Re-imagining the future: city region foresight and visioning in an era of fragmented governance

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Editorial

Abstract

In this editorial we explore how the concept of the city region has evolved and what questions this raises for the role of urban futures, including visioning and foresight. The editorial and Special Issue highlights the importance of foresight techniques in city region visioning, how power relations are shaped and transformed by these processes, and how important it is to link city regional foresight with transitions theory and urban innovation, alongside the climate change and sustainability agendas. This paper also addresses the application of city region visioning in the global north/global south, and what this means for future research.

Keywords: city region; urban futures; foresight; transitions theory; regional studies; city visions

CONTACT

Timothy J. Dixon (Corresponding author) t.j.dixon@reading.ac.uk (School of the Built Environment, University of Reading)

Geci Karuri-Sebina geci.karuri-sebina@wits.ac.za (School of Governance, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg)

Joe Ravetz joe.ravetz@manchester.ac.uk (Manchester Urban Institute, School of Environment Education & Development, Manchester University)

Mark Tewdwr-Jones m.tewdwr-jones@ucl.ac.uk (Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis, UCL)

1.0 Introduction

The contribution that city regions have previously made to productivity growth in the OECD is well-evidenced, as is the role of metropolitan governance, which has become increasingly important in what has been referred to as the 'metropolitan century' (Katz and Bradley, 2013; OECD, 2015; Ahrend et al, 2017; Maclennan et al 2020). The emergence of city regions as a focus for devolution and federalism in Europe and North America is also evidenced in this previous research, as is the important role of the city region in economic development and governance structures in other parts of the world, including Asia, Latin America and Africa (Yeh and Chen, 2020; Watson, 2021; Mabin and Harrison, 2022), and this raises important questions for the way in which planners, decision-makers and other market-based actors view the future at this scale (Harrison et al, 2021; 2022)

In an era of fragmented, multi-level governance systems, short-term politics, and the lack of strategic spatial intelligence in shaping the prospects for the future of places, there is a growing need for coherent long-term direction for city regions. Growing austerity, emerging growth-agendas, neo-liberalism, and

the rise of populism have also seen a movement away from formal state-led strategic and sub-regional planning tools towards more flexible and informal alliances for longer-term planning and visioning (Etherington and Jones, 2018; Harrison et al, 2021). Today, more than ever, therefore, with continuing climate change risks, the emergence of the global COVID-19 pandemic crisis, and socio-economic uncertainties also dominating urban agendas, decision-makers in city regions (and cities) are under pressure to think and plan for the longer term (i.e. at least 15-20 years) beyond simply short-term horizons (Dixon and Tewdwr-Jones, 2021; Ravetz, 2020). Moreover, the fragmented nature of governance and planning systems and often inadequate urban economic infrastructure, presents key challenges for the city regional scale (Galland and Harrison, 2019)

In the wider context of the apparent 'death' of 'old style' regional planning and its re-constitution to address space-specific needs (Harrison et al, 2021), there is a growing need therefore to provide a critical reflection on urban and regional futures in theory and practice, drawing on, for example, futures studies and methods (Karuri-Sebina, 2020). Some critical questions here include: How can city region foresight and visioning capabilities and techniques be developed and used within or alongside existing governance frameworks, by a range of public and private actors?

Foresight and visioning here includes a wide range of future studies, scenario planning, horizon scanning, transition management, community visioning, anticipatory policy intelligence, road-mapping and similar techniques (Goodspeed, 2020; Ravetz, 2020; Dixon and Tewdwr-Jones, 2021). The common features of these include: (i) longer time horizons; (ii) wider communities of stakeholders; and (iii) deeper layers of systems change, than can be addressed by mainstream functional planning. Typically, the use of these techniques can underpin new forms of strategic 'quasi-planning' (or visioning) for governance agencies yet, at the same time, may usurp existing planning or governance regimes, often through the development of what is termed 'adaptive' or 'agile' planning (Tewdwr-Jones and Galland, 2019).

