# Repoliticizing Green Spaces in Urban Transitions. The Relevance of Governance for Equitable Ecological Planning

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**Abstract.** In the pursuit of ecological transitions, city administrations emerge as key players in implementing global strategies. Urban ecological planning responds to several major objectives outlined in global sustainable agendas, and urban experimentation is considered an ideal arena for developing and testing models of renaturalization. However, this greening momentum is also serving as a means to depoliticize planning processes and city governance. Despite ambitious claims, ecological plans are frequently burdened by a fragmented approach, and a lack of structural imbalance and equity-focused provisions. The political significance of ecological planning and management is typically disregarded, with dissent and socio-economic impacts of greening on the population sidelined in favor of emphasizing social green benefits. Conveying a consensual and a-critical view of urban greening as a 'pure good' producing widespread benefits for all, and framing social benefits as a consequence of increased environmental quality sustainable planning often results in overlooking the possible unfair outcomes of greening-led urban regeneration. Moreover, emphasizing the urgency for adaptation measures, and celebrating measurable outcomes, ecological planning is embracing a technocentric approach to public space, whereby environmental issues are used to legitimize policies that are exclusionary. Fragmentation of ecological planning and governance, with the involvement of private actors or nonprofits in greening processes, may contribute to the decoupling of social and environmental claims, serving city marketing rather than citizens' well-being and social cohesion, and may result in the privatization and commodification of nature. By drawing on the analysis of green management experiences, this paper analyzes the need for a political sociology perspective in understanding and re-politicizing the governance of green spaces.

**Keywords:** green governance, urban green spaces, urban ecological transition, green gentrification.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the pursuit of ecological transitions, city administrations emerge as key players in implementing global strategies. With the vast majority of the world's population already living in cities and this trend expected to rapidly escalate in the future, and authors outlining our species as an "urban species" (Keil 2003, 2020), urban experimentation emerges as a prime opportu-

nity for developing and testing models of harmonious coexistence and sustainable prosperity (Hartig and Kahn 2016). Indeed, in the historical trajectory of global sustainability policy, the narrative has shifted from viewing cities as sustainability problems – for urban lifestyle and increasing trends of urbanization – to investing in them as drivers for global ecological transition (Angelo and Wachsmuth 2022). The global discourse about climate change has increasingly turned its focus to urban-scale adaptation strategies, driven in part by direct accountability and more agile leadership compared to the state level. This attention has led to an increase in funding and research efforts to develop guidelines for envisioning, designing, and implementing more resilient and sustainable cities. Embracing concepts like "sponge cities", "resilient" or "neutral cities", and approaches of "sustainable" and "climate" urbanism, urban ecological planning is evolving to align with key objectives outlined in global sustainability agendas, such as UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. Among different climate strategies, urban renaturalization emerges as one of the most effective (Endreny 2018). Afforestation has been listed as Natural Climate Solutions (Griscom *et al.* 2017), hailed as "the most effective climate change solution to date" to counteract the trend of carbon dioxide production (Bastin *et al.* 2019), and proved to be particularly efficient in urban and peri-urban areas (Francini *et al.* 2024). Recognized within the EU's Nature-Based Solution framework, urban afforestation and urban greening, namely the implementation of green infrastructure which encompasses vegetation and tree cover, addresses a range of issues including soil and air pollution, urban heat islands, rainwater runoff, and biodiversity loss (EU 2015, Gómez-Baggethun and Barton 2013, Salbitano *et al.* 2016, Ramyar *et. al.* 2021). Trees and plants provide a multitude of environmental, economic, social, and psychological benefits to urban environments, while extensive scientific research has confirmed the positive correlation between the experience of nature and human health and well-being (Hartig *et al.* 2014, Kuo 2015, Bratman *et al.* 2019). Therefore, urban greening is widely acknowledged as an effective means for transforming cities into more resilient, healthier, and livable places.

