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# Urban Buzzwords in Practice: Rhetoric, Method and the Politics of Diffusion

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**Abstract**

Over the past two decades, new terms have proliferated in urban planning discourse at an accelerating pace, often claiming to reframe how cities are understood, designed and governed. This article examines 24 widely used urban "buzzwords" as discursive devices, grouped into five thematic families: technology and data; climate and sustainability; spatial form and proximity; economic development and innovation; and governance and justice. Their propagation appears to depend on relatively open definitions, which allow adoption across institutional and professional contexts without prior consensus on objectives or instruments. New terms tend not to displace earlier ones but to layer onto them, producing cumulative planning vocabularies. The recurring patterns are interpreted through a five-stage lifecycle shaped by two cross-cutting properties: semantic openness during propagation and institutional domestication during adoption, the latter also potentially operating as a process of depoliticisation. The more productive direction for research lies less in refining definitions of emerging concepts than in examining how they shape attention, legitimacy and resource allocation within planning systems.

**Keywords**: Urban planning, urban governance, buzzwords, terminology, innovation, communication in planning.



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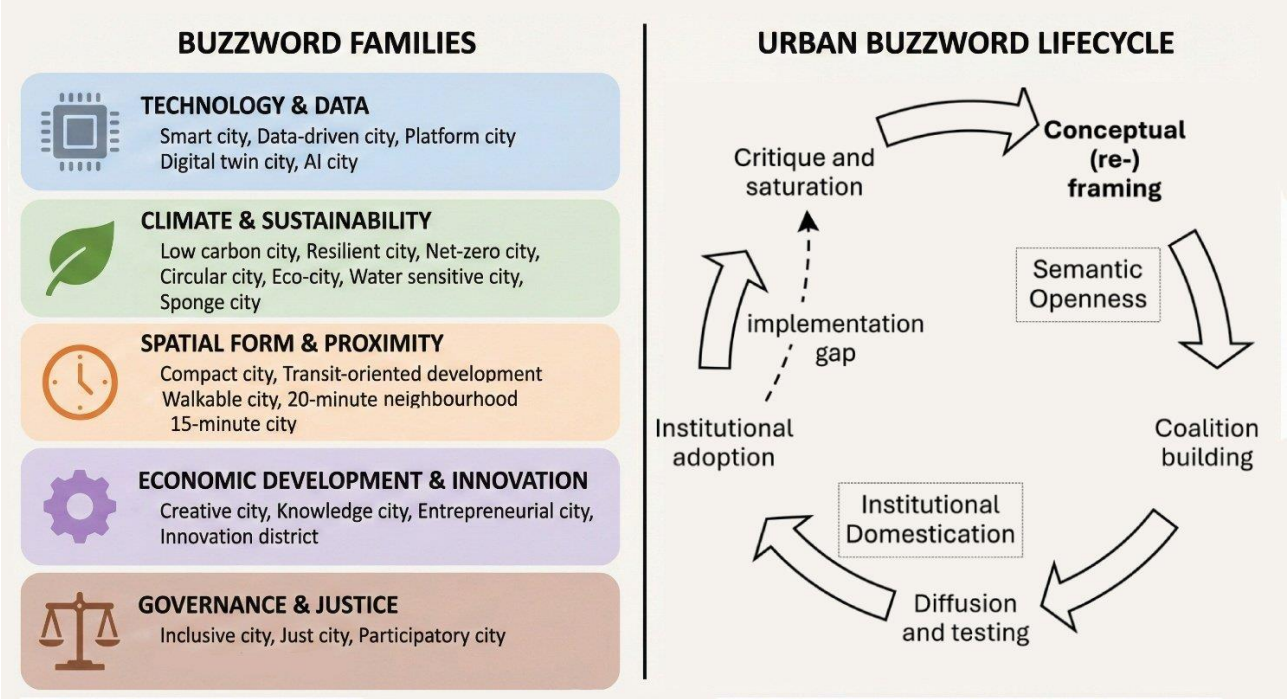
**Graphical abstract**




## 1. Introduction

Urban planning is a vocabulary-heavy discipline. Planning policies, briefs, academic studies and technical reports rely on recurring terms, or buzzwords, to communicate ideas about cities. Buzzwords play a significant role in signalling a problem and indicating a course of action (Allmendinger, 2009; Hall, 2014). Since the early 2000s the field has seen a proliferation of new urban labels (Sharifi, 2022; Meerow *et al.*, 2016). Terms such as "smart city", "resilient city", "15-minute city", "circular city", "innovation district", and "inclusive city" now circulate widely in academic literature, policy documents and political statements (Moreno, 2019). New formulations appear faster than earlier ones consolidate or retire (Wiig, 2016; Söderström *et al.*, 2014).

