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Understanding the dialectical relationship between governance and governance outcomes in the context of urban (re)development: A critical review

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ABSTRACT

This study examines a crucial yet underexplored topic: the dialectical relationship between governance and its outcomes in urban (re)development. As contemporary urban governance networks become increasingly dynamic, understanding this relationship is essential for advancing theoretical models beyond static, linear frameworks and informing adaptive, context-sensitive governance strategies. We integrate Assemblage Thinking with dialectical perspectives to develop a conceptual model that reconciles the long-standing debate over whether networks should be understood as “structure” (stable power/resource relations) or “process” (contingent interactions). By operationalizing key Assemblage principles, we embed governance–outcome dialectics within the “structure–process” continuum, extending the application of Assemblage Thinking in urban studies beyond descriptive uses. The Assemblage–dialectical model posits that methodological choices, including variable selection, temporal dimensions, and reasoning modes, significantly influence governance–outcome interpretations. A systematic review of empirical studies on urban (re)development practices, which echo the dialectical diagnosis of the governance–outcome relationship, largely validates this model. It demonstrates that studies using isolated variables, cross-sectional analysis, and causal reasoning tend to reinforce *structure-* or *process-oriented* interpretations. While these studies do not explicitly reject the structure–process entanglement, they often prioritize structure or process as the primary determinant of governance outcomes. However, contrary to initial expectations, studies combining causal and relational reasoning, rather than relying solely on relational reasoning, along with holistic and longitudinal perspectives, are more consistently aligned with an *Assemblage-based* interpretation. These insights provide scholars and practitioners with a more comprehensive understanding of governance configurations and their evolving interactions with outcomes, ultimately enhancing the capacity to design effective and adaptive urban governance strategies.

1. Introduction

Governance refers to the processes of forming and implementing collective decisions involving a variety of mutually interdependent public, semi-public, and private actors linked by specific interests and resource relationships (Goodwin & Painter, 1996; Rhodes, 1997; Torfing et al., 2003). This concept, widely applied across various domains, is inherently shaped by contextual features (Briassoulis, 2019). Since the late 1970s, as urban (re)development¹ has become increasingly complex, local states can no longer “assume a monopoly of expertise or

resources” (Newman, 2004, p. 79) and have instead turned to collaborative networks of public, private, and voluntary sectors (de Bruijn & ten Heuvelhof, 1995; Goodwin & Painter, 1996; Rhodes, 1997; Stoker, 1998). Although theories such as “urban regime”, “urban governance”, and “growth machine” differ in conceptual and methodological orientations, they converge on the idea that “network” has become a defining feature of contemporary urban governance (Blanco, 2013; Davidson et al., 2019; de Bruijn & ten Heuvelhof, 1995; MacLeod & Goodwin, 1999; Pierre, 2014; Rhodes, 1997; Sacli, 2011; Stoker & Mossberger, 1994; van Ostaaijen, 2024). The term network itself refers to “a set of

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¹ Urban (re)development in this research refers to actions that involve a combination of social, political, and economic interventions to achieve the physical transformation of urban spaces. In this study, urban (re)development is a general term, referring to any spatial construction– and/or transformation–related collective activities undertaken within urban contexts.

more-or-less stable relationships linking actors who share common interests, exchange resources, and acknowledge interdependencies” (Börzel, 1998, p. 254), highlighting a mutually dependent relational structure among actors pursuing shared goals. Building on this, the concept of urban governance network has emerged, characterizing both the structure and the process of governing urban (re)development (Chan & Hu, 2004; Pierre, 2014).

Research on urban governance has predominantly split into two strands: one characterizing different dimensions of governance networks (da Cruz et al., 2019), and the other documenting their outcomes—whether spatial, social, political, economic, intended or unintended, or immediate or long-term (Fawcett & Daugbjerg, 2012). Yet, the relationships between these governance networks and their outcomes have not received equivalent attention. While studies on governance success/failure (effectiveness) (Joslin & Müller, 2016), governance performance (Rotberg, 2014), and good governance (Howlett & Ramesh, 2014; Torfing & Sørensen, 2014) have established partial linkages between governance networks and specific outcomes, they lack a systematic framework to identify which governance mechanisms are associated with outcomes and how these linkages operate across contexts. This gap limits the reproducibility and contextual transferability of findings, leaving the governance–outcome relationship fragmentarily understood and poorly theorized. Meanwhile, a thorough understanding of the governance–outcome relationship holds dual significance. Scientifically, it demands a holistic analytical framework that bridges spatial, temporal, and disciplinary boundaries. Urban governance outcomes emerge from interconnected social, spatial, economic, and political dimensions and operate across multiple scales (Davidson et al., 2019). Systematically tracing how governance dynamics translate into outcomes can advance theories of socio-spatial complexity. Societally, mapping the mechanisms linking governance to outcomes provides actionable insights, enabling decision-makers to align actions with diverse stakeholders’ needs and promote more equitable, sustainable urban futures. For instance, identifying which governance features are correlated with specific outcomes, when these outcomes emerge, and why they persist or shift can inform (1) nuanced evaluation systems that assess governance practices beyond simplistic metrics (e.g., incorporating equity indicators alongside economic growth) (Wu et al., 2022) and (2) adaptive interventions that steer governance toward desired outcomes while mitigating unintended consequences (e.g., promoting inclusive development while causing less displacement) (Wang, 2022). In response, our research aims to develop a reproducible framework for analyzing governance–outcome linkages, offering both scholarly and practical guidance for navigating urban (re)development complexities.

