

Article

Existential Resilience in the City

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Abstract: Severe weather continues to challenge cities worldwide. Typhoons, wildfires, floods, and extreme temperatures test urban systems, communities, and governments at all scales. To combat such effects, resilience has emerged as a term geared towards increasing their ability to address impacts, strengthen infrastructure, and deal with cleanup measures. Although this business sounds straightforward to non-philosophers, ethical and existential elements remain out of view for the sciences and require investigation. This article fleshes them out. The first step is to identify relevant stakeholder groups and competing interests. The second is discovering equitable ways to bring professionals and city dwellers together to develop proactive safeguards and recovery protocols for such tragedies. When they engage in the necessary practices, they can take responsibility for the city and find meaning in the process.

Keywords: existentialism, philosophy of the city, resilience, severe weather

Climate change challenges cities worldwide. From temperature fluctuations to extreme weather events—it is doubtful that any place is entirely exempt from such troubles. Municipal responses, even though they can help mitigate related harm, can create other problems. Not only are such outcomes avoidable, but dealing with them carefully can provide opportunities to create meaningful interactions between urban residents and municipal administrations. Such exchanges are essential for cities and city living. Examining the dynamics of those relations can show what taking responsibility for the city looks like—and it can give additional meaning to residents' lives. It involves looking at how the enmeshments of material and social technologies impact residents in several ways and realizing the possibilities, which includes choosing ones that support ethical outcomes among stakeholder groups.

For instance, cities require technologies like physical infrastructure that can reduce flood damage and prevent property loss, but they also require “tools of thought,” theoretical devices we can employ to help us think

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through the procedural aspects of managing socio-material technological arrangements. Resilience can be one such “technology” to help achieve desired outcomes. Yet, how it is built is a significant ethical issue. It can be a vital element of proactive and reactive strategies for dealing with climate change’s impacts on cities—if carried out *with* the community rather than *for* them (assuming they want to participate). This point entails that it cannot *exclusively* be a top-down directive for policy, which holds that employing resilience as a thought technology has normative elements that require examination to determine legitimacy.

Unfortunately, operations that involve urban residents working alongside city officials go against the status quo. In turn, it seems reasonable to hold that any ideas and practices that go against tradition should anticipate pushback from those benefitting from it and the subjects who accept familiarity as the pinnacle of progress. Leaders are used to leading, and the same goes for followers. However, accepting such arrangements as gospel counts as dogma, but using the “tools of the philosophic trade” can help us move beyond it. Outside of the discipline, schools of thought such as participatory planning remain on the periphery, and cities largely ignore them.¹ Wanting something more from our cities requires thinking about them in unorthodox fashions, which is why philosophy is one of the best testing grounds to explore such ideas. To that end, the term “co-planning,” short for “cooperative planning” will be fleshed out in later sections.²

This reality suggests that all germane measures must be carried out with judicious reasoning. Suppose these kinds of pursuits take guidance from recent works in the emerging philosophical literature on cities that endeavor to address these conditions. In that case, they can help safeguard cities while radically restructuring municipal-community relations. Once we address the ethical complexity of these matters, we are positioned to discuss the existential aspects of such affairs. They involve how residents and municipal agents can find meaning in the process while taking responsibility for the city in the face of disaster preparedness and clean-up efforts following tragedies. This article fleshes out these ideas, showing how we can move from theoretical dimensions to their limits, gesturing toward real-world implementation.

It begins with examining the kind of challenges of concern to gain familiarity with *some* of the climate-change issues plaguing cities. Next, it briefly looks at the numerous stakeholder groups that require ethical

¹ Lisa Nyamadzawo, “The Paradox of Participatory Planning in Urban Planning,” in *The Wagner Planner*, 9 (14 December 2020), <<https://wp.nyu.edu/wagnerplanner/2020/12/14/the-paradox-of-participatory-planning-in-urban-planning/>>.

² This notion is examined fully elsewhere. See Shane Epting, *Urban Enlightenment: Multistakeholder Engagement and the City* (New York: Routledge, 2023).

consideration, then shows how “moral ordering,” one such advancement in the philosophical literature on cities as mentioned above, can provide direction for those combatting climate-change issues in built environments.³ With this view established, it examines how we can think about resilience in ways that reveal the conditions required for the integrity of the term’s internal structure. The goal here is to see how we should think of and use the term “resilience” to safeguard cities ethically and authentically. Then, I connect these ideas to the more complex existential conditions that make pursuing this inquiry worthwhile. Lastly, I conclude by discussing the limits of this kind of thinking, which sets the stage for future work for municipal agents and urban residents who find it useful.