The basic function of a buzzword is to compress an argument. A single phrase like smart city can imply a diagnosis (the city is inefficient), a goal (digital optimisation) and a stance (technology is the answer), without any of these being made explicit (Joss *et al.*, 2019; Cugurullo, 2021; Cowley *et al.*, 2018). This compression is what makes buzzwords useful in policy briefs, planning statements, funding applications and political speeches, where space is limited and the audience is mixed. The persuasive effect is not accidental. Buzzwords are designed, or at least selected, to align with values already widely shared in planning theory and elsewhere, such as innovation, sustainability, fairness or urgency (Hollands, 2008; Angelidou, 2015). Ambiguity is part of the appeal. A precise definition would tie the term to one constituency, whereas a vague one allows technologists, environmentalists, social planners and politicians to all claim it (Jacobs, 2012).

Comparable dynamics have been identified in development studies, where "governance", "participation" and "sustainability" have been characterised as "magic concepts" because their breadth allows coordination among actors with divergent objectives (Pollitt and Hupe, 2011; Mosse, 2004; Cornwall, 2007; Leach *et al.*, 2012). The same semantic openness has long been theorised as constitutive of political coalition-building (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Scholte, 2011; Metzger *et al.*, 2015).

Consider the smart city (Batty, 2012). The mind quickly evokes imagery of a sensor-laden street, digital dashboards in city hall, citizens interacting with city services using their smartphones. Similarly, the "resilient city" draws on a different vocabulary, one closer to civil engineering than information technology: flood barriers, nature-based solutions, social solidarity, networks built to keep running when one node fails. The picture of the "compact city" describes form rather than infrastructure, with dense blocks, mixed uses and transportation within walking distances of 10 or 15 minutes (Meerow, Newell and Stults, 2016; Bibri and Krogstie, 2017; Sharifi, 2022). Three buzzwords, three pictures, three planning traditions speaking through them. Each one treats the city as something that can be envisioned in concrete terms, while leaving considerable scope for variation in interpretation and implementation (Pozoukidou and Angelidou, 2022; McFarlane, 2011; Luque-Ayala and Marvin, 2015).

Prior work has examined small sets of urban concepts together, typically focusing on their political premises or governance implications (Hatuka *et al.*, 2018). The most systematic comparative work to date has come from a series of bibliometric studies. De Jong *et al.* (2015) mapped

twelve city labels in the academic literature 1996–2013 and demonstrated that, despite extensive overlap, each retained a conceptually distinct identity. Schraven *et al.* (2021) extended this to 35 labels across 1990–2019 (11,337 articles), confirming the dominance of the 'sustainable city / smart city' duopoly while revealing the emergence of a third cluster oriented towards inclusion and safety. Similar work has focused on specific clusters (e.g. Ahvenniemi *et al.*, 2017; Bibri and Krogstie, 2017; Ramírez López and Grijalba Castro, 2020; Cugurullo, 2021).

Certain buzzwords have received considerable attention in urban studies. Research on smart, resilient and creative cities has examined their emergence, governance implications and implementation gaps (Hollands, 2008; Joss *et al.*, 2019; Veloso *et al.*, 2024). Longitudinal reviews identify tensions between stated ambitions and practical outcomes (Cowley *et al.*, 2018). However, this literature has tended to treat each label in isolation, often within its own thematic silo (e.g. Bibri and Krogstie, 2017; Myeong *et al.*, 2022; Allam *et al.*, 2021).

This article examines 24 urban buzzwords that have remained visible in planning, urban studies and related policy fields since the early 2000s. Each term is approached as a discursive device that bundles a diagnosis of urban conditions, a set of valorised practices and a horizon of intended outcomes. The analysis considers how such terms are conceived and how they circulate across institutional and professional settings. A buzzword lifecycle model is proposed to describe how urban buzzwords gain traction, become institutionally adopted and embedded in planning practice and finally recede from active use or get rebranded.

## 2. Methodology

The study takes the form of an interpretive, conceptually-oriented review rather than a systematic literature review. Terms were selected purposively against three criteria: (i) sustained visibility in planning, urban studies and related policy literatures since the early 2000s; (ii) circulation across more than one institutional or professional domain (e.g., academic, governmental, consultancy, advocacy); and (iii) explicit reference to the city or to urban districts as the object and scale of intervention. The 24 resulting terms are not exhaustive of the contemporary urban lexicon, but they capture the labels that have most consistently structured planning discourse over the past two decades.

The bibliometric mappings of De Jong *et al.* (2015) and Schraven *et al.* (2021) provide the most comprehensive quantitative coverage of urban concept-labels to date. The present study takes an interpretive approach that complements them in three respects: (i) it includes design-based labels (compact city, creative city, transit-oriented development) that bibliometric criteria sometimes marginalise; (ii) it extends to post-2019 entrants (the AI city, the digital twin city); and (iii) it interprets the mechanisms (i.e. semantic openness, institutional domestication, depoliticisation) that drive the trajectories traced empirically by previous bibliometric studies.

For each term, an anchoring set of references was identified through targeted reading of the founding sources, the principal programmatic statements and the main critical responses. Key references are listed in **Table A.1** (**see Appendix**) and provide the evidentiary base for the analysis presented in sections 3 to 7. Sources were read for the diagnostic claims advanced by each term, the practices and instruments it promotes and the actors it brings into play.