While the governance–outcome relationship remains an emerging research focus, it fundamentally reflects a subset of a broader network–outcome interdependence—a well-established theme in policy analysis, public management, business, and related fields (Börzel, 1998; Evans, 2001). Research across these domains consistently demonstrates that networks and their outcomes are mutually constitutive, forming a dynamic, non-unidimensional relationship (Benson, 1977; Dowding, 1995; Evans, 2001; Marsh, 1998; Marsh & Smith, 2000; Sacli, 2011; Sheppard, 2008). Marsh and Smith (2000, p. 5) defined this interplay as “dialectical”: “an interactive relationship between groups of variables in which each affects the others in a continuing iterative process.” While the dialectical nature of network–outcome relationships is widely acknowledged, scholars have conceptualized network–outcome dialectics in different ways (Benson, 1977; Evans, 2001; Marsh & Smith, 2000; Sacli, 2011). This divergence stems largely from ongoing debates about whether networks should primarily be understood as “structures,” i.e., strategically planned configurations of resource and power relations or as “processes,” i.e., contingent interactions among actors (Blanco, 2013; de Bruijn & ten Heuvelhof, 1995; Pierre, 2014; Rhodes, 1997). This “structure–process” dichotomy has led to two distinct explanatory frameworks: structure-based models, which posit explicit, linear correlations between network structures and outcomes; and process-based

models, which emphasize the contingencies of actor interactions in shaping outcomes.

Compared to broader network studies, there is little scholarship specifically examining the dialectical governance–outcome relationship, either theoretically or empirically. Theoretically, while network has been recognized as a key feature of urban governance and the governance–outcome relationship should, in principle, exhibit dialectical properties, no systematic conceptual models or frameworks have been developed. Empirically, the governance–outcome relationship is rarely the primary focus, leaving findings fragmented. More importantly, unlike general network studies, which clearly distinguish between structure-based and process-based conceptualizations, governance studies do not exhibit such a strict divide. Instead, they operate within a blurred boundary between structure and process, leaning toward either a structure- or process-oriented interpretation of governance networks. However, no systematic overview of these studies exists, leaving it unclear whether and how the rejection of the structure–process dichotomy is also reflected in interpretations of governance–outcome interdependency. This study aims to bridge both gaps.

First, we build a preliminary conceptual model for governance–outcome relationships in urban (re)development. Given the conceptual affinities between policy networks and urban governance, we draw on the dialectical model of policy networks to identify key elements for examining governance–outcome dialectics. However, the original dialectical model does not fully address the structure–process dichotomy, risking an oversimplified interpretation of this relationship. To overcome this limitation, we incorporate Assemblage, a poststructuralist concept recognized for capturing socio-spatial fluidity and complexity (Briassoulis, 2019), to reconceptualize governance as an Assemblage, a dynamic entity that continuously shifts between structural and processual features. Building on this, we refine the dialectical model of policy networks and adapt it for urban governance. While we retain the key variables of the original model—structure, process, context, and outcome—we embed outcomes and the broader context within the dynamic and indivisible structure–process fluidity. This conceptual model of governance–outcome dialectics suggests that three methodological factors, (1) variable selection, (2) temporal dimensions, and (3) reasoning modes, shape how studies capture governance–outcome dynamics.

Second, based on the conceptual model, we conduct a systematic literature review of empirical studies that contribute to understanding the dialectical governance–outcome relationship in urban (re)development. We (1) position studies along three interpretive tendencies—structure-oriented, process-oriented, or Assemblage-based—according to how they interpret the dialectical governance–outcome relationship, and (2) synthesize patterns, with particular attention to the methodological choices that shape these interpretations. The primary goal of this step is to assess how well the empirical findings align with the conceptual model and determine whether and how the methodological factors identified in the model shape the selective depiction of governance–outcome dynamics. By combining theoretical insights and empirical evidence, we aim to (1) present an overview of the current understanding of the intricate nature of the governance (network)–outcome relationship, (2) identify gaps and state-of-the-art perspectives and methodologies in existing studies, and (3) guide future research toward approaches that more accurately capture the complexity of this relationship.

This study addresses three research questions:

1. What elements define the dialectical relationship between governance and governance outcomes in urban (re)development, and how can these elements be assembled into a comprehensive conceptual model?
2. What are **empirical studies’ different interpretations** of the dialectical relationship between governance and governance outcomes in urban (re)development, and what factors explain these variations?

3. What theoretical and empirical implications emerge from a comprehensive understanding of the dialectical governance–outcome relationship?

2. Assembling the dialectical model for the governance–outcome relationship

This section develops a conceptual framework for understanding the dialectical governance–outcome relationship and guides the systematic literature review. By applying Assemblage Thinking (AT) to reconcile the long-standing structure–process dichotomy in network analysis, we move beyond perspectives that frame networks as either static structures or contingent processes. Building on this, we refine Marsh and Smith's dialectical model for urban governance. While retaining its four core variables—structure, process, context, and outcome—we embed them within a flat ontology, removing fixed boundaries and emphasizing their interdependence. Additionally, we identify three methodological factors, i.e., variable selection, temporal dimensions, and reasoning modes, which shape analytical orientations and influence whether studies reinforce structure-/process-oriented explanations or adopt an Assemblage-based interpretation.

2.1. Two existing conceptualizations of network: Structure versus process

While network is widely used to describe collaborative processes across various domains, scholars debate whether it should be understood primarily as structure or process (Blanco, 2013; de Bruijn & ten Heuvelhof, 1995; Pierre, 2014; Rhodes, 1997). The structure perspective focuses on the static “being” of networks, arguing that specific configurations of power and resource relations between interest groups can be planned/identified to solve particular problems (Fawcett & Daugbjerg, 2012). Here, the power/resource relations between actors serve as the units of analysis (Benassi, 1995; Börzel, 1998; Mønsted, 1995). In contrast, the process perspective emphasizes the dynamic “becoming” of networks—their evolving, adaptive nature in response to uncertainty and contingency (Benassi, 1995; Fawcett & Daugbjerg, 2012; Mønsted, 1995). It treats all governance structures as inherently non-hierarchical and horizontally organized, rejecting the need for differentiation (Benassi, 1995; Mønsted, 1995). From this perspective, contingent interactions between actors, rather than fixed structures, serve as the primary units of analysis (Börzel, 1998).