We should care about this topic because it examines how resilience efforts are ethical affairs emerging on our city streets and suburban cul-de-sacs. Investigating this issue can enhance how urban dwellers understand themselves in the face of severe weather. Considering that climate change’s full range of effects remains to be seen, the following notions could inform neighboring issues or assist municipalities searching for ways to make resilience efforts matter to the people who must contend with those threats and their increasing realities.

Climate Change’s Challenges

Despite having countless resemblances, cities differ in myriad ways. Accordingly, their challenges vary in scale, from the macro to the micro, and in intensity and duration. For example, most cities have electricity, but sources and delivery modes vary, along with the natural hindrances they face. We can apply this line of reasoning to mobility, housing, commerce, and countless cultural elements. Many island cities must contend with typhoons, rising temperatures, and other challenges that remain constant and evolving.⁴ Only uncertainty is certain when it comes to the totality of such events and their impacts.

However, preparation and responses could mitigate this condition, lessening its impacts on cities and their inhabitants. Consider that several cities within proximity to woodlands now view frequent fires as recurring

³ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴ William N. Holden and Shawn J. Marshall, “Climate change and typhoons in the Philippines: Extreme weather events in the Anthropocene,” in *Integrating Disaster Science and Management* (2018), 407–421, <<https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-812056-9.00024-5>>.

problems.⁵ Numerous places must deal with severe and ongoing droughts.⁶ Although the issues above are direct effects of climate change, they have several indirect consequences that further complicate efforts, adding to the burden that communities must shoulder.

For example, cities facing extreme heat during the summer months are witnessing their power grids fail due to demand for air conditioning.⁷ Enduring such conditions often puts seniors and other vulnerable groups in deadly and dangerous positions. Such tragedies are not isolated, but numerous places worldwide see deaths associated with sweltering heat yearly.⁸ Severe weather events can cause substantial loss of power for lengthy times, putting hospitals and emergency services in precarious positions.⁹ Even though budgetary adjustments might reduce felt impacts, using such funds could take away from needed community projects and necessary municipal improvements.

Other indirect impacts require additional observation, such as those that do not have an immediate physical counterpart. Consider the rising costs of home insurance.¹⁰ Even though coastal cities in hurricane zones and those dealing with wildfires account for significant damages, insurance companies also provide coverage to residents across vast territories away from those kinds of landscapes. This point suggests that residents of inland areas will also have to contend with rate increases to cover the total losses these companies face. In addition, landlocked cities remain subject to floods and tornados, meaning they will also have threats that could raise their rates.

While the above list of instances is non-exhaustive, it indicates the kind of issues of concern. Each city will also have specific problems that will

⁵ John Rennie Short and Abbey Farmer, "Cities and climate change," in *Earth*, 2:4 (November 2021), 1038–1045, <<https://doi.org/10.3390/earth2040061>>.

⁶ Jolanta Dąbrowska et al., "Between flood and drought: How cities are facing water surplus and scarcity," in *Journal of Environmental Management*, 345: 118557 (2023), <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvman.2023.118557>>.

⁷ Laura Paddison, "Heat waves are getting longer and more brutal. Here's why your AC can't save you anymore," *CNN* (4 July 2024), <<https://www.cnn.com/2024/07/04/climate/heat-waves-air-conditioning-climate/index.html>>.

⁸ Qi Zhao et al., "Global, regional, and national burden of mortality associated with non-optimal ambient temperatures from 2000 to 2019: a three-stage modelling study," in *The Lancet Planetary Health*, 5:7 (2021), e415–e425, <[https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196\(21\)00081-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196(21)00081-4)>.

⁹ Ed Lavandera, Ashley Killough and Elizabeth Wolfe, "Houston area residents struggle without power and water as excruciating heat continues," *CNN* (12 July 2024), <<https://www.cnn.com/2024/07/12/weather/houston-texas-power-outages-heat-friday/index.html>>.