The 24 terms are organised into five thematic families: technology and data; climate and sustainability; spatial form and proximity; economic development and innovation; and governance and justice. The families were derived inductively from the corpus and reflect the dominant problem-framings around which the terms cluster. Placement was determined by the framing most consistently emphasised in the anchoring references. The final column of **Table 1** distinguishes normative terms, which articulate value-laden visions of how cities ought to be, from descriptive or technical terms, which denote specific tools, targets or analytical frames.

The umbrella term “sustainable city” is deliberately not included in the corpus. It functions at a higher level of abstraction than the terms examined here, functioning as a meta-category that includes several of the climate and sustainability buzzwords analysed below. Similarly, design movements such as the “garden city”, “New Urbanism” and the “urban village” are not included in the corpus. Although they have circulated widely and influenced planning practice, their context is fixed by published charters, manifestos or design codes, which constrains the kind of interpretive flexibility this study takes as constitutive of a buzzword.

## 3. Technology and data-related buzzwords

Since the late 2000s, urban planning discourse has increasingly incorporated terminology associated with data and digital technologies (Batty, 2012; Townsend, 2013). Advances in urban analytics (Kandt and Batty, 2021) combined with the ubiquity of the internet, mobile broadband, smartphones, cloud computing, sensor networks and GNSS positioning drove the rise of a new lexicon. Terms such as smart city, data-driven city, platform city, digital twin city, and AI city entered planning vocabulary in close succession (Batty, 2012; Mohanty *et al.*, 2016; Caprotti *et al.*, 2022). These terms function as a shared vocabulary that articulates expectations about the role of the digital age in reshaping urban governance, analysis and management (Kitchin, 2014; Cugurullo, 2021).

The smart city has achieved the widest recognition within this technological lexicon (Batty, 2012; Angelidou, 2014; Albino *et al.*, 2015). Schraven *et al.* (2021) showed that smart-city articles overtook sustainable-city articles in 2014 and by end-2019 accounted for 46% of the entire urban-labels corpus across 35 labels and 30 years. Its diffusion is closely linked to technology vendors, demonstration projects, academic research and policy initiatives that focused on urban applications (Söderström *et al.*, 2014).

**Table 1.** Overview of key buzzwords by theme.

| Theme | Term | First Appearance (approx.) | Key Actors | Discursive Property |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Technology and data | Smart city | Mid 2000s | Corporate / academia | Descriptive/Technical |
| | Data-driven city | Early 2010s | Academia | Descriptive/Technical |
| | Platform city | Late 2010s | Urban studies | Descriptive/Technical |
| | Digital twin city | Late 2010s | Tech industry | Descriptive/Technical |
| | AI city | Early 2020s | Corporate | Descriptive/Technical |
| Climate and sustainability | Low-carbon city | Late 2000s | Academic | Descriptive/Technical |
| | Resilient city | Late 2000s | International organisations | Normative |
| | Net-zero city | Mid 2010s | Central governments | Descriptive/Technical |
| | Circular city | Mid 2010s | Academia / EU policy | Descriptive/Technical |
| | Eco-city | Late 1980s | Mixed | Normative |
| | Water-sensitive city | Mid 2000s | Australia | Descriptive/Technical |
| | Sponge city | Mid 2010s | Chinese government | Descriptive/Technical |
| Spatial form and proximity | Compact city | Early 1990s | Academic | Descriptive/Technical |
| | Transit-oriented development | Mid 1990s | Planning | Descriptive/Technical |
| | Walkable city | Mid 2000s | Mixed | Descriptive/Technical |
| | 20-minute neighbourhood | Late 2010s | Policy (Australia) | Descriptive/Technical |
| | 15-minute city | Late 2010s | Academic | Descriptive/Technical |
| Economic development and innovation | Creative city | 2000s | Academia / policy | Normative |
| | Knowledge city | 2000s | Academia | Normative |
| | Entrepreneurial city | 1990s | Academia | Descriptive/Technical |
| | Innovation district | Mid 2010s | Think tanks | Descriptive/Technical |
| Governance and justice | Inclusive city | 2010s | UN / international organisations | Normative |
| | Just city | 2010s | Academia | Normative |
| | Participatory city | 2010s | NGOs / urbanists | Normative |

Earlier formulations placed emphasis on real-time monitoring through sensor networks and digital dashboards (Nam and Pardo, 2011; Harrison *et al.*, 2010). Over time, the scope widened to include urban mobility, infrastructure management, digital services and urban governance (Barns, 2020; Calzada, 2021). In planning practice, the "smart" label has been attached to a wide spectrum of initiatives, from technology procurement to open data portals and performance indicator frameworks, frequently situated within broader narratives of innovation and modernisation (Kitchin, 2016; Viitanen and Kingston, 2014).