Coming at a time when uncertainties and risks associated with economic, socio-spatial and socio-environmental are heightened (Galland et al, 2020; Harrison et al, 2021; Dixon and Tewdwr-Jones, 2021), this special issue explores, at a city regional scale (which includes cities within their regional context), how foresight, futures and visioning studies are being used to develop new 'spatial imaginaries' and how strategic planning might be redefined for both shorter and longer horizons. The critical questions here include: who initiates and controls city region foresight, futures, and visioning? To what extent are these techniques embedded within existing formal and democratic forms of sub-regional government, or do they work better in alternative models of 'adaptive' or 'agile' planning? How are established methods of futures / foresight studies being used in practice? How might mainstream regional strategic planning and decision-making respond and learn from the city region

foresight and visioning? What areas of interest might be excluded or overlooked in 'mainstream' city regional foresight or visioning exercises?

In this editorial, before we turn in more detail to the emerging cross-cutting issues from the papers in the special issue and draw wider conclusions,we focus on the city regional scale and its role in visioning and foresight.

2.0 The role of the 'city region' in 'urban futures' studies

The concept of the 'city region', which broadly highlights the interrelationships between a city and its environs (Davoudi, 2009) has a long history and tradition in UK, European and North American spatial planning stretching back to Patrick Geddes (1915) and Lewis Mumford (1924) (Watson, 2018). Moreover, as Davoudi (2009) suggests, since the 1990s, although the city region lacks a unified definition, there has been a resurgence in city region thinking and practical application in both the academic and policy communities. The attraction of the city region scale lies in its potential to focus not on physical structures of cities per se, but rather on the relational dynamics of social networks and urban functions which spill over boundaries – in this sense the focus on city region scale recognises not only the 'under-bounded' nature of many 'administratively-bound' urban areas but also the 'functional reality' of integrated economic, political and social relations within and across a city and its hinterland (Healey, 2009; Watson, 2018).

The importance of a city region (or metropolitan) focus, with its 'territorial' nature, has also been highlighted internationally by such organisations as UN-Habitat and OECD, particularly as it is seen that cities can play a major role in helping their wider functional economic areas move to a more resilient and sustainable future post COVID-19 (UN-Habitat, 2021; OECD, 2020). This has been re-enforced through SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and the new urban agenda (Habitat III), which also focus strongly on the city region (UN-Habitat, 2020).

Despite this, as Watson (2018) suggests, there has been previous criticism from those who argue that, for example, increased globalisation in a 'post-national' age, has created flux and disruption to the 'city region' concept so that the new global economy can override and usurp the concept of fixed and bounded city regions which might once have been considered to be potentially pliable to top-down planning and intervention (Storper, 1997; Allen and Cochrane, 2007). Importantly though, there are others who have argued more recently, in the late 2000s, that the city region concept is very much alive, and that economic networks and relationships, and the concept of state-determined and functionally bounded city region are best understood in terms of its local characteristics (Jessop et al, 2008). In this sense, there is a need to recognise the unique characteristics of cities and city regions, or the 'eigenart' of a place (or places), which also underpins the very essence of a 'spatial imaginary' (GACGC, 2016; Dixon and Tewdwr-Jones, 2021).

This also has ramifications for the way in which the city region concept is applied to the global south, where devolved powers of governance are much rarer and where the concept may have much less practical relevance (Watson, 2019). Furthermore, as Galland and Harrison (2019) point out, the term city region is often used interchangeably with 'metropolitan region' and the fluidity of different approaches or perspectives to the concept determines the result of *'what'* a city region (or metropolitan region) means in practice and *'where'* it is designated.

Yet the concept of the city region is also highly relevant to what can be described as 'urban futures' thinking, drawing on a strong tradition of 'visionary planning' stretching back to the 'thought experiments' of Howard and Le Corbusier. This invites us to imagine what cities and urban areas will be like in the long-term (beyond 20 years), how they will operate, what infrastructure and governance systems will underpin and co-ordinate them and how they are best shaped and influenced by their primary stakeholders (civil society, governments, businesses and investors, academia, and others) (Dixon and Tewdwr-Jones, 2021). Practical planning-led examples of this approach at city level emerged during the 1980s and 1990s particularly in the USA, but since the 2000s we have seen the development of more formal visioning processes (or what might be termed 'city foresight' methods) in cities and urban areas covering cities from North America and the UK. Here 'city foresight'[1] refers to the formal techniques of foresight which can be used to create a city vision or a shared and desirable future for that place, and a primary example of this is the UK Government Office of Foresight Future of Cities Programme (2013-2016) which was founded on the science of thinking about the future of cities. Similar programmes were also developed in other countries and wider areas including Norway, Saudi Arabia, and continental Africa (Karuri-Sebina et al, 2016; Dixon and Tewdwr-Jones, 2021).