¹⁰ Li Cohen, Tracy J. Wholf, Marina Jurica, "Climate change is making home insurance costs more expensive. These maps show prices and weather risks in your state," *CBS News* (17 September 2024), <<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/maps-home-insurance-costs-state-extreme-weather-risks/>>.

test infrastructures built long before climate change was a problematic reality and upgrading them to safeguard urban residents must hold steady. One preexisting condition is that past injustices linger, and many marginalized communities are still living with their ill effects. For example, the impact of Hurricane Katrina on the city of New Orleans, Louisiana, in the US fits this description rather well. Hurricane Katrina was an extremely deadly event, killing close to 1900 people and causing over 100 million USD in damages in August 2005.¹¹ Environmental justice scholars illustrate how members of the African American community there had to endure a long history of harmful treatment (to say the least) before Katrina, and the conditions associated with resilience could be seen as an extension of such treatment if distribution efforts are lopsided against them.¹² For similar cases, climate change only makes matters worse, compounding harmful conditions for such communities.

Within the notion above, there is a tension between dealing with past and present issues regarding marginalized groups—which are also situated within larger scenarios wherein they compete with other stakeholder groups' interests. Yet, decisions must be made. These kinds of issues bring the problem of moral prioritization into view.¹³ It concerns decisions that affect multiple stakeholder groups that have inherent moral dimensions, considering that whose interests receive focus, action, prioritization, and being able to have a meaningful voice is a moral issue itself. As mentioned earlier, some such groups have already been harmed, neglected, and/or disrespected.

"Moral ordering" is a theoretical device that can help us deal with this issue.¹⁴ One could argue that this approach is the most recent advancement regarding moral extensionism in the Western approach to applied philosophy. It provides a way to deal with problems confronting distinct stakeholder groups that each deserve moral consideration equitably. They can include but are not limited to marginalized groups, vulnerable persons, the public (which includes those groups), nonhumans (i.e., ecosystems and individual species), possible future people, and urban artifacts.¹⁵

¹¹ For more information, see National Weather Service, "Extremely Powerful Hurricane Katrina Leaves a Historic Mark on the Northern Gulf Coast," *National Weather Service* (last updated: September 2022), <<https://www.weather.gov/mob/katrina>>.

¹² Robert Bullard and Beverly Wright, "Introduction," in *Race, Place, and Environmental Justice after Hurricane Katrina: Struggles to Reclaim, Rebuild, and Revitalize New Orleans and the Gulf Coast*, ed. by Robert D. Bullard and Beverly Wright (New York: Routledge, 2009).

¹³ Shane Epting, *Urban Enlightenment: Multistakeholder Engagement and the City*, (New York: Routledge, 2023), 28.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

The idea is that all groups deserve moral consideration, but they should not receive it equally. For instance, most people would never want to say that an urban artifact like a streetlight deserves the same moral consideration, which could include protection, as a human infant.¹⁶ Such a situation would warrant public outcry if someone were to defend this view. This extreme hypothetical exhibits a scale or order of groups, persons, or stakeholders that deserve consideration and action above others under specific conditions.

Consider a group that was harmed regarding disaster relief preparedness. Again, thinking about the African-American population living in New Orleans and affected by Hurricane Katrina is an exemplar, considering the insights from environmental justice scholars showing that they were in a disadvantaged position.¹⁷ That case exemplifies the kind of conditions associated with a preexisting condition in disaster preparedness. In turn, when considering new ways to address preparedness in a given area, those groups require prioritization to ensure they do not remain in harm's way or add to the list of times they have been on the receiving end of inequitable planning. Despite having increased mindfulness of such situations, the idea is not that other groups deserve less attention or effort, but it makes sense that any plan or action benefiting them could do so while also taking care of preexisting conditions simultaneously.

Examining these realities exposes the preexisting conditions that must be dealt with before or while addressing current issues unless there is an urgent need that could cause greater harm. Now that it is clear that groups in these situations have "buy-in," warranting special consideration and action, we can study the pattern behind such actions to determine similar instances that require like treatment. Some other cases could include requiring extra care to live the same life as anyone else. Being vulnerable could include some elderly or disabled persons or any other scenario wherein additional insights are required to deliver fair distribution of municipal services. Although being vulnerable is not the same as being marginalized, the conditions associated with it require that those fitting this description should receive a kind of buy-in, assuming they want it.

The public comes next in the moral ordering sequence, which includes the previous groups.¹⁸ This notion entails that any solution or mitigation effort should not harm them or put them at a disadvantage. Any such solution must bring their interests firmly into consideration. Nonhumans come next by default, except in cases wherein not prioritizing

¹⁶ A similar point is made in *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁷ Bullard and Wright, "Introduction."