Although not inherently incompatible, the two perspectives' differing analytical foci—structural configurations versus dynamic interactions—have long reinforced a dichotomy, leading scholars to develop distinct, sometimes contrasting analytical frameworks for studying networks (Blanco, 2013; Börzel, 1998; Hill & Varone, 2021; Rhodes, 2007, 2011; Weible, 2023). In public policy studies, this divide has given rise to two prominent schools: the interest intermediation school and the governance school (Börzel, 1998; Marsh & Rhodes, 1992; Rhodes, 1997, 2007). While each offers valuable insights, their approaches to policy outcome analysis remain largely dichotomous (Börzel, 1998). The interest intermediation school, rooted in the structure perspective, focuses on network typologies and their linear association with specific outcomes (Fawcett & Daugbjerg, 2012). Conversely, the governance school, which views policy networks as mechanisms for mobilizing dispersed political resources through contingent processes (Börzel, 1998; Rhodes, 1997), emphasizes interactive, iterative, and contextually rich factors in shaping policy outcomes (Dowding, 2001; Fawcett & Daugbjerg, 2012; Sacchi, 2011).

However, the structure–process dichotomy oversimplifies urban governance, as empirical studies show that urban governance networks cannot be reduced to either static structures or contingent processes alone. In practice, governance structures are inherently hybrid and fluid (Briassoulis, 2019, p. 420). For instance, in urban (re)development projects, market-driven governance structures often dominate the bidding/tendering phase to foster competition, while hierarchical

frameworks are later adopted to regulate quality and safety during implementation (Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998). Thus, understanding how governance modes alternate through internal interactions between network actors has become a significant research focus (Klijn et al., 2011). At the same time, urban (re)development cases emphasize that structures remain fundamental to understanding governance processes, as state and non-state actors exist in inherently hierarchical relationships (Blanco, 2013; Brenner, 2004; da Cruz et al., 2023; Skelcher et al., 2013). Authorities maintain dominance over public life through powerful governing tools such as laws, regulations, and taxes, what Amin and Thrift (1995) term “institutional thickness.” While actor interactions depend on individual agendas, resources, and skills, they are inevitably shaped by institutional constraints (Mønsted, 1995). In sum, structure and process in urban governance are inextricably interdependent, complementary, and mutually explanatory (Börzel, 1998; Hill & Varone, 2021; Weible, 2023).

2.2. Reconciling the structure–process dichotomy through Assemblage

We draw on the concept of Assemblage to address the oversimplification of the structure–process dichotomy. Originating from the writings of Deleuze and Guattari (1988), the notion of Assemblage (French: *Agencement*) originally referred to the dynamic arrangement of heterogeneous entities into provisional socio-spatial relations that co-function yet remain subject to change (Baker & McGuirk, 2017; Delanda, 2006b; Müller, 2015; Spies & Alff, 2020; Wang, Wu, & Zhang, 2024). This Deleuzian Assemblage has given rise to what is now widely known as AT, which challenges traditional reductionism and structuralism, emphasizing the inextricability of heterogeneous components in social/natural phenomena and their continuous mutual influence (Briassoulis, 2019). As a synthesis of Deleuzian philosophy, AT recognizes the world's capacity for emergent novelty and the absence of absolute laws of cause and effect (Van Wezemaal, 2008), thus opposing one-sided explanatory models that prioritize a single social or natural driving force over others (Spies & Alff, 2020). Accordingly, Assemblage has become synonymous with complex socio-spatial phenomena, necessitating analysis through hybridity, temporality, and relational processuality (Briassoulis, 2019; Muminovic, 2015; Spies & Alff, 2020; Wang, Wu, & Zhang, 2024).

The AT conceptual pair of stabilization/destabilization² is particularly insightful for rethinking the structure–process entanglement in governance. In Deleuzian philosophy, stabilization reinforces coherence, institutional consolidation, and structural persistence, while destabilization introduces disruption, transformation, and relational shifts (Dovey, 2020; Muminovic, 2015). Crucially, these forces are not oppositional but co-constitutive, continuously unfolding in parallel (Delanda, 2006a). As Delanda (2006b, p. 12) states, “the identity of any Assemblage at any level of scale is always the product of a process (territorialization, and in some cases coding), and it is always precarious, since other processes (deterritorialization and decoding) can destabilize it.” Extending this intellectual thinking, Dovey (2010, 2020) and Muminovic (2015) further operationalize stabilization and destabilization by linking them to an entity's material and expressive roles. Traditionally, a socio-material entity is often read through its “being”—its manifested archetype, including physical characteristics and stabilized, quantifiable features—which defines its material role (Dovey, 2020). However, this role is continuously shaped by an ongoing morphogenetic process involving functional adaptations and relational

² According to Delanda (2006a), territorialization and deterritorialization describe the processes by which assemblages stabilize or destabilize over time. To enhance clarity, this study adopts stabilization and destabilization as terms interchangeable with territorialization and deterritorialization to directly reflect governance dynamics while maintaining alignment with the conceptual framework of Assemblage Thinking.

reactions to internal/external dynamics, leading to destabilization and transformation—“becoming” (Delanda, 2006a; Muminovic, 2015). This becoming corresponds to an entity’s expressive role, which encompasses its performative, relational, and adaptive aspects (Müller, 2015; Muminovic, 2015).

While Deleuze originally positioned becoming as replacing being, the application of AT as a new realism, mediating between materialism and phenomenology, allows for a heterogeneous reading of socio-material complexities as mixtures of both (Baker & McGuirk, 2017; Briassoulis, 2019; Müller, 2015). Since Assemblage components vary in their sensitivity to intervention forces, they assume different roles at different moments, resulting in shifting material (being) and expressive (becoming) configurations (Muminovic, 2015). Accordingly, Dovey (2010, 2020) and Muminovic (2015) situate Assemblages along a “material–expressive” continuum, where any socio-spatial complexity contains varying degrees of stabilization and destabilization at any given moment. This continuum-based perspective effectively captures stabilization and destabilization as coexisting forces that continuously and relationally shift in intensity over time, rather than as discrete phases.