In their evidence and achievement-based green initiatives, city governments are also leveraging the opportunity to attract investments and stimulate new "green growth" (Anguelovski 2023). Situated within the neoliberal framework of urban competitiveness, the need for green planning has given rise to the concept of "green boosterism", an extension of the traditional notion of "urban boosterism" which focuses on enhancing a city's image to attract financial capital and new residents (García-Lamarca *et al.* 2021). Green boosterism involves the strategic adoption of environmentalist and green narratives and practices as branding tools to elevate cities' appeal, to position themselves as leading environmentally-friendly urban centers (Greenberg 2015, Connolly 2019, Neidig *et al.* 2022). However, driven by market-oriented and outward-looking strategies of self-promotion, this green rhetoric often leads to the monetization and financialization of greening interventions, facilitating speculation and rent capture (García-Lamarca *et al.* 2022, Anguelovski and Connolly 2021, Brand 2007). In this scenario, there is a risk that green planning may overlook equity goals, and reproduce or even exacerbate existing inequalities in green provisions and spatial justice. As scholars have pointed out, if issues of social equity are not directly and locally addressed, strategies aimed at inclusive green development may paradoxically lead to greater inequality rather than widespread health benefits, social cohesion, and inclusion (e.g. Cucca 2012, Haase *et al.* 2017, Cole *et al.* 2017, Anguelovski and Connolly 2021, Anguelovski *et al.* 2022, Anguelovski 2023).

The growing call for cities' renaturalization, which is shaping political agendas and driving investment in the global intercity competition, is increasingly adopting a technocentric (Checker 2011) and performance-oriented discourse on greening. This approach is grounded in, and reinforces, a consensual and acritical view of urban greening that has been referred to as "green orthodoxy" (Haase *et al.* 2017, Pearsall and Anguelovski 2016, Connolly 2019). Emphasizing measurable environmental green benefits, urban green orthodoxy invisibilizes tensions and unjust outcomes associated with new green interventions. In response, the concept of "green gentrification" (Gould and Lewis 2017), together with partially overlapping "ecological gentrification" (Dooling 2009) and "environmental gentrification" (Checker 2011) terms, has emerged to document the inequitable outcomes of greening plans, policies, and interventions explicitly pursuing resilience, sustainability or "greenness". Drawing on approaches from environmental justice and political ecology, this expanding body of literature explores the relationship between greening, power, and justice in urban contexts through various trajectories, including increased property values and real estate prices, the displacement of low-income residents, the expulsion of marginalized people, the exclusion of targeted groups from decision-making processes, the privatization of public space, and the reproduction of spatial inequality patterns (Anguelovksi *et al.* 2019, Quinton *et al.* 2022, Anguelovski 2023). Most publications on green gentrification explored aspects of distributional justice, examining how existing socio-economic and ethnic spatial inequalities

have influenced the distribution of green coverage and investments in renaturalization; and assessing whether new greening initiatives contribute to gentrification in the targeted area (Anguelovski 2020). Many green space redevelopment, expansion, or transformation interventions, especially large-scale ones, have been associated with physical displacement and cultural and social dispossession, with exclusionary effects in terms of accessibility and a reduced sense of belonging (Anguelovski 2023). A correlation between the intensity of green rhetoric and green branding efforts, and the decreased affordability of cities, was documented worldwide (Dale and Newman 2009, García-Lamarca *et al.* 2021). Research pathways focusing on identifying design and typological aspects more prone to unjust outcomes have also emerged. For instance, the "just green enough" approach, advocating for the implementation of numerous small scattered green spaces over large parks, was built upon the evidence that large-scale and functional parks are more likely to foster gentrifying effects (Curran and Hamilton 2012, Wolch 2014, Rigolon *et al.* 2020).

Green gentrification studies explore the complex interplay between urban greening and justice, framed through three key dimensions: distributive, procedural, and interactional (Low 2013, Schlosberg 2013, Anguelovski *et al.* 2020). Most attention has been drawn to distributive justice – which unfolds in the unequal distribution of green amenities and the reproduction of segregated spatial patterns of environmentally disadvantaged populations. However, scholars have also illustrated issues related to citizens' participation in decision-making processes, and the marginalization of existing ecological knowledge and practices. Additionally, instances of conflict, rejection, and resistance to greening initiatives have been documented across Europe, and North and South America (e.g., Checker 2011, Newman 2015, Anguelovski *et al.* 2019). Nonetheless, the significance of green space governance and management in perpetuating injustice within ecological planning remains largely underestimated.