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

ecosystems would harm humans in general or specific groups. Placing nonhuman interest above humans in environmental ethics received ample criticism, holding that it ignores race.¹⁹ Similar thoughts exist regarding environmental thought being imperialist.²⁰ Doing so implies that green lives matter more than marginalized lives.²¹ To avoid making this claim, nonhuman life must come after human life, except when a pressing or urgent need can support an incredibly strong case for such decisions. After nonhumans, we have to give some consideration for possible future people. Wanting to make decisions prioritizing them over other human groups says that nonexistent lives matter more than people living and struggling today. Lastly, artifacts come last by default because things are often replaceable, and people are not.²²

One key feature of moral ordering is that its inherent nature entails flexibility, meaning that a lower-order stakeholder group can receive increased attention and action for situations requiring it, such as urgency or threats to human wellbeing.²³ This suggestive order provides normative guidance, but the affected groups must have an outcome-shaping voice, such as those associated with political recognition.²⁴ In turn, one could argue that associated results will concern material impacts like infrastructure or relief services, but such considerations only account for one kind of concern. The reality is that “value,” conceptually, goes beyond monetary units and the like. This notion suggests that most reasoning will involve the instrumental use of resources, highlighting their significance and how they are valued. However, intrinsic value also comes into view, meaning we can morally consider things on those grounds. The specific variety of intrinsic value required here is

¹⁹ Eugene Hargrove, “Forward,” in *Faces of Environmental Racism: Confronting Issues of Global Justice*, ed. by L. Westra & B. Lawson (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), ix–xxvi. Also see, Charles Mills, “Black Trash,” in *Faces of Environmental Racism*.

²⁰ Ramachandra Guha, “Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique,” in *Environmental Ethics*, 11:1 (Spring 1989), 71–83, <<https://www.uky.edu/~rsand1/china2017/library/Guha.pdf>>

²¹ Shane Epting, “On moral prioritization in environmental ethics: weak anthropocentrism for the city,” in *Environmental Ethics*, 39:2 (Summer 2017), 131, <<https://doi.org/10.5840/enviroethics201712146>>.

²² Moral ordering has numerous elements that account for several conditions associated with multistakeholder engagement. Exploring them here goes beyond this paper’s scope. For more information, see Epting, *Urban Enlightenment*, 6–8.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Nancy Fraser, “Recognition without Ethics?” in *Theory, Culture & Society*, 18:2–3 (June 2001), 21–42, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276012205176>>.

“collective intrinsic value.”²⁵ This particular category stems from Eugene Hargrove’s version of weak anthropocentric intrinsic value.²⁶

This notion entails that the people affected by and who have expertise on an issue must decide if it is valuable for those reasons. In other words, the pattern associated with recognition must extend into how we think about every dimension of value formation and disaster preparedness and relief. If we bring back the idea that thought technologies can help us in our endeavors to safeguard cities, then we can say that the concepts we employ to help us shape relevant policies and our lives do as well. In turn, it makes sense to say that “resilience,” as a thought technology, is one such term. It is simply good, aside from any instrumental value that it can provide. As Hargrove puts it, the criterion for this kind of value is that valuers, typically relevant experts, assign it.²⁷ However, going with the idea that social and material conditions shape technology, resilience could have its intrinsic value negated if those conditions yielded harmful or bad outcomes.

That point aside, looking at resilience through the lens of moral ordering, we learn how we must form its conception, which entails its promise, peril, and limitations. The goal is to lay out procedures wherein the term is defined in a manner that reveals why it deserves study, not only for philosophical pursuits—but also for ones that could help cities deal with some of the problems that climate change brings. Yet, accounting for all relevant stakeholder groups does not address all relevant ethical affairs. Those having the power to define the term *must* include the people affected by how it is used to address events such as extreme weather preparedness, clean-up efforts, and restoration. Laying out the conditions for these values is the first step toward learning how resilience can be an existential affair, requiring a thorough fleshing out.

The section below does just that. It begins by interrogating the term, paying attention to how its juxtaposition with moral ordering can show us how to employ it to show respect for the people it should serve. Establishing this view shows how to bring the term into practical conversations about policy and infrastructure in a manner wherein the term has integrity, which will ready us to reveal its existential dimensions in later sections.

²⁵ Shane Epting, *Meaning in the Metropolis: Toward an Urban Existentialism* (New York: Routledge, 2024), 35.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 44. Also see Eugene Hargrove, “Weak Anthropocentric Intrinsic Value,” in *The Monist*, 75:2 (April 1992), 183–207, <<https://doi.org/10.5840/monist19927529>>.

²⁷ Hargrove, “Weak Anthropocentric Intrinsic Value,” 198.