But what of the city region in this broader field of 'urban futures' studies? A recent overview and co-citation analysis of emerging regional foresight studies (the application of foresight methods to territorial issues where proximity factors are critical) (Amini et al, 2021) offers an insight into some of the key themes from a group of 111 papers published between 2000 and 2019 (mainly in Europe and with a strong focus on tools/methods), predominantly in such journals as *Futures*, *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, and the *European Journal of Futures Research*. The analysis found five main clusters of significance in the intellectual base which comprised: (i) the role of normative forecasting in the vision development process; (ii) the importance of participation from key stakeholders; (iii) the use of foresight methods to underpin strategic management and policy-making; (iv) the interrelationship between innovations systems and regional foresight; and (v) the role of multi-

[1] Foresight more generally can be thought of as the discipline of exploring, anticipating, and shaping the future, which helps build and use collective intelligence in a structured and systematic way to anticipate developments and better prepare for change (EC, 2020).

level governance in regional foresight. Building on this analysis, in the next section, we highlight the important and critical cross-cutting issues emerging from the papers in this special issue

3.0 Critical issues in city regional visioning

3.1 Using foresight methods for city region visioning

Shipley and Michela (2006) suggest that the origins of visionary planning lie in the management literature of the 1970s to 1990s which led to seminal works on visioning in North American planning such as *A Guide to Community Visioning* (Green et al, 2000) and the *Community Visioning and Strategic Planning Handbook* (National Civic League, 2000). In the developing world the promotion of city development strategies (CDSs), and their accompanying toolkits, which placed the development of a city vision centre-stage) also helped drive vision-making (Robinson, 2008; Cities Alliance, 2017). More recently we have seen during the 2000s and 2010s a strong focus on sustainability within city (and city region) visions in both Europe and the Rest of the World – for example Bristol, Copenhagen, and Sydney (Dixon et al, 2018; Dixon and Tewdwr-Jones, 2021). Often such visions, which may also have a strategic spatial planning element (for example, Hong Kong, Johannesburg, Nairobi and Sydney), have been driven by increasing competition between cities and the need for partnership and co-operation in a world of fragmented governance, alongside the growing impact of climate change and resource depletion (see also Kellokumpu, 2022; Mikula, 2022 - this issue)).

Where more formal foresight-based techniques have been used in UK cities the outcomes have been promising (GOfS, 2016; Dixon and Tewdwr-Jones, 2021; Ravetz and Miles, 2016, but have been relatively rare - in a survey of 225 cities and 400 sustainability initiatives, for example, only 8.5% (34) used foresight methods, mainly in a housing and land use context (Castan Broto et al, 2019). Although the same might also be said of the city regional scale (Amini et al, 2021), as this special issue shows, there are emerging and innovative uses of foresight methods within this sphere. Mantysalo et al (2022, this issue) shows for example, how an explorative scenario-based framework was applied to the Helsinki Metropolitan Area for strategic land use planning using different modes of knowing—that is, ‘explanation’; ‘narration’; ‘argumentation’ and ‘instrumentalization’.

The application of foresight /futures into the complexities of city-region policymaking also highlights some typical contradictions of hegemonic power. For instance, in the Manchester city-region (Ravetz and Miles 2016), the ‘visions’ from an apparently open foresight process were closely managed, overtly radical groups were uninvited, and any direct implications were parked for sensitive policy questions, such as that of greenfield / brownfield development. Meanwhile the aspirations of official policy for a *‘sustainable, prosperous, inclusive’* city-region continued, with little time for discussion of the reality of *‘polluting, declining, divisive’,* or the counter-narrative of systemic change.

Ultimately, as Mikula (2022-this issue) argues, city regions are perhaps best thought of as occupying the 'soft space' between neighbourhoods and mega-regions; in other words, as soft spaces of spatial planning and governance, where more 'informal' visions (for example a strategic spatial strategy but one that is not founded on foresight techniques) based on 'spatial imaginaries' have predominated. This is an important issue to consider especially in countries of central eastern Europe where the city region is a relatively weaker concept- in these instances more informal voluntary and 'bottom-up' approaches to vision building can still work, although as Mikula suggests, the coalitions of co-production may be uneasy.