This AT-informed perspective directly shapes our reconceptualization of the inextricability of structure and process in urban governance. Governance conceived as an Assemblage is defined simultaneously by its stabilized material role (structure), i.e., static arrangements and power relations, and its expressive role (process), i.e., contingent actor interactions facing continuous destabilization. Rather than switching back and forth between stability and instability, governance Assemblages oscillate continuously along a stabilization–destabilization continuum, shaped by contextual forces over time. A governance Assemblage’s degree of stabilization corresponds to the dominance of its material role (structure), while its degree of destabilization reflects the prominence of its expressive role (process). This dynamic is illustrated in Fig. 1, in which the horizontal spectrum represents the interplay between structure (stabilization) and process (destabilization), while the vertical axis captures temporal evolution. The red trajectory demonstrates how governance Assemblages exhibit varying levels of the stabilization–destabilization combination at key moments. This reconceptualization transcends binary models, positioning governance as a fluid,

evolving Assemblage that dynamically shifts between structure and process in response to contextual dynamics.

2.3. Dialectics in network–outcome relationships

Urban governance has strong conceptual ties to policy network theory, as both emphasize decentralized decision-making, multi-actor coordination, and networked interactions in collective processes (de Bruijn & ten Heuvelhof, 1995; Rhodes, 1997). Policy network research has significantly shaped urban governance studies, fostering conceptual cross-fertilization between the two fields (de Bruijn & ten Heuvelhof, 1995; McGuirk, 2000; Rhodes, 1997; Torfing et al., 2003). Given their shared analytical concerns and conceptual affinities, previous studies have demonstrated the feasibility of adapting and applying theoretical and methodological approaches from policy network analysis to urban governance research (Rhodes, 2007; Wang, Wu, & Zhang, 2024). Building on these insights—particularly the well-developed conceptual models and analytical frameworks within policy analysis for understanding network–outcome dialectics—we draw on the dialectical model of policy networks to identify key elements essential for disentangling the dialectical network–outcome relationship in urban governance.

Four major approaches originally emerged from policy network research: the structural approach (Marsh & Rhodes, 1992); formal network analysis (Laumann & Knoke, 1987); the rational approach (Dowding, 1995); and the personal interaction (or anthropological) approach (McPherson & Raab, 1989). Reflecting the structure–process dichotomy, these approaches have privileged either structural or processual perspectives in the development of explanatory frameworks for policy outcomes (Marsh & Smith, 2000). The first two structure-focused approaches argue that network structures exert a direct and significant influence on outcomes by shaping actor inclusion/exclusion, positional hierarchies, and power distribution, thereby constraining decision-making and implementation processes (Börzel, 1998, p. 258; Fawcett & Daugbjerg, 2012; Marsh, 1998; Marsh & Smith, 2000). In contrast, the rational and anthropological approaches emphasize process-focused explanations, positing that policy outcomes result from actor interactions (“bargaining” in Dowding’s terms) rather than preordained structural configurations (Dowding, 1995, 2001). These approaches highlight the role of individual beliefs, knowledge, and experiences, arguing that human agency is more influential than rigid institutional structures in shaping outcomes (Benassi, 1995; Börzel, 1998; Fawcett & Daugbjerg, 2012; Mønsted, 1995).

Similar to debates that have emerged in urban governance, increasing theoretical and empirical evidence highlights the role of both policy network structure and process in shaping policy outcomes (Hill & Varone, 2021; Marsh, 1998; Weible, 2023). In response, Benson (1977), Evans (2001), Marsh and Smith (2000), among others, have introduced the term “dialectical” to describe the policy network–outcome relationship. While dialectical is commonly understood as an “interactive relationship between mutually influencing variables” (Marsh & Smith, 2000, p. 5), its deeper meaning extends beyond mere interaction. Drawing from Marxist and Hegelian dialectics, the term originally referred to the “thesis, antithesis, and synthesis” of two or more variables, where coherence, tensions, or contradictions between variables drive transformation, and changes in one variable occur in relation to the dynamics of others (Evans, 2001, p. 543).

This dialectical perspective led Marsh and Smith (2000) to develop an analytical framework that integrates both structure and process as core analytical variables. Their dialectical framework recognizes that policy networks do not operate in isolation but are embedded within a broader context that both shapes and is shaped by network dynamics (Sacchi, 2011). This broader context consists of political, economic, ideological, and knowledge-based factors, which influence both the structural configurations and the agency of actors embedded in them (Marsh & Smith, 2000). Accordingly, their framework identifies three

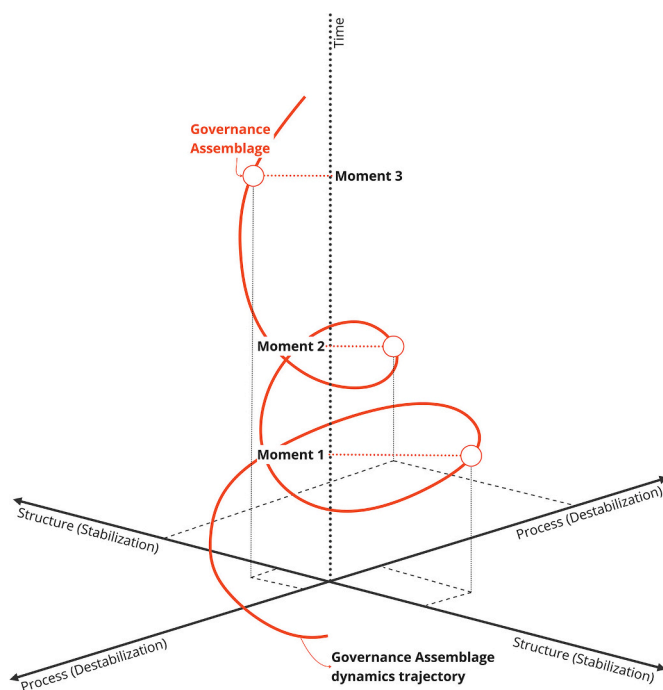


Fig. 1. Schematic representation of governance dynamics shifting between structure and process over time (adapted from Muminovic, 2015).

dialectical relationships between four key components: network structure, network process (termed “agency” in Marsh and Smith’s model), broader context, and network outcome (Marsh, 1998; Marsh & Smith, 2000; see Fig. 2). The first dialectical relationship is between network structure and network process, acknowledging that while structures shape actors’ opportunities and constraints, actors also modify structures through interaction and negotiation. The second dialectical relationship is between networks and the broader context, indicating that external political, economic, and ideological shifts influence policy networks, while network dynamics, in turn, contribute to changes in the broader governance landscape. The third dialectical relationship links networks and policy outcomes, emphasizing that outcomes are not merely the result of network interactions but also recursively reshape network structure and process over time.

