalina, **Kipfer** Stefan, **Porto de Oliveira** Osmany, **Kinossian** Nadir, **Zérah** Marie-Hélène, 2023, "Jennifer Robinson 2022: Comparative Urbanism: Tactics for Global Urban Studies, New York, Wiley-Blackwell", Review Symposium, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, article en lign.

Clerc Valérie, **Deboulet** Agnès, 2018, « Quel *Nouvel Agenda urbain* pour les quartiers précaires ? La fabrique des accords internationaux sur l'urbanisation pour la conférence Habitat III », *Métropoles* (DOI : https://doi.org/10.4000/metropoles.6189).

Datta Ayona, 2021, "Fast Urbanism: Between Speed, Time and Urban Futures" (URL : https://www.transient-spaces.org/blog-fast-urbanism-between-speed-time-and-urban-futures/, consulté le 04/03/2024).

Datta Ayona, **Shaban** Abdul, 2017, *Mega-urbanization in the global world: fast cities and new urban utopias in the postcolonial state*, Londre, Routledge/CRC Press.

Debord Guy, *Internationale situationniste*, (9), 1964.

Deboulet Agnès, 2022, *Sociétés urbaines au risque de la métropole*, Paris, Armand Colin.

Drozdz Martine, 2022, « Des marchés de capitaux aux fonds de pension, aménager la ville avec les investisseurs à Londres », *in* Touafik Souami, Marie Llorente, Martine Drozdz (dir.), *Financement de l'aménagement urbain. Acteurs – Innovations*, Éditions du Moniteur, p. 147-157 (DOI : https://doi.org/10.3917/moni.souam.2022.01.0148).

Erdi Lelandais Gülçin, 2014, « Right to the City as an Urban Utopia? Practices of Everyday Resistance in a Romani Neighbourhood in Istanbul ", *in* Gülçin Erdi Lelandais (éd.), *Understanding the City. Henri Lefebvre and Urban Studies*, New Castle, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, p. 69-89.

Erdi Lelandais Gülçin, 2017, « L'urbanisation néolibérale et conservatrice au prisme de l'autoritarisme en Turquie », *Mouvements,* 2(90), p. 54-61.

Erdi Gülçin, 2025, *Ankara,miroir de la Turquie moderne : Utopies, pouvoir, résistances*, Bruxelles, Editions de l'ULB.

Fauveaud Gabriel, 2015, *La production des espaces urbains à Phnom Penh. Pour une géographie sociale de l'immobilier*, Paris, Éditions de la Sorbonne.

Fauveaud Gabriel, **Laillé** Robin, **Chhem** Rémi, 2026, "The Rise of Offshore Urbanism and the Expanding Frontiers of Financialisation in the Global South", *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 51(2) (DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.70075).

Fan Yang, 2017, « Temporality and Shenzhen Urbanism in the Era of 'China Dreams'», *Verge: Studies in Global Asias*, 3(1), p. 189-212 (DOI: https://doi.org/10.5749/vergstudglobasia.3.1.0189).

Iosa Ioana (dir.), 2008, *L'architecture des régimes totalitaires face à la démocratisation*, Paris, L'Harmattan.

Joseph Isaac, 1997, "Prises, réserves, épreuves", *Communications*, (65), p. 131-142.

Khalil Heba M., 2023, Lawyers as infrastructures: mediations, blockages, and new possibilities in grassroots movements. *Journal of Law & Society*, 50(2), p. 231-250.

Marcuse Peter, **Connolly** James, **Novy** Johannes, **Olivo** Ingrid, **Potter** Cuz, **Steil** Justin, 2009, *Searching for the Just City: Debates in Urban Theory and Practice*, Londres, Routledge.

Planel Sabine, 2015, « Espaces autoritaires, espaces (in)justes ? », *Justice spatiale | Spatial Justice*, (8) (URL : https://www.jssj.org/article/espaces-autoritaires-espaces-injustes/, consulté le 28/04/2026).

Sharma Sarah, 2014, *In the Meantime: Temporality and Cultural Politics*, Durham, Duke University Press.

Stadnicki Roman, 2026, *Au-delà de Dubaï*, Paris, Éditions de l'Aube.