Moral Ordering Resilience

So far, I have touched on the conditions surrounding resilience but have said nothing about the term itself. Common conceptions could hold that it is the ability to endure hardship and recover or stay strong when facing tragic events. The academic reality is that the term exists in numerous areas of study and contexts, and most share conceptual ground in accord with the brief account just mentioned. The term first emerged in ecology during the 1970s.²⁸ Today, there is enough research on the term to do a “meta-literature review” on the literature dealing with resilience. Patrick Martin-Breen and J. Marty Anderies’s review that offers insights into the terms applicable nature addresses the expanding use of resilience:

Resilience has, in the past four decades, been a term increasingly employed throughout a number of sciences: psychology and ecology, most prominently. Increasingly one finds it in political science, business administration, sociology, history, disaster planning, urban planning, and international development. The shared use of the term does not, however, imply unified concepts of resilience nor the theories in which it is embedded. Different uses generate different methods, sometimes different methodologies. Evidential or other empirical support can differ between domains of application, even when concepts are broadly shared.²⁹

When applying the term to describe people, it could be to suffer setbacks, injuries, or just the trials of life while maintaining composure or recuperation. The words can change by degree of emphasis, but the pattern behind them holds the same sentiment. New accounts with nuanced differences will continue to emerge in the literature. When we think about the term applied to urban infrastructure, it would be able to endure a storm and not fail or bounce back with quickness. Yet, as Martin-Breen and Anderies illustrate, the term in an urban studies (i.e., academic) context has taken on a life of its own, so to speak. There are also numerous descriptions of “urban resilience” and “city resilience” that capture the essence of resilience above.³⁰

²⁸ City Resilience Index, *City Resilience Framework* (The Rockefeller Foundation and Arup International Development, 2014), 3
<https://preparecenter.org/sites/default/files/arup_rockefeller_resilient_cities_report.pdf>.

²⁹ Patrick Martin-Breen and J. Marty Anderies, *Resilience: A Literature Review* (Brighton: Bellagio Initiative and The Institute of Development Studies, 2011).

³⁰ City Resilience Index, 3.

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Yet, no matter how academics or municipal agents problematize, synthesize, or legitimize their conceptions, they might mean little to city dwellers unless they can help construct or define the term or assess and agree with offered accounts. Urban residents might identify with all or parts of preconceived ideas of what urban resilience should contain. However, Fraser-inspired notions of political recognition could hold that attempts at paternalized acceptance of pre-packaged resilience are ill-fated. This point does not dismiss expertise. Still, it holds that legitimacy depends on how it is defined and by whom, meaning the people whose lives will be affected by how a definition informs its material correlates (e.g., infrastructure) should be involved.

Despite resilience's current prevalence in the academy, countless historical urban tragedies force residents to deal with situations that embody the term's definition. This point implies that aside from scholarly endeavors, city dwellers have been dealing with the conditions surrounding the term throughout time. Such an idea suggests that many cities have faced situations that bring the term to our attention. For instance, long before climate change was an undeniable condition of existence, tragic events made the term relevant. The Great Chicago Fire of 1871 could count.³¹ Other events like tornados, typhoons, and hurricanes also come to mind, along with isolated tragedies like Superstorm Sandy that hit New York City in 2014 that can damage infrastructure.³² While such events test systems and people, climate change's effects, although similar to those mentioned, are unique in the sense that they are the results of our collective existence, steered mainly by the usual suspects such as governments and the fossil fuel industry. Not everyone is responsible for those outcomes, but everyone must endure their inevitability.

Now, with anthropogenic climate change, resilience must occupy space within more encompassing terms like sustainability. Consider that using resources without compromising others' capacity to do the same could bring resilience into the conversation regarding how resources and abilities are employed strategically to achieve that result. Such a notion requires us to examine how using specific materials, fuels, policies, human resources, and several other things could impact municipalities' ability to respond to severe

³¹ This fire killed about 300 people, left 100,000 homeless, and covered 2100 acres of the city. For more information, see Chicago Architecture Center, "The Great Chicago Fire of 1871," <<https://www.architecture.org/online-resources/architecture-encyclopedia/the-great-chicago-fire-of-1871>> (accessed January 2025).