There are two key innovations of Marsh and Smith’s model. First, it synthesizes structural and processual perspectives, making network–outcome analysis both structure- and process-related. Second, it decomposes networks into finer, analyzable components, i.e., actors, relations and interactions, operationalizing the model as an analytical tool (Evans, 2001; Marsh & Smith, 2000; Sacli, 2011). However, it still treats network structure and process as independent variables rather than embedding them in a fully dynamic framework (Sacli, 2011). This approach contrasts with emerging evidence from urban governance, where structure and process are deeply intertwined and fluid rather than separate, static variables. To address this limitation, the following section incorporates AT as a conceptual tool to refine and reassemble the dialectical model for urban governance.

2.4. Assembling the dialectical model for urban governance

Given the strong conceptual ties between policy network research and urban governance, Marsh and Smith’s model offers a promising foundation for understanding governance–outcome interdependencies. Specifically, each of the variables specified by Marsh and Smith can find an analogue in governance. Governance structure aligns with institutional arrangements, authority hierarchies, business structures, and socio-economic norms, representing relatively stable power/resource relations (Amin & Thrift, 1995; MacLeod & Goodwin, 1999). Governance process means interactions/behaviors of actors shaped by individual knowledge, skills, mutual trust, reciprocity, and negotiation, all of which are contingent and context-specific (Dickinson, 2014; Rhodes, 2007). Context consists of “macro political conditions, as well as the specific context where the steering action is operated” (Sacli, 2011, p. 4). Governance outcomes encompass both tangible and intangible effects, ranging from direct outputs, such as new infrastructure, policy initiatives, and urban landscape transformations, to more abstract and long-term socio-economic and political impacts.

However, Marsh and Smith’s model fundamentally contradicts the indivisible structure–process entanglement inherent in urban governance. The contradiction stems from an ontological inconsistency between traditional politico-economic perspectives and the dynamic nature of urban governance. These classical politico-economic perspectives, which also underpin the dialectical model of policy networks, are largely rooted in structuralism and reductionism, emphasizing

stability, predictability, and clearly delineated mechanisms (Briassoulis, 2019; Kamalipour & Peimani, 2015; Van Wezemael, 2008). They often impose overly deterministic and standardized explanatory frameworks on policy and governance phenomena (Briassoulis, 2019). Nevertheless, as previously discussed, urban governance is far more dynamic in reality, shaped by evolving interactions, contingent decisions, and shifting macro- and micro-level contexts. Directly applying frameworks derived from traditional politico-economic perspectives, such as the dialectical model of policy networks, without modification risks oversimplifying these complexities.

Recognizing this ontological misalignment, scholars including Van Wezemael (2008), Brenner et al. (2011), McFarlane (2011), Briassoulis (2019), Wang (2019), Wang, Wu, and Zhang (2024) have advocated AT as an alternative ontological basis for governance research. With its emphasis on relationality, fluidity, and emergent properties, AT offers a conceptual pathway to capture governance’s inherent dynamism and complexity (Allen & Cochrane, 2010; McCann & Ward, 2012; Wang, 2019). Since the early 2000s, AT has been selectively applied as a descriptive orientation to inspire new conceptual frameworks and methodological guidelines for governance research (Briassoulis, 2019). However, as AT remains primarily an intellectual perspective rather than a structured methodological framework, many scholars have pragmatically integrated Assemblage insights with existing approaches to develop adaptive research strategies (Spies & Alff, 2020; Wang, Wu, & Zhang, 2024). Such approaches consistently “generate new ideas within existing theories without abolishing or replacing them” (Muminovic, 2015, p. 296). Given that we have already adopted AT to reconcile the structure–process dichotomy, embedding governance–outcome dialectics within an Assemblage-based framework is both conceptually justified and feasible.

Nevertheless, two key concerns must be addressed before its implementation. First, since the dialectical model of policy networks originates from structuralist traditions, its compatibility with AT requires careful evaluation. Second, while conceptually feasible, the embedding of governance–outcome dialectics within an Assemblage-based framework requires further operationalization to develop applicable methodological strategies. Although AT has been employed in urban governance studies for some time (Brenner et al., 2011; Briassoulis, 2019; McFarlane, 2011; Van Wezemael, 2008; Wang, Wu, & Zhang, 2024), most have applied it descriptively to critique structuralist perspectives. A systematic integration of AT into governance–outcome analysis, particularly in dialectical models, is absent.

To address the first concern, we draw upon scholars such as Delanda (2006a), Sheppard (2008), Müller (2015), and Sayer (1984), who emphasize that both dialectical thinking and Deleuze–Guattarian Assemblages foreground dynamic relationships among interdependent, heterogeneous variables. This shared conceptual foundation suggests that dialectics can be effectively embedded within an Assemblage-based framework. In the case of the second concern, this study advances beyond previous descriptive applications of AT. Specifically, we operationalize three key ontological principles of Assemblage—heterogeneity, relationality, and dynamism—to systematically integrate the dialectical governance–outcome relationship into an Assemblage-based framework we introduced earlier in Section 2.2.