Subsequent terms can be understood as refinements of the smart city (Kandt and Batty, 2021; Trencher, 2019). The data-driven city places greater emphasis on analytics, performance metrics and evidence-based decision-making (Kitchin, 2014; Thakuriah *et al.*, 2017). In practical terms, this has often involved the digitisation of previously analogue materials, such as historical maps and archives, alongside the development of online data portals (Batty, 2013; Goodchild, 2022).

The platform city shifts attention from data as a resource toward platform-mediated coordination as a mode of urban governance (Barnard-Wills and Ashenden, 2010). This framing highlights the role of digital intermediaries and the power asymmetries associated with platform ownership. Online platforms like "Airbnb", "Uber", "Amazon", "Google" and "Wolt" provide digital services that disrupt how cities traditionally operate (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2019; Morozov and Bria, 2018). The term serves primarily as an interpretive lens for understanding how such innovations create new challenges and opportunities for cities.

The digital twin city is more closely associated with technical approaches (Tao *et al.*, 2019). Originating in engineering and simulation, it denotes virtual representations of urban systems connected to ongoing data streams (Jones *et al.*, 2020; Dembski *et al.*, 2020). Its use in planning discourse remains loosely defined (Mohammadi and Taylor, 2021; Deprêtre *et al.*, 2022). Depending on the case, it may refer to sophisticated urban simulation models, integration of GIS and geospatial intelligence, 3D modelling, or consolidated urban data platforms (Lehtola *et al.*, 2022; Batty, 2020).

The more recent AI city extends these narratives into the early 2020s (Allam and Dhunny, 2019; Cugurullo, 2021). Currently, it acts as a future-oriented descriptor for speculative applications of generative AI (text, code, sound, image, video) and agentic swarm systems in municipal decision support (Veloso *et al.*, 2024). The term signals a

shift from digital monitoring networks toward autonomous decision-making (Rathore *et al.*, 2021; Zuboff, 2019). Initial formulations are often shaped by corporate actors, startups and innovators with academics and consultants subsequently translating these ideas into planning discourse (Greenfield, 2013).

## 4. Climate and sustainability-related buzzwords

Environmental terminology has always been at the core of modern urban planning, from Patrick Geddes' views of the city as an organism and the Garden City movement to the post-war ecological turn. Eco-city was already in circulation by the late 1980s. Low-carbon city arrived with the Kyoto-era policy focus on climate change. Resilient city came in after the 2000s, partly through the Rockefeller-funded "100 Resilient Cities programme". Other terms include circular city, net-zero city, sponge city and water-sensitive city. Each new term tends to track whichever environmental anxiety happens to be politically active at the time (While and Whitehead, 2013; Hodson and Marvin, 2010; Bulkeley *et al.*, 2014). Some of these terms originate from urban ecology, others from climate policy and energy (McCann and Ward, 2012; Voytenko *et al.*, 2016). Their common denominator is that environmental limits and long-term system behaviour are integral to urban development (Beatley, 2000; Davoudi, 2012; Bulkeley *et al.*, 2010).

The eco-city is the oldest term in the group. Coined by Richard Register in Ecocity Berkeley (1987), it described a city redesigned around ecological balance, urban metabolism and integration with its bioregion (Register, 1987; Roseland, 1997; Beatley, 2000). The eco-city of this period was more of a vision; it did not say what density a city should reach, what mix of land uses qualified, or how outcomes were to be assessed. These specifics came later, through the compact city and sustainable urban form studies, which translated the ecological aspirations into density thresholds, land-use mix indices and energy performance metrics (Jenks *et al.*, 1996; Jabareen, 2006).

Low-carbon city and net-zero city arrived with the post-2000 climate policy infrastructure. The low-carbon framing keeps emissions as the variable of interest and treats the city as one node within national or international climate accounting (Bulkeley and Betsill, 2003; Bulkeley *et al.*, 2010). The net-zero framing shifts to reduction of energy demand and proliferation of renewables (Bulkeley *et al.*, 2014; Hölscher *et al.*, 2018). Both terms communicate efficiently because they can be easily quantified (Acuto, 2013; Jordan *et al.*, 2015).

Almost all environmental terms imply that the city can be brought into a stable equilibrium with nature. The resilient city is an exception to this rule (Folke, 2006; Davoudi, 2012; Meerow *et al.*, 2016). It treats disturbance as the normal condition of urban systems and asks how the city keeps functioning when shocks arrive. By the mid-2010s resilience was already adopted by international organisations, national strategies and local plans. It addresses a series of urban challenges such as floods, heatwaves, infrastructure failure, social fragility, fiscal stress and pandemic preparedness in an interconnected manner (Elmqvist *et al.*, 2018; Rockefeller Foundation, 2015). The resilient city has also been criticised by academics. A frequent critique is whether the systems prioritised for protection truly benefit the populations that are most exposed to environmental, social and economic shocks (Davoudi, 2012; Meerow and Newell, 2016).