Addressing at the same time global climate crisis effects and branding purposes, cities are encouraged to adopt ecological plans and green initiatives aimed at adaptation, mitigation, and enhancing citizens' health and quality of life. This re-naturalization necessitates a substantial reorganization of urban governance, encompassing the updating of procedures and protocols for green management, the integration of new skills, collaboration across different administrative sectors, and the allocation of dedicated resources. However, despite ambitious claims, such plans are frequently hampered by a fragmented approach, and a lack of structural and equity-focused foresight. Moreover, the political significance of ecological planning and management is typically disregarded, with dissent and socio-economic impacts of greening on the population sidelined in favor of emphasizing the social benefits of green spaces. In this context, a re-politicization of green planning and a sociopolitical analysis of modes of green management proves necessary. The equity of urban greening interventions is inextricably linked to its planning and governance, as the decision-making strategy guiding interventions and the mode of resource acquisition can lead to very different outcomes in terms of spatial justice. Indeed, the fragmentation of ecological planning and governance with the redistribution of administrative functions, accompanied by green orthodoxy, resonates with a micro-political and techno-centric perspective to urban governance that is typical of cities' neoliberalization (Brand 2007, Brenner and Theodore 2002, 2005). Operatively, the involvement of private actors in the design, implementation, and management of urban greening, without coordination and city-wide perspective, may serve city marketing rather than citizens' well-being and social cohesion, and may result in the privatization and commodification of urban nature. Furthermore, the increasing reliance on public-private partnerships or collaborations with environmental nonprofits, ostensibly aimed at maximizing efficiency and reducing costs of greening initiatives, overlooks their possible exclusionary effects, as well as their impact on the perceived and actual accessibility of public green spaces. By drawing on an analysis of green space management experiences, this paper underscores the importance of adopting a sociological perspective to further our understanding of the implications of green space governance. The hypothesis presented is twofold: first, there is a need to re-politicize green planning and practices, moving away from the neoliberal rhetoric of neutrality; second, this re-politicization must be rooted in a critical examination of green governance.

## 2. GREENING AS DEPOLITICIZING NARRATIVE

### 2.1. Depoliticizing effect of the climate crisis

The urgent narrative of the climate crisis has resulted in a moral imperative towards greening as part of urban climate politics. This vision legitimates the overshadowing of social and equity issues, insinuating environmental concerns to be prior to the survival of the human species against the threat of climate crisis (Harper 2020, Bulkeley 2021). Conceived under a state of (climate) emergency and addressing international accountability, new green

planning emphasizes environmental aspects and measurable outcomes while neglecting local social specificities and political issues. As a consequence, despite the integrated approach embedded in the sustainability, resilience, and adaptation frameworks, as expressed in the Agenda 2030 (Biermann *et al.* 2017), equity and justice aspects are frequently sidelined in favor of solely environmental mission. As the impacts of climate change intensify, with the increase of extreme heat, floods, and pollution levels, the necessity for compromise and consensus may override political divides and oversee possible contestations (Long and Rice 2019). According to Checker, «contemporary fixes to environmental issues, especially climate change, provide a prime example of the rise of technocracy, managerial governance and consensual politics» (2011: 214), «which disallow spaces for conflictual politics and the imagining of alternative modes of governance» (*Ibidem*). This applies to urban greening as well. In terms of consensus, a resilient agenda encounters less resistance from a wide audience (Chiesi and Forte 2022, Harper 2020, Swyngedouw and Ernstson 2018), gradually removing urban greening from political debates, or silencing protests and alternative narratives.

This re-signification of urban nature as a climate solution, thus as an urban requirement for adaptation rather than as public space, shifts the criteria for evaluating green spaces. In urban agendas, it may result in a technocratic, ostensibly politically neutral approach to solving environmental issues, through which unjust dynamics may operate. This technocratic perspective stresses the rapidity of climate crisis effects and the urgency for adaptation measures, in order to stage environmental issues that must be dealt with through compromise, managerial and technical arrangement, and the production of consensus. Planning decisions concerning where and how to green cities are framed as technocratic issues. No space is given to political dissensus, which is perceived as unseemly and counter-productive, while inclusion and equity are sidelined in the name of sustainable goals. The effectiveness of ecological and green policies is assessed in quantitative terms, for example in the number of trees planted. Yet, the spatial component is reduced to the role of service multiplier: it is a surface available for the performance of ecological and ecosystem functions, but it lacks any socio-political dimension. In green planning, characters like park size, biodiversity, number of trees present, and ecological connectivity, are prioritized, while considerations such as location relative to socio-economic context or public perception are downplayed. Accessibility and diverse use possibilities, key aspects for public engagement and inclusiveness (Chiesi and Costa 2022), can be even overshadowed by the need to ensure ecologi-

cal performance. From this viewpoint, the restriction of certain areas in public gardens for biodiversity protection can be read at the same time as exclusionary and ecologically oriented measures. As a result, the possibility of interaction and coexistence within green spaces, which would otherwise be fundamental requirements for public space, is not recognized as decisive, and the enjoyment of green spaces itself is depoliticized.