- Heterogeneity:** We retain the original analytical variables from previous dialectical models but adopt a flat ontology to restructure their relationships, ensuring analytical granularity while capturing the fluid, relational nature of governance. Specifically, we extend the governance Assemblage (Fig. 1) into a governance–outcome Assemblage (Fig. 3), internalizing all variables (governance structure, process, outcome, and context) as heterogeneous yet inseparable components of a fluid and dynamic whole.
- Relationality:** Unlike conventional policy analysis, which compartmentalizes dialectical relationships into three separate sub-dialectics—between network and outcome, between network and

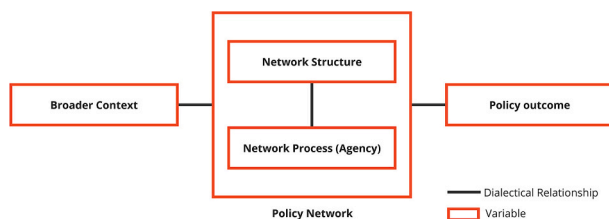


Fig. 2. Key elements of the original dialectical model (based on Marsh & Smith, 2000).

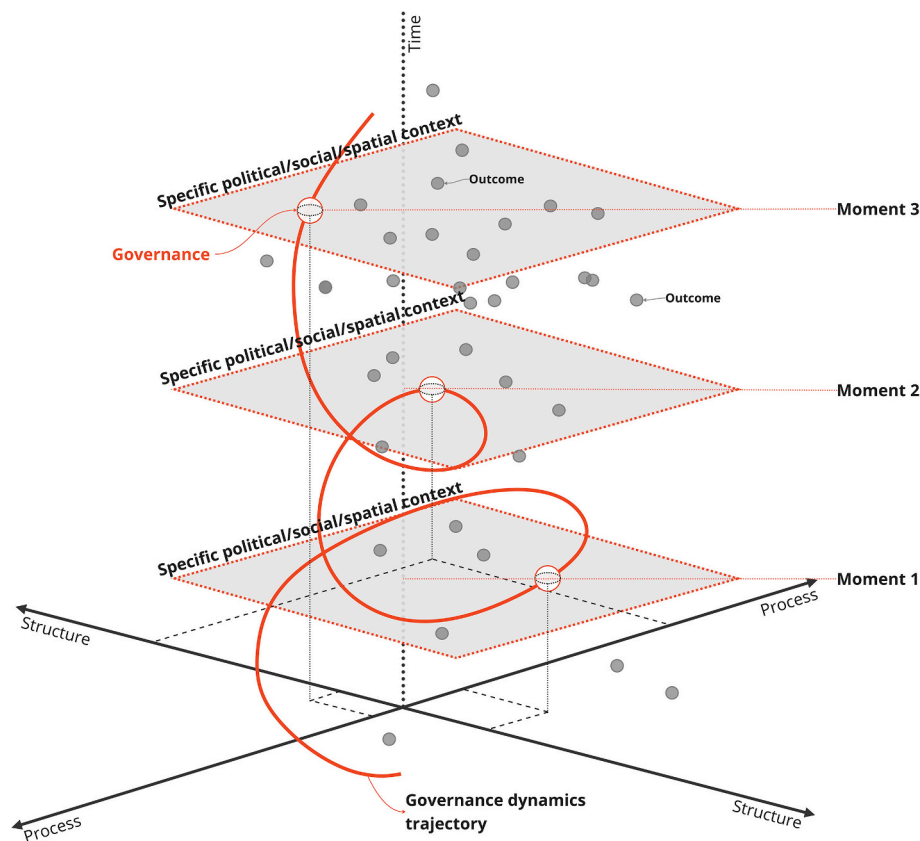


Fig. 3. The embryonic Assemblage–dialectical model of governance–outcome relationship.

context, and between structure and process—our approach rejects the notion that these relationships are quantifiable or have distinct, independent boundaries. Instead, we argue that the governance–outcome relationship emerges from the continuous and dynamic interplay between all components of the governance–outcome Assemblage, where each interaction, conjunction, or interplay between these components contributes to the broader, evolving governance–outcome relationship.

3. **Dynamism:** We embed governance–outcome dialectics within the structure–process continuum to reflect how the structure–process entanglement is reproduced in the governance–outcome interdependency. As illustrated by the red trajectory in Fig. 3, governance structure and process continuously remix across temporal and spatial variations, generating diverse outcomes at different moments and contextual scales. The vertical time axis highlights governance–outcome dialectics as evolving syntheses shaped by historical decisions, emergent interactions, and future developments. Additionally, the gray layers represent the contextual boundaries framing governance–outcome interactions at specific time points (e.g., Moments 1, 2, and 3), each influenced by political, social, spatial, and institutional factors.

The new Assemblage–dialectical model of the governance–outcome relationship (1) is fully built upon the structure–process fluidity, (2) moves beyond the descriptive use of AT, and (3) incorporates the temporal–spatial dimensions to enhance its applicability across different governance contexts.

With the growing prominence of Assemblage-informed research, scholars increasingly recognize the methodological incompatibility between structuralist/reductionist perspectives and subjects characterized by relational, dynamic, and provisional qualities—collectively referred to as “Assemblages” (Briassoulis, 2019; Van Wezemael, 2008; Wang, Wu, & Zhang, 2024). Specifically, scholars highlight how differences in

three key methodological choices can introduce biases:

1. **Variable selection:** Narrowly focusing on specific components of an Assemblage or restricting the scope of research dimensions and scales may overlook broader relational dynamics arising from the interplay of diverse components, leading to incomplete or skewed understandings of the Assemblage’s complexity (Fox & Alldred, 2015).
2. **Temporal dimensions:** Baker and McGuirk (2017) emphasize the importance of considering temporal dynamics to understand how Assemblages transform over time, and that cross-sectional analysis neglects the continuous, evolving nature of Assemblages, producing static interpretations that miss inherent fluidity.
3. **Reasoning modes:** Linear causal reasoning oversimplifies the emergent, contingent interactions characteristic of Assemblages, where non-linear reasoning better aligns with their complexity (Bridge, 2021).