The circular city descends from industrial ecology and urban metabolism, where the city is interpreted as a system of material and information flows (Girardet, 1992; Kennedy *et al.*, 2007; Prendeville *et al.*, 2017). Most policy uptake has come through the EU's Circular Economy Action Plan (European Commission, 2015, 2020a), embedded since 2019 within the European Green Deal (European Commission, 2019) and enabled at the building-stock scale through the Renovation Wave (European Commission, 2020b). Here, the critique focuses on whether a radical restructure of the urban metabolism towards circularity is feasible in the current economic environment and can be actively pursued (Jensen and Remmen, 2017).

Sponge city and water-sensitive city are the most technical terms in the section. Both are about urban water (Wong, 2006; Brown *et al.*, 2009; Jia *et al.*, 2017). The water-sensitive city is a framework for integrating stormwater, land use and ecology at the catchment scale in Australian engineering and planning practice (Brown *et al.*, 2009; Fletcher *et al.*, 2015). The sponge city was formulated in China with thirty pilot cities designated in 2015 under a national programme (Jia *et al.*, 2017). Engineering and design solutions seem to converge: permeable pavements, bioswales, green roofs, retention basins, rain gardens and restored watercourses interconnected to reduce urban flooding and maximise water reuse. Implementation logic, however, diverges: the water-sensitive city advanced through professional reform within Australian water authorities while the sponge city through a centrally funded national programme in China.

## 5. Spatial form and proximity-related buzzwords

This third group of buzzwords includes the compact city, the walkable city, transit-oriented development (TOD), the 15-minute city and the 20-minute neighbourhood. What ties them together is density, mixed land use and close proximity to services and public transportation (Hill *et al.*, 2024; Banister, 2008; Geurs and van Wee, 2004). Compared with the technological and climate vocabularies in the previous sections, these terms point to either a recognisable pre-existing urban form, or to a simple empirical rule like a walking distance or a population density. Experts, decision-makers and citizens can all use these terms without much translation overhead (Pozoukidou and Chatziyiannaki, 2021; Honey-Rosés *et al.*, 2020).

The compact city is the oldest term in the group, going back to early-1990s European planning debates (Jenks *et al.*, 1996; Burton, 2000; Williams *et al.*, 2000). Spatial concentration is the organising idea: higher densities, mixed uses, shorter trips, viable public transport, less greenfield development. The compact city has received its

own share of critique, especially regarding the environmental trade-offs and its effectiveness in eliminating car dependency (Neuman, 2005; Banister, 2008).

The walkable city narrows the focus to pedestrians (Banister, 2008; Palència *et al.*, 2020). Streets get reorganised around short distances, low traffic speeds and a mix of uses, on the assumption that walking will replace short car trips. Walkability interventions tend to land in central, already advantaged or tourist-facing districts and the wider effects on metropolitan segregation are difficult to detect. Barcelona's superblock programme is the case usually cited. The Poblenou superblock pilot opened in 2016 and the redesign delivered cleaner air, less noise and more pedestrian space inside the intervention areas. It also coincided with rising rents and short-term rental pressure in the same neighbourhoods, in a city where affordable housing was already an issue (García-López *et al.*, 2020).

TOD brings back together land-use planning and transport planning which were separated for most of the twentieth century (Calthorpe, 1993; Bertolini, 1999). TOD is often presented as a low-conflict win for both mobility and densification, but comparative reviews keep finding the same pattern: land values around stations rise, lower-income residents are gradually priced out and the redistribution that the policy was supposed to enable does not happen on its own (Curtis *et al.*, 2009; Geurs and van Wee, 2004). Critiques stress that TOD tends to reproduce the inequality it claims to address unless it's co-developed along with affordable housing policies (Banister, 2008).

The 15-minute city and the 20-minute neighbourhood have both been interpreted as a re-formulation of Clarence Perry's 1929 neighbourhood unit, updated to contemporary mobility patterns and focusing on temporal rather than spatial thresholds (Moreno *et al.*, 2021; Allam *et al.*, 2021; Pozoukidou and Chatziyiannaki, 2021; Pozoukidou and Angelidou, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic, with its social distancing, remote working and the temporary collapse of mass transit, rattled the foundations of the compact city (Batty, 2020). The 15-minute city offered a way to keep the compactness argument alive by reframing it as a problem of accessibility to essential services and everyday needs (Moreno *et al.*, 2021; Allam *et al.*, 2021).

## 6. Economic development and innovation-related buzzwords

The economic vocabulary of urban planning shifted in the late 1990s. As the de-industrialisation of the global North and competition for mobile capital became the operating condition of urban governance, a new family of labels arrived to make sense of it (Landry, 2012; Carrillo, 2004; Florida, 2002). Creative city, knowledge city, entrepreneurial city and innovation district are terms that treat urban space as an economic asset and planning as a mechanism to grow it (Harvey, 1989; Landry, 2012; Carrillo, 2006; Katz and Wagner, 2014).

The entrepreneurial city is the oldest of these and the one with the strongest academic roots. Harvey introduced it in 1989 as a diagnostic term, not a policy proposal. The argument was that urban governance had moved away from the postwar managerial mode (delivering services, redistributing resources) toward an entrepreneurial mode focused on growth, public-private partnerships and privatisations (Harvey, 1989; Jessop and Sum, 2000). Cities had started behaving and competing like companies. The term has not really left urban geography and even in planning it is chiefly used as an analytical lens and rarely as a policy or a plan.