³² Mikami Takahito, Miguel Esteban, and Tomoya Shibayama, "Storm surge in New York city caused by Hurricane Sandy in 2012," in *Handbook of Coastal Disaster Mitigation for Engineers and Planners*, ed. by Miguel Esteban, Hiroshi Takagi, and Tomoya Shibayama (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2015), 115–131.

weather events. In turn, paying attention to the instrumental values associated with resilience deserves considerable attention regarding how it benefits sustainability (or does not), and we can keep its intrinsic value in view as well.

This point entails that we must consider that resilience, as a conceptual element, bolsters the integrity of sustainability as a conceptual device. In other words, if sustainability is a larger conceptual device that helps us create cities that will endure without compromising possible future people's ability to do the same, considering resilience as a vital smaller part makes sense. We can consider it inherent to a robust definition of sustainability that does not require us to examine it to point to where its significance is lost. For this context, it would be a red herring or pedantic superficialities parading as substance.

That point aside, turning to the applied world, we find that numerous incorporated cities now have sustainability offices and management teams, and this term applies to such operations. They often use resilience as a term to showcase the strength of their department and its relationships to how the municipality works for residents. Other municipalities lacking those offices nevertheless accept severe weather as a motivation to justify expenditures to help prevent floods, power losses, and catastrophes and increase the ability to bounce back quickly after such events.

For all such cases, it is easy to see the instrumental value of resilience as part of how we conceptualize sustainability. Consider infrastructure that can withstand nature's forces or can be quickly repaired when damaged. Those cases illustrate why it is practical and useful to want sustainable infrastructure to embody this quality. Yet, does it make sense to say that sustainability and resilience have intrinsic value? That is to say, do they have any kind of quality wherein it is not valued for what it can do for us in any shape, form, or fashion? I answer in the affirmative and will argue that we can know it. Moreover, we can take an additional step and say that urban residents must, under most circumstances, define the term and many of its facets. There is a justice element to such claims.

Robert Figueroa explicitly makes this point when formulating necessary conditions for environmental justice, employing Nancy Fraser's conception of recognition, holding that those impacted by policy decisions must be able to weigh in on them.³³ As mentioned earlier, the pattern of this thought extends to less complex notions, such as resilience, that have the same effect on people. This point suggests if resilience is a term that makes

³³ Robert Figueroa, "Evaluating Environmental Justice Claims," in *Forging Environmentalism: Justice, Livelihood, and Contested Environments*, ed. by J. Bauer (Amonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2006), 360–376.

up part of sustainability, emergency preparedness, and clean-up efforts, those impacted need to be recognized by inclusive efforts that provide them with a way to shape the term's conception and execution as it informs those engaged in moral ordering. Still further, the process of coming to know the intrinsic value of urban resilience could take on an existential dimension that can provide residents' lives with additional meaning.

Here is how it unfolds. The first order of business is to determine who defines the term, how it is employed, and its limitations. For example, it is an integral part of many normative frameworks (e.g., Figueroa) that people affected by policy decisions must be able to weigh in on how such policies are shaped. In step with moral ordering, relevant marginalized groups and vulnerable populations must have the ability to weigh in first so that they are not further harmed or subjected to conditions that challenge their ability to exist alongside everybody else. This reason underscores why we must employ Fraser's conception of recognition, holding that each person be respected for their humanity and treated as equals.³⁴

This point entails that any such account of resilience that appeals to the public, to which they also belong, must manifest so that the conditions of such a conception do not perpetuate wrongdoing or create new harm. If such a conception is to exist, it must benefit everyone, meaning that any sort of utilitarian framework will inherently lack the necessary structure. In turn, how the term is defined is inherently an ethical issue. As mentioned, recognition is the fulcrum of urban resilience.

Although the exploration thus far exhibits the ethical dimensions of urban resilience, there is also an existential element that requires fleshing out. It concerns engaging in resilience planning and practices in ways that provide people with access to meaningful experiences. The section below does just that. It looks at the kind of actions associated with resilience-focused efforts. By exploring these elements, we expose the existential opportunities that merit further investigation to see a fuller range of possibilities associated with the events that make this topic deserve our attention.

The Existential Possibilities of Resilience Efforts

Although severe weather events often cause stress, damage and injury, and death, those negative experiences and tragedies do not need to maintain a stranglehold on us or our resilience efforts entirely. The threat of such events is largely unavoidable, but this reality does not entail defeat whenever they strike. This notion suggests that communities can find comfort in safeguarding themselves and developing strategies to deal with

³⁴ Fraser, "Recognition without Ethics?," 21–42.

catastrophes. This point provides an opportunity to explain how existentialism can enhance our thinking on this topic and might play a significant role in helping cities protect themselves against severe weather events. In turn, we must employ the concepts above.