These methodological choices may similarly affect the interpretation of the governance–outcome Assemblage. As illustrated in Fig. 3, the dialectical governance–outcome relationship constitutes a dynamic, and relational whole. When interpreting such a “typical Assemblage-featured” entity, as commonly observed in research, the application of structuralist-oriented perspectives—such as isolation of specific variables (e.g., particular outcomes, selected governance components, and restricted contextual factors), performance of cross-sectional analyses, or reliance on causal reasoning—risks an incomplete or distorted understanding of governance–outcome dialectics. These methodological choices tend to frame governance–outcome relationships as fixed points along the structure–process continuum (represented by the three points along the red trajectory in Fig. 3). These approaches implicitly establish a measurable balance between structure and process, enabling the identification of the more dominant as the primary factor shaping

outcomes at given moments. Consequently, we believe that although studies on governance–outcome Assemblages do not display the stark dichotomies common in general network–outcome research, structuralist-inclined methodological tendencies might still generate structure-oriented or process-oriented interpretative biases. In contrast, studies employing holistic, longitudinal, and relational methodologies are more likely to fully embrace the Assemblage-based perspective illustrated by the continuous red trajectory in Fig. 3. This approach conceptualizes governance–outcome relationships as emergent, context-specific, and continuously evolving interplays of structure and process. Accordingly, we identify three interpretive tendencies that may emerge in empirical studies on governance–outcome dialectics based on different methodological choices: structure-oriented, process-oriented, and Assemblage-based.

To assess whether these tendencies manifest among empirical studies, and how they are correlated with the methodological factors identified—or additional, unforeseen influences—we conduct a systematic literature review in the following sections. This review examines how governance–outcome relationships are framed in empirical studies and evaluates the methodological choices or other factors shaping different interpretations.

3. Review methodology

Guided by the preceding conceptual model, we systematically collected **empirical studies** that touched upon the dialectical governance–outcome relationship within the context of urban (re)development, and further examined whether and how their methodological orientation affected their interpretation of this relationship. The selection of relevant articles followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines (Page et al., 2021). This section explains our approach in detail.

3.1. Data source and search strategy

In this study, we developed a comprehensive search query to identify articles examining the relationship between governance and outcomes in urban (re)development. Between January and May 2023, we conducted multiple iterative searches in *Web of Science* and *Scopus* databases to test and refine this query, ultimately finalizing the search strings shown in Table 1. The final search was conducted on 22 May 2023, in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021) to

ensure transparency and reproducibility and enable future updates of the review.

The primary objective was to ensure that articles retrieved simultaneously addressed four key themes: “governance,” “governance outcome,” “relationship,” and “urban (re)development.” To encompass all relevant articles across disciplines, we included synonyms and equivalent terms for these concepts from fields such as urban governance, political science, geography, and sociology. To balance comprehensiveness and accuracy, we used several strategies to refine our search query.

First, we streamlined the search term library by comparing the impact of including versus excluding certain synonyms for each concept. For example, synonyms of “achieve,” such as “accomplish,” “complete,” and “fulfill,” were excluded from the relationship category, as their inclusion did not yield additional valuable articles. This process was applied to other keyword groups, resulting in a limited range of words in each column.

Second, we used logical operators to improve the accuracy of search results. As shown in Table 1, rows represent union (“OR”) combinations of keywords, while columns indicate intersection (“AND”) combinations. The “AND” operator ensured that all specified terms appeared in results, while “OR” broadened the search by including synonyms of the four key concepts. Additionally, we applied the proximity operator Near/0 to ensure that terms such as “urban governance” appeared as a single phrase rather than being separated by unrelated words. We also used relevance filters, such as “topic” (title–keywords–abstract) and “title,” to specify the necessity of different word strings appearing in the results. Notably, studies on governance modes/models were included due to their significant insights into the governance–outcome relationship, even if they did not have the terms “governance” and “outcome” appearing simultaneously in their titles, keywords, or abstracts.

Third, we excluded terms or indicators that might bias the search toward specific types of governance practices/research. We did not prescribe any geographical scales, locations, authorships, or publication years in the search query to ensure an inclusive and unbiased dataset. To capture governance practices across all scales, we specifically included terms such as “regional,” “city,” “neighborhood,” “residential,” and “housing” under the urban (re)development category. This strategy helped prevent the wording “urban” from inadvertently narrowing the geographical scope of the studies. Furthermore, we avoided using loaded terms such as “successful” in the governance outcome category, as our study sought to encompass both positive and negative outcomes.

Table 1
Overview of search terms.

OR ↓	AND →			
Relevancy Filter	TITLE	TITLE-ABSTRACT-KEYWORDS		
String Group	<i>Governance</i>	<i>Governance Outcome</i>	<i>Relationship</i>	<i>Urban (re)development</i> (Near/0)
Search Term	govern* ^a state decision-making policy-making participat* stakeholder governance mode governance model governance process governance role	outcome effect impact performance result differentiation consequence change transformation role	caus* achieve* explain* influence affect mechanism restrict create impact drive role transform* relation* led/lead interven* respon*	regional urban city neighborhood residential housing development redevelopment renewal regeneration restructuring revitalization governance

^a The asterisk (*) is used as a wildcard character in search strategies. It allows searches for multiple variations of a word by truncating it at a certain point. For example, “govern*” includes all words that start with “govern,” such as govern, government, and governance.

In conclusion, the terms in our query underwent a rigorous screening process to ensure that they effectively captured the breadth and depth of the governance–outcome relationship in urban (re)development.