Furthermore, as Ravetz and Miles (2016) suggested, planning in cities and city regions should try to maximise 'urban intelligence' to improve decision-making and facilitate foresight-based methods to visioning. In a related vein, Perry (2022-this issue) defines intelligence as being *'…not only about what is known but the relationship between knowledge, capability and capacity to act'*, and Kitagawa and Vidmar (2022-this issue) draws on this concept to highlight the role of 'strategic intelligence' tools which can help shape strategic visions for places. Kitagawa and Vidmar's paper uses a novel foresight-based 'opportunity areas analysis tool (OAAT)' to help develop and better understand place-based industrial strategy in a Scottish city region.

3.2 Participation of stakeholders in the co-production of visions

Previous research in the application of foresight and visioning techniques to cities has often referred to the 'quadruple helix' (QH) model which emerged from a European Commission policy focus on civic engagement and open innovation (Dixon and Tewdwr-Jones, 2021). This sees four main stakeholder groups (civil society, government, business, and academia) as being important in the co-production of visions. In the special issue the QH model (and its interpretation in particular contexts) is referenced directly by Kitagawa and Vidmar (2022) and Mikula (2022).

However, at face value, although the QH model might appear to treat the four groups as having an equivalent impact on outcomes this may well not be the reality. Indeed, for Perry (2022) conventional co-production processes for city regions poses three main challenges for city regional intelligence: 'epistemic', 'procedural' and 'distributive', for which numerous responses have been developed including 'labs', 'hubs' and 'platforms'. In a case study of MISTRA Urban Futures (Manchester and Cape Town) the same author also highlights how some stakeholders such as academic researchers can enhance boundary crossings between civil society and policy officials who might otherwise be disconnected. This is operationalised through strategies of intermediation on the one hand which open up policy processes about a parallel process that can be also used to question, debate and unsettle existing logics in what is described as the 'tactics of unsettling'. This is part of the broader question of whose knowledge and whose power matters more in city regional visioning and its outcomes because

knowledge co-production is not 'value-free' (see also Mikula (2022) and Mantysalo et al (2022) for example in this issue).

It is certainly true, however, that the fragmented nature of governance and the withdrawal of state intervention in planning has created opportunities for softer approaches and for other groups such as the private sector and academia to play their part. This is at the heart of what is referred to as 'depoliticisation', which implies a new regime brought about by the 'destatisation' of a series of former state domains and the transfer of responsibilities to, for example, civil society organisations, and also towards a more 'market-oriented' approach. As Etherington and Jones (2018) suggest, this has important ramifications for the 'post-political' city region. These ideas are developed further (perhaps rarely in *Regional Studies*) by Kellokumpu (2022-this issue), who, in the context of Oulu City Centre Vision, argues that depoliticisation does not automatically lead to the closure of politics from public debate and public demands, but rather can produce a more nuanced limitation of discourses and privileging of individual actors in vision development. *'Whose city region vision?'* therefore remains a pertinent question.

3.3 Linking city regional foresight, transitions theory and urban innovation

In previous research and academic literature, with a few notable exceptions, there has been little attempt to link foresight methods with transitions theory and urban innovation at a city or city regional scale. Three exceptions to this were the Retrofit 2050 (UK), VP2040 (Australia) and MUSIC (EU) programmes, each of which took a different focus, but which also drew on transition theory and transition management to develop visions at city and/or city regional scale (Dixon and Tewdwr-Jones, 2021). Seminal to this thinking was transition theory which recognises that wicked urban problems (Rittel and Webber, 1973) can only be resolved through a major restructuring of existing systems. This was founded on the concept of a multi-level perspective (MLP), which helped frame understandings of the multi-scale socio-technical transition pathways for innovations (for example, to achieve a sustainable city region future), in terms of 'landscape' (the overall societal setting for the innovation), 'regime' (the dominant culture, structures and practices in place) and 'niche' (where radical experimentation and innovation happens) (Geels, 2010; Rip and Kemp, 1998).