Equity concerns, if not overlooked in renaturalization plans, typically manifest solely through the activation of participatory processes (Angelo *et al.* 2022). However, the techno-managerial approach to urban greening, where a unique scientific rationale seems to be admitted, may affect participatory mechanisms, which, when adopted, reproduce power imbalances, or legitimize ongoing interventions, for example by presenting a limited range of alternatives for expressing preferences. Although the importance of public engagement in green and climate planning and management is widely recognized, scholars emphasize the need to critically assess the transparency, accountability, and openness of citizens' involvement in decision-making processes, along with the role and impact of participatory initiatives on the structure of these processes (Betsill and Bulkeley 2003, Bulkeley 2021). It is widely agreed that the term "participation" has become overly broad and elusive, often serving as a narrative tool for advancing neoliberal agendas dominated by private actors and profit motives (Moini 2012, Turnhout *et al.* 2020). Especially in climate-oriented green planning, participatory processes can be employed to respond to transnational recommendations, foster citizens' political commitment, or promote initiatives, rather than address complex and potentially contested issues including most marginalized groups in the decisional process (Bherer 2010, Bulkeley 2021). Citizens' involvement can serve not only to inform but also to legitimize policies. Indeed, in climate-oriented participatory processes, the «depoliticized discourse that uses rational and scientific arguments to evoke universalized ideas of what is 'the best' solution» (Turnhout *et al.* 2020: 16).

### 2.2. 'Green-as-good' narrative

The climate emergency narrative accentuates the stripping away of greening from its political nature (Long and Rice 2019). But the depoliticization of green spaces is also conveyed by the green orthodoxy narrative, which, as mentioned above, sees urban greening as intrinsically inclusive, producing widespread benefits for all. Framing distributed social benefits as a consequence of increased environmental quality, rather than as a precondition, green orthodoxy overlooks the existing ten-

sions among the corners of the environment–economy–equity "planner's triangle" (Campbell 1996), and possible unfair outcomes of greening-led urban regeneration.

The depoliticization of renaturalization processes and the decoupling of environmental and equity considerations are facilitated by a process of removal of any political or social connotations from the dominant representation of urban nature. Hillary Angelo traced back the origins of a socially constructed view of nature as an indirect, universal, and aspirational good, with the delineation, starting from the industrialization period (Angelo 2021). With the creation of such "urbanized nature", greening practices are selected, detached from the production of goods and services for self-consumption and survival in general, and oriented towards leisure and recreation purposes. These interpretations of nature as amenities have become dominant narratives, portraying green spaces as universally beautiful, positive, virtuous, and inclusive. The strength of such narratives contributes to the delegitimization of dissent and protests against green implementation, while also normalizing the renovation of existing urban nature to conform to an idealized image of "glitzy and manicured green" spaces (Anguelovski *et al.* 2018). Consequently, certain voices and practices may be marginalized in favor of others, and certain groups of inhabitants may be selectively excluded from accessing public spaces (e.g., Dooling 2009, Newman 2015, Koprowska *et al.* 2020).

Together with an increasing emphasis on their measurable outcomes, the narrative of green-as-good is particularly powerful in neutralizing any critical consideration regarding the same democratic and equitable nature of greening operations. Equity aspects are sidelined in favor of environmental performance concerns, justified by a narrative of implicit inclusiveness of greening, and the win-win paradigm of green orthodoxy. Trust in the intrinsically diffused benefits of urban greening policies leads to their development without direct attention to equity, and governance structures often lack explicit orientation towards ensuring justice and accessibility of those benefits. As a result, environmental efficiency may be easily used as a rhetorical tool to serve market and economic interests (Kotsila *et al.* 2021), and the involvement of private stakeholders is welcomed as beneficial regardless of socio-spatial outcomes.