The creative city and the knowledge city work differently. They are policy visions, not critical analytical lenses. Charles Landry's *The Creative City* (2000) and Richard Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002) gave urban administrations a vocabulary for repositioning around cultural production, knowledge work and the supposed location preferences of educated mobile professionals (Landry, 2012; Florida, 2002; Carrillo, 2006). Both terms spread with the help of city rankings, "best practices", consultancy reports and conference circuits. However, there was an under-specification of planning instruments related to these aspirations. A city could declare itself creative or knowledge-based without changing its zoning, its capital budget or its regulatory framework, and many did (Landry, 2012; Katz and Wagner, 2014). The branding was the policy.

The innovation district is the most recent and the most spatially specific. The term was popularised by a Washington think tank report (Katz and Wagner, 2014) and it refers to geographically clustered research institutions, start-ups and technology firms. The typical settings are recognisable: a university campus, a brownfield retrofitted for startups, or a greyfield converted to a tech-and-research orientation. The framing combines economic development objectives with the kind of urban qualities the proximity tradition has always cared about, namely density, walkability, mixed use and connectivity (Katz and Wagner, 2014; Centre for London, 2016). In this sense the innovation district is a hybrid. It pulls a New Urbanist physical template into the service of a knowledge-economy growth strategy.

It is worth noting that all four rest on assumptions about what generates urban prosperity and have received significant critique. The creative-class thesis has been criticised for increasing gentrification in the cities that adopted it (Peck, 2005; Comunian, 2010; Pratt, 2011). The entrepreneurial-city diagnosis has been criticised for over-generalising from a small set of Anglo-American cases (MacLeod, 2002). The innovation-district model is still too recent for a settled assessment, although early evaluations flag definitional ambiguity, uncertain economic effects (Drucker and Kayanan, 2023) and displacement pressures on adjacent neighbourhoods (Zandiatashbar and Kayanan, 2020).

## 7. Governance and justice-related buzzwords

Terms such as inclusive city, just city and participatory city are often used to address equity in governance, social justice and participation in urban planning (Healey, 1997;

Miraftab, 2009; Purcell, 2006). They appear most often in academic papers, international organisation reports, advocacy and policy programmes (Harvey, 2008; Brenner *et al.*, 2012; UN-Habitat, 2016). This family of buzzwords is primarily concerned with how goods are distributed and what interests are represented in formal planning processes (Davoudi, 2012; Fainstein, 2014).

The just city rejects economic growth for the sake of growth and focuses instead on equity and diversity (Fainstein, 2010; Marcuse *et al.*, 2009). It is invoked to assess whether planning decisions equally redistribute resources and mitigate inequalities and to expand the political rights and voice of disadvantaged groups (Fainstein, 2010; Soja, 2010). In planning debates, the just city works as a critical lens to judge plans and institutions often without specifying a certain urban configuration (Marcuse *et al.*, 2009; Fainstein, 2014). References to the just city in formal plans or policy documents tend to signal an ethical orientation rather than concrete procedures for implementation (Campbell, 2006; Fainstein, 2014).

UN-Habitat and the World Bank advance the inclusive city as a policy framework centred on equal access to services, goods and governance (UN-Habitat, 2010; World Bank, 2013). The "inclusive city" focuses on removing the barriers preventing different social groups from participating in economic, social and civic life. It focuses on expanding access across housing, mobility, public space and service provision (UN-Habitat, 2016). Plans and strategies frequently invoke "inclusion" as a guiding principle, yet they provide limited specification of how inclusiveness is to be realised (Miraftab, 2009; Campbell, 2006).

Finally, the participatory city provides a vision of urbanism in which residents are systematically involved in shaping decisions about the places they live and work in (Arnstein, 1969; Fung, 2006). The participatory city supports the notion that residents, such as tenants or even squatters, have legitimate claims over their neighbourhoods irrespective of property ownership status. Additionally, residents often have first-hand experience of the places they live in, hence community participation and co-design result in a more effective outcome as well (Healey, 1997; Cornwall, 2008).

The participatory city is advanced by networks of activists, NGOs, community groups and sympathetic officials who experiment with tools such as participatory decision-making, neighbourhood forums and co-design processes (Ostrom, 1996; Fung, 2006; Miraftab, 2009). These initiatives address democratic deficits in conventional planning processes and promote active citizenship (Arnstein, 1969; Swyngedouw, 2005; Zakhour, 2020). Within this framework, participation has become the primary language through which urban policy negotiates community empowerment and manages conflict (Cornwall, 2008).

Arnstein's (1969) "ladder of citizen participation" distinguished between genuine citizen power, tokenism and non-participation. Cardullo and Kitchin (2018) examined Dublin's smart-city programme and found that much of what is presented as participation amounts to information-giving and consultation rather than substantive citizen power. Similar patterns have been documented in corporate stakeholder engagement, where broader participation can be associated with increased symbolic compliance rather than substantive change (Hu *et al.*, 2026). It can be assumed that the participatory city inherits a structural tension between its ambition and the institutional capacity required to make participation consequential.