The MLP approach (linked to systems thinking), also highlights the essential ambiguity at the centre of the city-region foresight agenda: what is the 'entity' and 'agency' of the city-region in a spatially defined area where there may be multiple interests and domains? Whether formal, quasi formal or informal, the city-region entity and agency is typically in a contested and vulnerable position, caught between global forces, national states, local districts and other cross-cutting territories: all of which may interact in unpredictable ways. In that sense successful foresight / visioning processes are not only building the '*collective strategic intelligence'* of their city-region (however it may be defined), but more

so, building the actual entity, reason for being, identity and mandate of that city-region unit. This is potentially a significant reframing – from a 'foresight as information', to a 'foresight as validation' which may be deeply politicized and contested. The special role of foresight might then be to highlight the internal opportunities and synergies between different parts of a quadruple / 'multi-helix' system.

As Frantzeskaki et al (2018) point out, transition management is primarily concerned with the dynamics of structural change and how and when such transformation can be initiated developed and shaped. In this sense it is a 'governance niche' characterised by long term visioning and leading to the promotion of bottom-up processes experiments and innovative projects (Wolfram, 2018). Although subject to a degree of criticism from some quarters particularly in relation to power relations and the often-narrow focus of desired transitions (see Loorbach et al, 2016), the frameworks do offer potential at city and city regional scale. In this special issue for example, Kitagawa and Vidmar (2022) shows how the starting point for the OAAT approach draws on the MLP framework: this encompasses 'trends', which constitute macro-level changes in 'landscape'; 'capabilities', which correspond to the interrelationship of actors and their agency in the meso-level 'regimes; and 'capacities', which represent 'technological niches' of innovative new solutions.

3.4 The growing importance of the sustainability, resilience, and climate change agendas

As we saw earlier city regional visioning must today be seen against the increasingly important context of urban sustainability, resilience, and climate change impacts. Many cities have pursued a vision which frontends sustainability as a future goal, and this is often at the heart of city regional envisioning as well (Ravetz et al, 2020). Similarly, cities and city regions which aspire to be resilient are those seeking to survive and bounce back from socio-economic and socio-environmental shocks—in this sense resilience 'operationalises' sustainable development. The broader canvas of climate change and the moves of many cities and city regions to net zero targets by 2030 and beyond is also an important backdrop to city region envisioning. For example, by 2022 there were climate emergency declarations in 2094 jurisdictions globally covering more than 1 billion people (Climate Emergency Declaration, 2022) although recent research shows that many city authorities still lack formal plans and strategies for action (for example, in relation to the UK - Bawden, 2022).

Pitidis et al (2022-this issue) shows how 'resilience imaginaries' can be co-produced by interweaving resilience narratives with established socio-spatial imaginaries. The study was based in Thessaloniki Greece) which is a member of the Rockefeller 100 Resilient Cities network. The resilience imaginary was shaped in the period 2014-2019 and helped influence the mobilisation of financial and human resources to support its realisation and to promote its development. This type of imaginary was used to develop a socio-spatial imaginary, and to promote the city region's image as a resilient city, but as with other imaginaries, remains political in nature and often contested and heavily influenced by 'chief

imagineers' who may have greater influence than civil society. In this sense imaginaries and visions are often best described as 'co-produced' rather than 'co-created' (Dixon and Tewdwr-Jones, 2021).

In the special issue it is also interesting to highlight Sheikh et al's paper (2022-this issue), which focuses on two different framings for ecological futures in Australia (*Atlas of Living Australia* and *Greenprints*). Sheikh et al argue for a much greater recognition for a bioregional approach to city regions which adopts a 'more than human' view of city regional foresight, and also incorporates a strong focus on indigenous people. In this re-shaped foresight, the authors argue for envisioning which is inclusive of non-human lifeforms, and which also recognises the futuring ability of non-human lifeforms and their synergistic relationship with humans, an area of focus which has been rarely, if at all, touched upon in previous work in *Regional Studies*.

3.5 The geopolitical divide in relevance and application

In the special issue it is noticeable that of the seven papers two are UK-based, two are from Finland, two are from the EU and one is from Australia. Apart from Perry (2022-this issue) who focuses on Cape Town as well as Manchester, the primary focus is on countries in the 'global north', or relatively high-income countries, rather than the 'global south', or what might be equated with low- and middle-income countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America (see, for example, Dados and Connell, 2015).