## 3. THE CONTROVERSIES OF PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP

The search for different modalities of public-private partnerships is encouraged as a fruitful strategy to maximize national and local efforts to achieve sustainable goals. With limited resources available for urban greening and the goal of expanding and improving green space provision, city administrations have increasingly adopted mechanisms such as privately owned public green spaces. However, while these kinds of spaces contribute to the overall supply of publicly accessible areas, private interests can shape their accessibility. Especially in the absence of proper negotiation between public and private interests, the latter often takes precedence, potentially leading to exclusionary practices or the commercialization of public spaces (Németh 2009, Németh and Schmidt 2011, Lee 2022). Privately-owned public green spaces typically feature increased regulation of use and behavior, often reflected in the presence of security personnel, surveillance cameras, stringent rules, and restricted zones, but also design feature guiding behaviors – such as access gates or furniture designed to discourage certain activities (Pearsall and Eller 2020, Verheij *et al.* 2023). Since the inclusivity of public green space is directly shaped by its permitted uses and perceived norms (Chiesi and Costa 2022), these features can significantly limit their accessibility. Similar concerns apply to publicly owned but privately managed parks (Pearsall and Eller 2020), especially when they are part of new urban developments. The profit-oriented participation of private stakeholders in urban ecological transition should therefore raise concerns about the fairness of such processes, and the inclusiveness of the outcomes (Brand 2007, Pearsall *et al.* 2020, Verheij *et al.* 2023), particularly in light of the increasing economic value and attractiveness of urban greening (Liebelt *et al.* 2023, Ma *et al.* 2024). Much of the green gentrification scholarship has examined the correlation between investments in greening and rising property values, highlighting how urban greening has been leveraged by developers and real estate investors to increase the value of their assets (Immergluck 2009, Loughran 2014, Haase *et al.* 2017, García-Lamarca *et al.* 2022, Anguelovski 2023). The term "green gap" was introduced to describe how municipalities, investors, developers, and affluent residents capitalize on greening projects through "green rents" – i.e. increased land and property value – while simultaneously claiming the universality of benefits delivered (Anguelovski *et al.* 2018).

Indeed, cities are increasingly marketing urban greening and resilience as integral parts of their international brand, often favorably viewing private initiatives as instrumental in shaping a new image of a green city. In this branding effort, cities have committed themselves to the search for flagship symbols of "a smart, sustainable, and resilient global urban orthodoxy", rather than

a just renaturalization of urban space (Connolly 2018). Green landmarks and eco-symbols are created under the guise of resilience and inclusion, yet their resonance primarily serves private investments. Moreover, private partners' involvement is celebrated for enhancing the ecological contributions of green spaces – such as maximizing ecosystem services or biodiversity through expensive management practices – yet these factors are more relevant to the project's success and profitability than the overall well-being of citizens. In this context, the controversies inherent in privately owned and privately managed public spaces are even more neglected when it comes to green spaces. By framing urban nature as a universally desirable (and needed) amenity, high-end eco-symbols and public community gardens are equalized without scrutinizing the normative consequences of design choices and management approaches. As a result, profit-driven green projects or park management may be viewed positively even when they fail to achieve sustainability – favoring on the contrary land consumption and new development – or equity goals, ultimately diminishing perceived and actual accessibility to green spaces.

Over the last two decades, Milan has shifted its narrative from a gray to a green city. However, rather than reflecting an actual effort by the administration to enhance park provision or reduce land consumption – most of the experiences of urban forestry and community gardens predate the 1990s – this "green transition" narrative and perception is largely embedded in eco-symbols, such as Vertical Forests, Library of Trees, and CityLife Park. These green components have been integrated into new urban developments, marking as 'green flags' the two most ambitious and largest-scale operations of Porta Nuova and CityLife. The CityLife Park (168.000 sq.m, to be doubled in next years), described as the third public park and the biggest pedestrian zone in the city, was part of the masterplan for the conversion of the former headquarters of the city trade fair into a high-end residential and commercial site. The Library of Trees (90.000 sq.m) and two well-known Vertical Forests skyscrapers were part of the Porta Nuova redevelopment in the industrial and working-class neighborhood of Isola-Garibaldi, in the Northern part of the city. Porta Nuova, realized starting 2007 and launched during Milan EXPO2015, was the largest redevelopment in Europe, encompassing high-end residential buildings, offices, headquarters for financial firms, and a commercial plaza.