Doing just that involves examining the typical circumstances associated with the operational procedures wherein moral ordering takes place, which require stakeholders to work with municipal agents on resilience matters. Such partnerships count as what has been called cooperative city planning—or “co-planning.”³⁵ The procedure is like participatory urban planning, but cooperation requires emphasis to underscore the central element of both parties actively working in concert.

Here is a fictitious example. Imagine there was a fenced vacant lot in the city under municipal authority. A group of residents lacked space for their dogs to exercise. They approached city leaders, asking for the land to be turned into a dog park. Instead of carrying on business as usual and denying the request out of habit, they listened to community needs (perhaps local elections were on the horizon). The city agreed to transform the underutilized space into the requested park. They assigned landscape architects, inspectors, and park services to work with future users to gain input on what the dog park should look like to meet their needs. Once the park is complete, all parties involved could see how their dedication and efforts, such as co-planning, worked to create a new part of the city that they could feel responsible for and add meaning to their lives in the process. Although this case is imaginative, it embodies the spirit of cooperative measures that can unify residents and municipal leadership.

There is now a body of academic research showing how cities can develop operational procedures that give residents a seat at the decision-making table.³⁶ However, real-world examples such as the fictitious case above are more elusive than ubiquitous. Despite the reality that actual change is the goal, we must think through these desired outcomes, questioning power structures, the status quo, and business as usual that would preserve elements that have produced urban systems that already cannot withstand severe weather.

Thinking about what it means for everyday people to be able to engage with municipal professionals to work on projects to improve their lives, one could argue that such undertakings align with “urban existentialism.” Let me flesh out this concept while connecting it to moral

³⁵ Epting, *Meaning in the Metropolis*, 8.

³⁶ Muki Haklay, Piotr Jankowski, and Zbigniew Zwoliński, “Selected Modern Methods and Tools for Public Participation in Urban Planning – A Review,” in *Quaestiones Geographicae*, 37:3 (September 2018), 127–149, <<https://doi.org/10.2478/quageo-2018-0030>>.

ordering and co-planning. For instance, when stakeholders co-plan with municipal agents with moral ordering as their guide, they think together with ethics at the forefront of their minds. Unlike other existential thinking like Sartre's works, such as *Existentialism and Humanism*, this positioning focuses on groups thinking from a place of ethicality from the outset.³⁷ In turn, all parties learn about each other. As city dwellers, they are taking responsibility for the city in a limited fashion. This notion suggests that they are playing roles in shaping their urban experiences to a degree, meaning they are taking responsibility for the quality of their lives with others who are doing the same.

This point intersects with the idea that resilience should be an integral part of sustainability as a concept.³⁸ We use the term to bolster sustainability efforts by supporting infrastructures that balance immediate and long-term resource use. Residents defining resilience in this sense can have meaning, but it differs from severe weather-related resilience. Here is what I mean. Psychological research shows that climate change's impacts and severe weather have harmful mental effects on populations.³⁹ We can separate these kinds of harm into at least two categories. One is the stress of losing one's home, property, possessions, and life through severe weather events. Such stress could qualify as a form of "dreadful conditions" inspired by Kirkegaard's use of dread.⁴⁰ This term entails that social and material arrangements, things like regulations and physical infrastructure, can make people feel dread—or dreading engaging in a particular action because of a range of discomfort or harm. Dreadful conditions can encompass a range of intensity.

For example, sitting in traffic for hours because local laws prevent one from riding a bicycle could be a dreadful condition, especially considering that very few people enjoy sitting in traffic endlessly.⁴¹ Another example could include living in a flood-prone area, constantly concerned about rising waters during storms. The way to deal with dreadful conditions is to extricate residents by removing or altering them, aiming to deliver better

³⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, trans. by Carol Macomber (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

³⁸ E.g., Brian Walker and David Salt, *Resilience Thinking: Sustaining Ecosystems and People in a Changing World* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2012).

³⁹ Charles Schmidt, "Climate Anxiety: The Existential Threat Posed by Climate Change is Deeply Troubling to Many Young People," in *Harvard Medicine: The Magazine of the Harvard Medical School* (Spring 2023), <<https://magazine.hms.harvard.edu/articles/climate-anxiety>>.

⁴⁰ E.g., Søren Kierkegaard, "Either/Or," in *The Essential Kierkegaard*, ed. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 37–84.