This is concerning because there is a real need to understand the issues and challenges of the city-region, where this is a relevant concept, in the global south. The recent international ESRC Urban Transformations programme which ran from 2015-2019 went some way towards addressing this deficiency by focusing on how in urban economies, new technologies, and responses to environmental change are reshaping the distribution of power, resources, and information in cities. Part of the focus of the programme was to draw international scholars and practitioners together and develop a new conceptualisation for thinking about the future of cities (and city-regions). This drew on interdisciplinary thinking and a 'systems-of-systems approach' to develop an original PEAK urban conceptual framing (Keith et al, 2020) which was based on (i) **P**rediction and projection in the city; (ii) **E**mergence, combination, material cities and complex systems; (iii) **A**dopting innovation and metropolitan commensuration; and (iv) **K**nowledge exchange and urban co production. Yet, such programmes are relatively rare, and there remains a dearth of transglobal programmes which focus on city regional futures per se.

This also raises in our minds, important questions about the special issue itself. When we first wrote the call for this special issue in 2019, we were quite careful in trying to appeal to a variety of international submissions. We also sought to encourage diversity and inclusion in the call, and, also in the ultimate selection of abstracts. Despite this, the outcome is very much a focus on the global north, which raises questions as to why this may be so. Clearly the ultimate geographic focus could be because the call itself needed to be more specific to the global south, which is something that could be addressed in

future issues of Regional Studies. Moreover, is there a tendency for us to assume concepts from the global north such as 'city regional futures' are themselves applicable to the global south when the reality and the nuances may be very different? (See, for example, Andres et al, 2019). In this context, in a recent paper (Randolph and Storper, 2022), interestingly, it is argued that the *differences* between these global areas are best understood through a *unified* set of global urban theories, while other recent evidence (Castro-Torres and Alburez-Gutierrez, 2022) shows that articles studying the global North (in a range of social sciences, including urban studies) are systematically less likely to mention the name of the country they study in their title compared to articles on the global South. Thi**s,** in Castro-Torres and Alburez-Gutierrez's view, constitutes, potentially, an unwarranted claim on 'universality' and may lead to lesser recognition of global south studies. In short, as the special issue implicitly shows, much more needs to be done to address the geospatial and disparities in knowledge and understanding of foresight and visioning to city regions in the global north and the global south, which also includes refocusing on the 'decolonisation of futures' agenda (Feukeu et al, 2021).

4.0 Conclusions – the future of city regional foresight and visioning

The papers in this special issue all make distinctive contributions to planning, city regional debates, and regional studies. They show, in their focus on strategic intelligence and long-term scenarios, how city regional futures are contestable and may be multiple in their outcomes. This also has implications for how we assess the 'quality' of the visions and their outcomes. As Wiek and Iwaniec (2014) point out, visioning is not the end of a process, it is a means to an end of a continuing and flexible, agile and adaptive process.

Ultimately, the key challenges for city regional futures map onto many of the challenges which are pertinent to city scale visions. As several of the papers in the special issue stress, the power relations of a vision are vital to consider—who is the vision for and who owns the vision? What is the role of academics as facilitators in this process and how does the quadruple helix model engender a greater understanding of how stakeholders interact and contextualise the vision as a means to an end? Secondly, the translation of vision to action is also influenced by the mode and method of city regional visioning, which in a normative sense, should be a dynamic process. After all, as Thomas Edison (1847-1931) wrote, 'Vision without implementation is hallucination'

The papers in this special issue show a richness and diversity of foresight methods and the bringing together of key stakeholders, although the issue of 'community engagement' remains a crucial element, and the purist form of vision 'co-creation' (or 'participatory-based' futures) perhaps remains a rare phenomenon. They also reveal an interesting and evolving focus on strengthening the links between city regional foresight, transitions theory and urban innovation, and the continued imperative on sustainability, resilience, and climate change agendas, both of which, because of often-fragmented governance structures within city regions is more complex and complicated than within a smaller,

predefined city-specific boundary. These nexi remain a potentially rich and transformative interdisciplinary area for further research in regional studies.

As to the future, and as we emerge from the COVID pandemic into a continuingly uncertain world it is also clear that we need to encourage more research into the role that foresight and visioning can play at city region level, and moreover, that our focus should also continue to lie in encouraging this research in a wide variety of cultural contexts, particularly the global south, that also help promote diversity and inclusion in city regional research.

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