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Rethink the City: a Path to Innovative Urban Solutions in the Global South

Dr. Roberto Rocco

Who would have known a few years ago, when a group of TU Delft PhD candidates led by Igor Moreno Pessoa and Luz Maria Vergara came up with the idea to organise a MOOC on issues of urban development in the Global South, that Rethink the City would have been such a resounding success?

Rethink the City filled a gap in urban development studies by addressing issues with an integrative approach based on analysing the interaction of actors, technologies and institutions rather than focusing on technology and design alone.

As urbanisation accelerates around the world, cities in the Global South face unique and complex challenges that cannot be addressed through “solutionism”, that is, the belief that complex societal problems can be solved primarily through technological or design-based solutions. Solutionism often overlooks the causality and underlying complexities and social nuances of urban development issues, leading to an overreliance on quick fixes and neglecting broader systemic considerations. These broader systemic considerations were addressed by the course in interactive and participatory online exercises, often peer-reviewed.

The three main topics of the course (Spatial Justice, Housing Provision and Management and Sustainable Urban Transitions) address urban development challenges and embrace their full complexity. Technology certainly plays a role in addressing urban development issues, and design remains central for a future-oriented imagination of better and fairer cities. However, solutions must also rely on the governance of socio-technical systems in constant evolution and change, by which I mean understanding and designing the relationships between a multitude of actors in the public sector, the private sector and civil society within formal and informal institutions, and within evolving socio-technical regimes.

Decisions must also rely on values, by which I mean the valuation of the multiple paths to take according to different societies' and communities' norms, values, objectives and capacities. Urban solutions don't happen in a vacuum and are most certainly not "neutral". "Neutrality" in technology and design is a fallacy that hinders the addressing of urban problems in their full complexity. The fallacy of neutrality in technology and design is the mistaken belief that these fields can be entirely objective and devoid of bias. In reality, choices made in design and technology often reflect the values and perspectives of their creators, potentially perpetuating societal biases and excluding diverse perspectives in problem-solving. The question should not be about including values in the design process but about whose values are included, who is around the table, and whose voices are heard in planning and design processes. This idea underscores the concept of co-design and co-planning, which speaks to spatial justice as a guiding framework for action.

Spatial Justice emphasises the fair distribution of the burdens and benefits of urban development, which necessitates just participatory planning processes and the full recognition of the aspirations, values, histories and trajectories of diverse groups in society.

Cities in emerging economies often grapple with issues of inequality and access to resources. The concept of spatial justice is central to addressing these issues. In *Rethink the City*, students delve into topics such as multi-level networked governance, regional planning, and informal urbanisation, gaining a deep understanding of the challenges and opportunities in achieving spatial justice.

Housing Provision and Management focuses on the growing demand for housing in the Global South. Traditional approaches may no longer suffice, and alternative methods are required. Through comparative international perspectives and an exploration of social innovation in housing, students gain insights into how housing can be provided and managed more effectively. This includes examining concepts like co-production and sustainable urbanism, which are crucial for addressing housing challenges.

Sustainable Urban Transitions explores the complex interplay between social, economic, and cultural factors in achieving sustainable urban transitions. Students grapple with questions related to socioeconomic inequality, community-led housing initiatives, and the balance between environmental sustainability and social justice. Case studies from diverse regions provide valuable insights into how these challenges manifest in different contexts.

Throughout the course, students gain not only theoretical knowledge but also practical skills. They learn to apply analytical tools and innovative solutions to real-world urban challenges. The course encourages students to develop a critical perspective on their own urban environments, empowering them to identify and address issues in their local contexts.

The success of Rethink the City is evident in its impact on students and the broader urban planning community. Graduates of the course have gone on to become advocates for more inclusive and sustainable urban development. They may apply the knowledge and skills gained to address pressing urban challenges in their respective regions, making a tangible difference in the Global South. Moreover, as the course's global reach and interdisciplinary approach have attracted thousands of participants worldwide, it has fostered a rich exchange of ideas and experiences among participants. This diversity of perspectives enhances the quality of the learning experience and promotes innovative thinking.

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Roberto Rocco is an Associate Professor of Spatial Planning and Strategy. Roberto is trained as an architect & spatial planner with a master's in planning by the University of São Paulo and a PhD by TU Delft. Roberto focuses on governance for sustainability transitions, as well as issues of governance in regional planning and design. This includes special attention to Spatial Justice as a crucial dimension of sustainability transitions. Roberto has also published extensively about informal urbanisation in the Global South, and he does research on how informal institutions influence and shape planning at the local level. He is a consultant for the Union for the Mediterranean and has recently drafted the UfM Action Plan for Sustainable Urbanisation 2040. (<https://ufmsecretariat.org/urban-agenda/>). He is one of the lead investigators of UP 2030 Urban Planning and Design Ready for 2030, a Horizon Europe project gathering 42 partners seeking to speed up the sustainability transition in European cities.