Comparative reviews of urban governance suggest that similar terminology, when transposed across jurisdictions, can yield different outcomes depending on administrative capacity and political traditions (da Cruz *et al.*, 2018). The inclusive city and the participatory city do not specify a uniform institutional template. Yet they provide a vocabulary that local actors adapt to existing structures, with consequences for implementation that are highly context dependent.

## 8. Discussion

The previous sections show that urban buzzwords create a multi-layered planning vocabulary as older concepts are not displaced by new ones but instead overlap and co-exist. Propagation and persistence are driven less by intrinsic novelty than by adaptability. Open-ended buzzwords accommodate disparate agendas across technology, environmental sustainability, spatial design, economic strategy and governance. Thus, they remain relevant across contexts without demanding precise consensus. Actors with divergent priorities deploy the same terminology while attaching different meanings to it. Ambiguity, in this respect, functions as a property that enables circulation across segmented governance structures and even conflicting interests.

This clustering pattern is also visible bibliometrically. Both De Jong *et al.* (2015) and Schraven *et al.* (2021) demonstrate that urban labels cluster rather than substitute. Parallels can be drawn between Schraven *et al.*'s "eco-cluster", "techno-cluster", "socio-cluster" and the five families presented here. The additional families, namely spatial form and proximity, and economic development and innovation, extend the picture to include design-based and economic vocabularies that prior bibliometric analyses tend to underweight.

A recurring pattern across the buzzwords examined is the limited connection between terminology adoption and shifts in planning practice. Buzzwords rebrand already existing ideas such as inequality, accessibility or environmental impact, in terms that appear better aligned with current policy priorities, technologies or public expectations. By doing so, they attract the attention of experts and decision-makers to both new and already existing planning principles that are presented as urgent.

Whether a term then translates into established planning activities depends on external considerations, namely sustained political commitment, institutional capacity, regulatory coherence and accessible resources. The appearance of a buzzword in formal plans, without the

institutional scaffold required to implement it, is likely a poor predictor of outcomes on its own.

The recurring patterns observed in the previous sections can be interpreted as a five-stage lifecycle of urban planning buzzwords (**Figure 1**): conceptual (re-)framing, coalition building, diffusion and testing, institutional adoption, and critique and saturation. Two cross-cutting properties shape its progression: *semantic openness* sustains broad uptake during the propagation stages of coalition building and diffusion, when buzzwords function as coordination devices rather than prescriptive blueprints. *Institutional domestication* then progressively narrows ambitious interpretations to fit established planning structures and the power configurations they embed (Flyvbjerg, 1998; Yiftachel, 2009). Where buzzwords carry conflicting agendas, the interpretations tend to align with prevailing distributions of political and economic influence. Their visionary or normative content tends to be diluted in this process, while the technical, procedural or design components are more readily absorbed into established practice. Domestication, in this sense, can also function as a process of *depoliticisation*.

Different stages of the cycle align with the coordination needs of distinct constituencies. Technology vendors, consultancies and international organisations are more visible in the propagation stages of diffusion and testing, while critical scholars dominate the critique and saturation stage. Adoption, by contrast, is mediated by a more dispersed mix of administrative, regulatory and funding actors that the cases examined here do not consistently trace.

The lifecycle proposed here is consistent with the stages identified by Schraven *et al.* (2021): infant, growth and mature stages. While their analysis describes trajectories empirically, the model offered here identifies the discursive mechanisms that shape why labels follow such trajectories in the first place.

Whether the proliferation of buzzwords over the past two decades will produce saturation or fatigue remains unclear. The question has not been systematically examined and the empirical picture is thin. There is limited understanding of how repeated rebranding affects credibility and uptake, or of when terminology loses its ability to coordinate action across different actors.

A similar pattern has been described outside urban planning. Corporate sustainability disclosures are now routinely scored by environmental, social and governance (ESG) rating agencies, yet the scores produced by different agencies for the same firm often diverge sharply. This gap has been explored by recent work on *carbon greenwashing* (Zhong *et al.*, 2025) and *investor-led activism* (Hu *et al.*, 2026). The lesson can be transferred to urban planning. Once a term's credibility is in doubt, its appearance in plans, reports and strategies functions as a marker of alignment with prevailing rhetoric, with limited bearing on the practices pursued.

This gap suggests a reorientation of research priorities. Rather than refining definitions of emerging concepts, the more pressing task is to examine how their adoption reshapes attention, legitimacy and funding within planning systems, and how trust in planning vocabularies is built, eroded and signalled across different audiences.