⁴¹ For more information on this topic and ideas in this section, see Epting, *Meaning in the Metropolis*, 42ff.

living environments. Extrication answers the question: “What can we do for people enduring dreadful conditions?”

However, removing dreadful conditions through extrication should be a co-planned process because of the recognition concern mentioned above, meaning that people should have a voice in determining the measures to change the urban environment that will affect them. It is reasonable to hold that such experiences will count as taking responsibility for the city in a limited capacity; engaging in the required efforts could give one’s life additional meaning.

This notion underscores the reason we co-plan, which is to think together. It is the needed activity required to live together in a civilized manner. A community becoming resilient benefits from everyone cooperating to do their part to achieve what is greater than isolated efforts. In times of crisis, communities come together, exhibiting the humanity that is always there. Making a city resilient reveals the community spirit hidden by the daily grind’s busyness. By engaging in co-planning efforts to bolster infrastructure, we, in turn, strengthen the community ties that remain underutilized. Considering the unique outcome, we can say that it is “authentic” in this sense, even though it differs from more customary uses of the term in traditional existential literature.⁴² Residents and municipal agents still produce something that is one-of-a-kind through co-planning. We can describe such a scenario as having “collaborative authenticity,” bearing in mind that the authenticity hinges on those parties cooperating. Putting in the work to achieve real-world, materialized outcomes could count as meaningful experiences.⁴³

Residents and municipal agents could see their cooperation as impacting their lives or the way they see the world and their place in it. In turn, it seems reasonable to hold that undertaking these projects could give people’s lives additional meaning—while taking responsibility for the city in the process. Although existential terminology can help us understand the significance of co-planning, taking *responsibility* and finding additional *meaning* are the conditions that make such operations require existential thinking to gain an enhanced view of those experiences. Even though city dwellers and municipal agents are impacted by the threats of climate change and the tragedies of severe weather, co-planning proactive resilience efforts, and clean-up measures can mitigate such effects.

These ideas in tandem, we see how they can account for the existential dimensions of urban resilience. Here is a fictitious example of how

⁴² E.g., Jean-Paul Sartre, *Jean-Paul Sartre: Basic Writings*, ed. by Stephen Priest (New York: Routledge, 2001).

⁴³ Epting, *Meaning in the Metropolis* 34.

such an enterprise could play out in the city. Suppose that municipal agents bring in relevant professionals like engineers and architects. Then, they recruit community groups to help them determine how previous extreme weather events impacted them or share their concerns about such tragedies in general. These experts could explain the technical aspects that require advanced, specialized education and training. Then, once they develop a plan, municipal agents could work with local, state, and perhaps national agencies to implement needed measures.

Although this hypothetical is incredibly reductionist, it illustrates the basic structure of how co-planning resilience efforts could count as taking responsibility for the city, which is a process that could add more meaning to residents' lives. Moreover, these kinds of examples show that when calamity strikes and such efforts protect residents or reduce harm, these notions would arguably increase in meaning multiple times over. Residents, municipal agents, and other professionals could clearly see how their work together led to positive outcomes or reduced harm, which are still winning situations in the fight against climate change.

As mentioned earlier, cities have different characteristics. They include but are not limited to topography, weather, history, cultural considerations, politics, social elements, and, of course, threats. Co-planning measures to deal with wildfires in California will require unique strategies, and the same is true for typhoons in the Philippines. Hurricanes in Florida demand intense study to mitigate harm. In addition to bolstering each city's ability to take a punch, they could also benefit from co-planning measures concerning clean-up efforts and repairs. Despite the horrible events that residents must endure and emergencies requiring immediate medical attention, post-catastrophe co-planning might also provide meaning in residents' lives. It could also help determine how to help stakeholders in ways that attend to the required measures that require intimate knowledge that the process could reveal.

Conclusion

While the ideas explored in this article remain in developing stages, the hope is that exploring them in multiple contexts could inform enhanced ways to contend with unavoidable tragedies. This notion suggests that much more interdisciplinary research is required to map the necessary considerations for equitable treatment before and after extreme weather events. This investigation focuses on these issues' ethical and existential dimensions, which is atypical for dealing with these subjects. While this notion is accurate, and we cannot discount the work needed in engineering and sciences that can save lives and property, such events usually only

exclusively define part of one's life in terms of negativity. Through thinking through preparation and clean-up efforts via co-planning, we can approach the inevitable in ways that show that we are not defenseless against severe weather. How we deal with these matters proactively not only could add meaning to people's lives, but those actions also partly define us.

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