Both Library of Trees and CityLife Park exemplify the quintessential "quality park", characterized by their highly designed and expensive-to-manage nature. These parks, which primarily serve as ornamental spaces and scenic backdrops for new commercial hubs, were financed through urban development charges on private real estate operations and were created as public. Consequently, high maintenance costs burdened public finances. One year after the completion of the Library of Trees, in 2019, a sponsorship agreement was signed with the Foundation affiliated with real estate developers. The goal was to shift the responsibility for maintenance from public to private actors, also tasking them with cultural activities programs. In exchange for shouldering this sponsorship burden, private investors gained exclusive rights to host private and commercial events in the park and a few surrounding areas. The administration welcomed this public-private sponsorship agreement as a win-win situation, ensuring high-quality parks and environmental benefits while easing the strain on public finances. Yet, the eagerness to preserve this eco-symbol seems to disregard the equity implications of semi-privatizing the park.

To explore the impact of both the design and semi-privatization of the Library of Trees, we conducted research involving neighborhood residents and members of Isola Pepe Verde, a small shared garden adjacent to BAM. This research comprised 20 semi-structured interviews lasting between 35 and 90 minutes, and four observation sessions conducted between January and March 2024. Additionally, we reviewed policy documents, key press materials, and published writings, including books and journal articles, related to the Isola-Garibaldi redevelopment and the Library of Trees. The findings suggest that the Library of Trees can be seen as a contested space. Its over-management, separation from the residential fabric – the area designated for the park was displaced by a concession requested by the developers – and rigid design recurrently emerged as determining factors in how the park is used. The Library of Trees has been described as a "park to walk through," a "meeting place, because it is recognizable and well-connected," suitable for "walking the dog or pushing the stroller". However, despite being positioned differently regarding the goodness of Porta Nuova operation, interviewees agreed that the Library of Trees was distinct from a public park. Both residents and activists reported limitations on their freedom of use, with enclosed biodiversity zones and intense commercial occupation resulting in a scarcity of available space. Some of the interviewees speculated that they "are not the intended users of the project", while others declared to feel like "consumers of a service rather than users of a space". The Library of Trees emerges as a space fundamentally disconnected from the needs of the neighborhood, lacking a community gar-

den following the redevelopment. The presence of Isola Pepe Verde's small shared garden – an asphalt area of a few thousand square meters covered with potted or box plants – stands as a critique to the grandiose park, as it accommodates functions prevented in the Library of Trees, such as direct interaction with nature, common-ing practices, and gardening.

The exclusionary effects of certain types of parks or green spaces, particularly highly maintained, "glitzy and manicured" ones, have been described in the literature (Anguelovski *et al.* 2018). In the case of Milan's Porta Nuova and the Library of Trees, this effect is exacerbated by the semi-privatization of management and program-ming activities. Sponsorship agreements have shifted maintenance costs from public to private actors, resulting in exclusive and exclusionary connotations for residents of the surrounding neighborhood. Porta Nuova stands as an example of the dual injustice stemming from the commodification of public space under the guise of green branding, as previously discussed. In the case of the Library of Trees, urban nature is initially commodified and capitalized upon as an asset to enhance the land and property values of surrounding areas, particularly dur-ing the process of urban redevelopment. Subsequently, it serves as an income site for commercial activities, based on agreements made to ensure the ongoing commitment of the private operator (the sponsor) to maintain and renovate the park, thereby relieving the burden on pub-lic finances. In addition, this situation presents challenges in terms of reversibility: the potential exit of the private actor could weigh on the administration, posing a risk to the integrity of the eco-symbol image. Consequently, the exclusionary effects are not only linked to the gentri-fication and displacement resulting from the operation but also to the expulsion of certain modes of use, which displaces the Library of Trees as an insufficient substitute for the neighborhood garden. These effects are present in interviewees' perception but invisibilized in the domi-nant narrative, which instead celebrates the eco-symbol and supposedly social benefits.

Encouraging governance models of city renaturali-zation that prioritize public-private partnerships while neglecting considerations of cultural and social accessi-bility may exacerbate the unjust repercussions of green interventions. Rewarding parks' visibility and iconicity at the expense of inclusiveness and openness to diverse segments of the population runs the risk of legitimat-ing the privatization of public space and accelerating green gentrifying effects. However, as green branding and green orthodoxy promote a notion of universally beneficial green spaces – emphasizing, moreover, their potential as climate solutions – these controversies are only uncovered when formal and functional distinctions between types of green space are recognized, and equity goals are explicitly addressed.