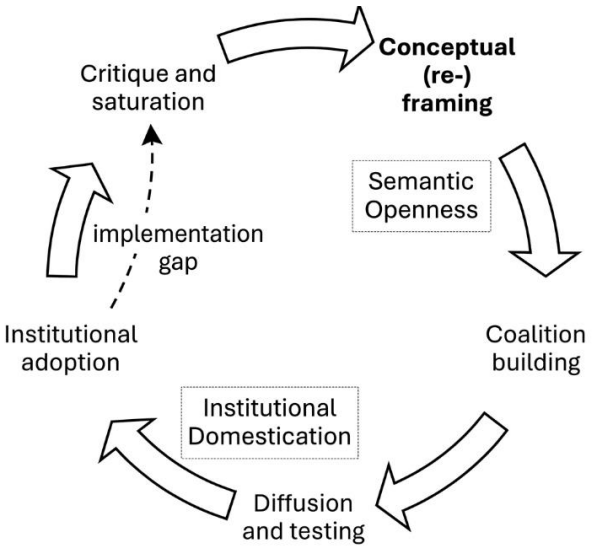



**Figure 1.** The urban buzzword lifecycle.

## 9. Conclusions

This article has argued that urban planning buzzwords can be understood through a five-stage lifecycle that starts and ends at conceptual (re-)framing. Two cross-cutting properties appear to shape its progression: semantic openness during propagation, and institutional domestication during adoption. Semantic openness sustains broad uptake by allowing diverse stakeholders to converge on a shared term without prior agreement on its content. At these stages buzzwords function as coordination devices rather than prescriptive blueprints. Institutional domestication then narrows ambitious interpretations to fit established planning structures and the power dynamics they embed (Flyvbjerg, 1998; Yiftachel, 2009). The two properties may help account for the rapid expansion of the urban planning vocabulary since the early 2000s.

The cycle is not politically neutral. Successive waves of vocabulary may shift attention, visibility, legitimacy and funding without addressing the institutional structures and power configurations they appear to challenge. Whether this pattern persists indefinitely, or eventually produces audience fatigue and credibility loss, remains an open empirical question. Either way, the productive direction for future research lies in tracing how the appearance of new terms reshapes the distribution of attention and authority in planning systems whose institutional arrangements predate them.

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## Appendix A.

**Table A.1** Key references by Table 1 category.

| Theme | Term | Key references |
|---|---|---|
| Technology and data | Smart city | Hollands 2008; Söderström *et al.* 2014; Albino *et al.* 2015; Kitchin 2014; Wiig 2016; Cowley *et al.* 2018; Batty 2012 |
| | Data-driven city | Kitchin 2014; Batty 2013; Thakuriah *et al.* 2017; Goodchild 2022 |
| | Platform city | Morozov and Bria 2018; Barns 2020; Caprotti *et al.*, 2022 |
| | Digital twin city | Tao *et al.* 2019; Dembski *et al.* 2020; Batty 2020; Lehtola *et al.* 2022 |
| | AI city | Allam and Dhunny 2019; Cugurullo 2021; Veloso *et al.* 2024 |
| Climate and sustainability | Low-carbon city | Bulkeley and Betsill 2003; Bulkeley *et al.* 2010; Acuto 2013 |
| | Resilient city | Folke 2006; Davoudi 2012; Meerow *et al.* 2016; Meerow and Newell 2016; Elmqvist *et al.* 2018 |
| | Net-zero city | Bulkeley *et al.* 2014; Hölscher *et al.* 2018 |
| | Circular city | Girardet 1992; Kennedy *et al.* 2007; European Commission 2015; Prendeville *et al.* 2017; Jensen and Remmen 2017 |
| | Eco-city | Register 1987; Roseland 1997; Beatley 2000; Jabareen 2006 |
| | Water - sensitive city | Wong 2006; Brown *et al.* 2009; Fletcher *et al.* 2015 |
| | Sponge city | Jia *et al.* 2017 |
| Spatial form and proximity | Compact city | Jenks *et al.* 1996; Burton 2000; Williams *et al.* 2000; Banister 2008; Neuman 2005 |
| | Transit-oriented development | Calthorpe 1993; Bertolini 1999; Curtis *et al.* 2009 |
| | Walkable city | Banister 2008; Palència *et al.*, 2020; García-López *et al.* 2020 |
| | 20-minute neighbourhood / 15-minute city | Moreno 2019; Moreno *et al.* 2021; Allam and Moreno 2021; Pozoukidou and Chatziyiannaki 2021; Hill *et al.* 2024 |
| Economic development and innovation | Creative city | Florida 2002; Landry 2012 |
| | Knowledge city | Carrillo 2004; Carrillo 2006 |
| | Entrepreneurial city | Harvey 1989; Jessop and Sum 2000 |
| | Innovation district | Katz and Wagner 2014; Centre for London 2016 |
| Governance and justice | Inclusive city | UN-Habitat 2010; UN-Habitat 2016; World Bank 2013 |
| | Just city | Marcuse *et al.* 2009; Fainstein 2010; Soja 2010; Fainstein 2014; Campbell 2006 |
| | Participatory city | Arnstein 1969; Healey 1997; Fung 2006; Cornwall 2008; Miraftab 2009; Cardullo and Kitchin 2018 |

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