## 4. THE RISKS OF NONPROFITIZATION

In the collective "call of duty" of the climate crisis, the trend of outsourcing responsibilities for environ-mental planning and green implementation from public actors to corporations, non-profits, and citizen groups is often framed as a response to increasing austerity measures and spending reviews within the public sector. However, while such public disengagement may be por-trayed as neutral, apolitical, and efficiency-oriented, it is worth mentioning that such outsourcing of services and the redistribution of responsibilities traditionally man-aged by state or city agendas, towards private initiatives are actually reflective of a neoliberal approach (Heynen and Perkins 2005, Brand 2007, Kotsila *et al.* 2021). Pub-lic disinvestments in the green component and park sec-tor delegate green planning not only to private capacities but also to voluntaristic efforts, resulting in controversial outcomes such as disproportionately distributed pat-terns of greening or unjust processes. As previously dis-cussed, greening interventions driven by private interests prioritize economic objectives and capitalize on green attractiveness, often at the expense of inclusiveness and equity. However, unjust outcomes are not solely attribut-able to the involvement of private investors in greening processes. Entrusting non-public actors with the design, implementation, and management of new green spaces may exacerbate existing inequalities, even in cases where profit purposes are not the driving force.

Indeed, although acknowledging the potential con-tribution of nonprofits to environmental advocacy and provision, scholars have raised equity concerns about the increasing reliance on these organizations (Joassart-Marcelli *et al.* 2011, Perkins 2013, Rigolon and Németh 2018, Pearsall 2020), as well as the involvement of con-sultants (Angelo *et al.* 2022), in park management and design. Engaging consultants in greening plans may result in decisions that overlook equity considerations, as «while consultants' templates may include generic equi-ty-related language, they generally do not conduct local needs assessments before formulating specific policie» (Angelo *et al.* 2022: 12). Reliance on voluntary efforts can reinforce existing disparities among neighbor-hoods, favoring the more attractive or engaged, in spite of those most in need (Joassart-Marcelli *et al.* 2011, Per-kins 2013). Furthermore, the claims and accountability

of nonprofits can be co-opted to legitimize processes of environmental gentrification (Checker 2011).

Undeniably, involving park-oriented environmental nonprofits in cities' greening processes, entrusting them with advocacy, fundraising, management, provision of recreation activities and cultural programs, but also project coordination roles, offers the opportunity to expand the city government's achievements without burdening public finance, while also benefiting from the expertise of nonprofits members, often activists. For instance, by advocating for park development, nonprofits can carry out fundraising and citizens' engagement campaigns more effectively than public agencies due to their extensive networks and their accountability. Moreover, nonprofits can do better than the public actor in design or project management roles, leveraging their environmental expertise and focusing solely on individual projects rather than the entire city. However, in terms of equity and spatial justice, outsourcing these responsibilities to nonprofits may prove counterproductive. These equity concerns encompass inequalities in park maintenance, limited accountability of semi-public parks management, or disparities in access to green spaces and recreational opportunities (Rigolon and Németh 2017, 2018). In general, the shift of greening responsibility from public to nonprofits may facilitate the decoupling of environmental issues from social ones, narrowing the intervention to mere environmental aspects and isolating it from its multi-dimensional repercussions.

In their study for Chicago's 606 Elevated park and Trails, Rigolon and Németh warned against the risk of "nonprofitization" of project management of large scale interventions (Rigolon and Németh 2018). Investigating the procedural aspects of a paradigmatic project whose gentrifying effect is documented, researchers have shown how the reliance on park-oriented environmental nonprofits provides a compelling explanation for the occurrence of gentrification. Indeed, park-oriented environmental nonprofits, primarily concerned with ecological components, often lack the mandate to address equity concerns like displacement risks, thus reinforcing the separation of urban greening from broader justice-related goals and a green orthodoxy-driven approach, especially in large-scale green infrastructure projects tied to urban development and economic interests. As they pointed out,

*although the nonprofitization of project management [...] has some real benefits in terms of efficiency, this strategy can increase the chances of environmental gentrification due to the fragmentation of green space development and affordable housing goals, an overemphasis on the ecological and public health benefits of parks that can draw away*

*attention from displacement concerns, and the reduced accountability of both public and non-state actors* (Rigolon and Németh 2018: 72).

As private entities, nonprofits are not required to possess a comprehensive understanding of the city or to adopt broader governance strategies. This results in reduced accountability, as the valuation of intervention outcomes is confined to their specific areas of expertise, both thematically – pertaining to environmental aspects spatially and temporally – individual projects and their implementation timelines. While park-oriented environmental nonprofits are committed to environmental protection and enhancement, they are solely accountable for the environmental quality of the project and the objectives achieved within that realm. They cannot be held accountable for the lack of measures to ensure space accessibility, affordable housing protection, or the prevention of potential unjust consequences. When tasked with intervening in specific projects, environmental nonprofits are shielded from potential critics related to, for example, project placement within the city, measures to safeguard housing rights, or the effectiveness of targeted community engagement efforts.

In the case of Chicago's 606 Elevated Park and Trails, the advocacy for affordable housing was silenced under the claimed apolitical nature of greening, a rhetoric of "win-win" outcomes, and the perceived universality of its health and environmental benefits. Activists and organizations contesting gentrification and consequent displacement reported difficulties in arguing against the perceived positive impact of community improvement (Rigolon and Németh 2018). In this context, the involvement of environmentalist organizations provides the administration with an effective means of neutralizing conflict and dissent, aligning with a consensus-building approach that appropriates environmentalist resources, discourse, and claims (Checker 2011, Immergluck and Balan 2017). As a result, the administration can limit the debate to the spheres of expertise of environmental nonprofits, claiming project successes and potentially boasting about the foresight of entrusting a competent entity, while evading broader responsibilities for urban overall balance. In this way, the outsourcing of greening to nonprofits allows the administration's environmental agenda to leverage its credibility without confronting other social, economic, and democratic concerns. Without explicit public coordination aimed at mitigating justice-related consequences, the fragmentation of responsibilities can perpetuate or worsen existing inequalities, or even favor speculative processes and new urban development driven by private interests rather than democratic purposes.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Emphasizing the urgency for adaptation measures, which include greening, climate urbanism has espoused a technocratic and uncritical approach to the governance of the public space, of which green spaces are a constitutive part. Concurrently, ecologists' and environmentalists' arguments are manipulated and assimilated in a green orthodoxy narrative, to hijack the production of spatial knowledge and the debate about inclusion and just cities. While greening is assumed as universally beneficial and immune to the risk of injustice, its implementation may be legitimizing or favoring unjust, controversial, or speculation-oriented urban transformation processes. Cities demonstrate their accountability based on data that are assumed to be neutral and transparent, while assessment of green benefits can be used to avoid democratic (thus conflictual) planning processes. This technocratic approach reinforces a perception of the city as merely a physical structure rather than a complex interplay of socio-ecological relationships. In this paper, we explored how the urgency of the climate crisis reinforced a depoliticized narrative of green-as-good, obscuring equity concerns and leading to the marginalization of certain voices and the exacerbation of existing social inequalities. Moreover, we shed light on the risks of the neoliberalization of the urban ecological agenda, that is fragmenting greening into individual intervention and outsourcing costs and responsibilities from the public to the private sphere. The effect of such fragmentation, expressed in the involvement of private actors and nonprofits in green interventions, or through the signing of sponsorship agreements, is not immediately evident. Framed as politically neutral, and embracing a techno-centric narrative, this dynamic aligns well with the neoliberal approach to public management and urban planning, characterized by a gradual decrease in public spending in the ecological component and green management. With findings from empirical research on a case study in Milan, this paper delves into the controversies surrounding public-private partnerships in urban greening initiatives. While such partnerships are touted as avenues for maximizing sustainable goals, they often prioritize profit-oriented motives over considerations of justice and fairness. The influx of private investments in green projects can fuel gentrification effects, marginalizing already vulnerable communities and imposing new consuming ecologies over already existing ones. New greening is the result of negotiations between private interests and the city's commitment to green branding, in a process where democratic participation and dissent are silenced. Furthermore, analyzing the existing literature, we underscore how the nonprofitization of green projects can sideline broader justice-related goals and perpetuate existing inequalities. As discussed, entrusting responsibilities for the planning and implementation of new green infrastructure to nonprofit organizations is a choice that aligns with the depoliticization of urban governance and the minimization of conflict situations. Therefore, as for the privatization of greening, the involvement of nonprofits contributes to the decoupling of social and environmental claims, reducing accountability for equity needs. In this fragmentation of competencies and issues to be resolved, the intersectional nature of residents' claims is ignored or denied. In conclusion, this paper advocates for reasserting the political dimension in urban greening efforts. It calls for a more comprehensive and inclusive approach that prioritizes equity and justice alongside environmental sustainability.

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