3.2. Study selection and data extraction

The search strategy generated 8002 raw records. We included only peer-reviewed journal articles written in English. After removing duplicates, 3941 articles were further screened. Title and abstract screening excluded articles that were off-topic, i.e., articles that focused neither on governance and/or governance outcomes nor their relationship, articles that were outside the urban (re)development context, and articles about studies that were not empirical. If we could not determine the suitability of articles from their titles and abstracts alone, we examined the introductions. During the full-text review of 160 articles, we aimed to identify empirical studies with a dialectical diagnosis of the governance–outcome relationship in urban (re)development. Finally, 41 empirical studies remained for systematic review. Fig. 4 presents the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of the article selection process with detailed inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Data extraction was a two-part process. First, we independently reviewed all 41 articles to extract information on core methodological dimensions—such as governance–outcome variables examined, data collection methods, and reasoning modes—as outlined in the conceptual model (Fig. 3). In addition, we collected contextual details including geographical components, (re)development issues/programs, administrative scale, research focus scope, etc., could introduce further interpretative variations beyond the predefined methodological factors (see

Table 2).

Second, we focused on the studies’ overall findings and conclusions related to the dialectical governance–outcome relationship. Studies were placed along three tendencies based on their underlying explanatory orientation: structure-oriented, process-oriented, and Assemblage-based. Particularly, we argue that the three interpretative tendencies function as heuristic tools rather than rigid classifications. The placement work followed a two-step process.

In the first step, we identified whether studies adopted an Assemblage-based interpretation by assessing whether they framed governance–outcome relationships as co-evolving and relational or as predefined and causally directional. Studies that avoided deterministic causal models and instead emphasized governance–outcome interdependence as a fluid, adaptive configuration were placed in the Assemblage-based group. Common phrasing in these studies included expressions such as “governance (outcome) dynamics emerge through the interplay of heterogeneous elements” or “outcomes recursively reshape governance structures and actor dynamics.” These studies rejected fixed causal hierarchies and instead highlighted governance as an open-ended, continuously evolving phenomenon.

For studies that presented stable and explicit causal mechanisms, we proceeded to the second step to determine whether their explanatory emphasis leaned toward structure or process. Given that governance–outcome relationships exist along a continuum, some studies exhibited overlapping characteristics. However, the placement of these studies was based on their dominant analytical emphasis. Studies would be placed in the structure-oriented tendency if they ascribed primary explanatory weight to governance structures, typically featuring causal

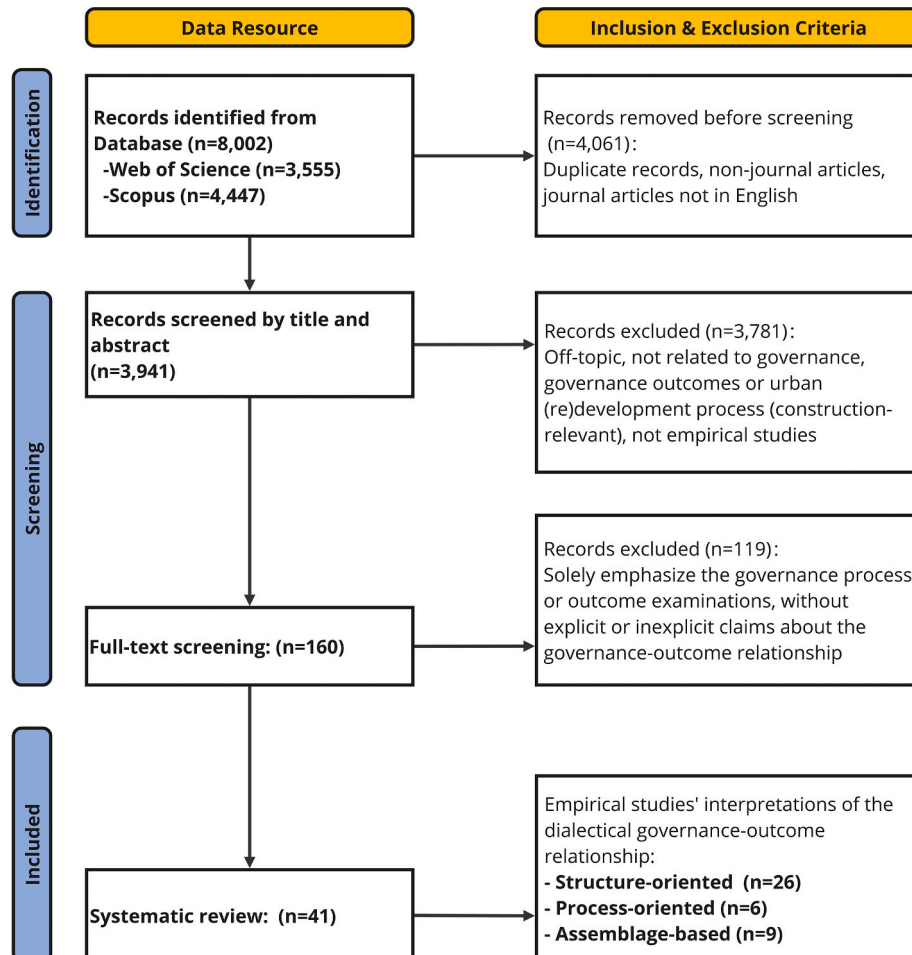


Fig. 4. PRISMA diagram.

Table 2
Frequency of studies by variable category.

Variable	Category	Count (%)	Variable	Category	Count (%)
Administrative/Geographical Scale of Governance Project	National	5 (12 %)	Governance–outcome variables	Structure–outcome	19 (46 %)
	Regional	1 (2 %)		Process–outcome	12 (29 %)
	City/Municipal	12 (29 %)		Network–context	3 (7 %)
	Sub-city	8 (20 %)		Whole	7 (17 %)
	Neighborhood	15 (37 %)			
Governed Issue	State-led urban redevelopment	28 (68 %)	Methodology	Qualitative	36 (88 %)
	Small-scale urban regeneration	3 (7 %)		Quantitative	1 (2 %)
	Cross-regional development	2 (5 %)		Mixed	4 (10 %)
	Others	8 (20 %)			
Characteristic of Governing Issue	Residential relocation-related	18 (44 %)	Temporal Characteristic of Research	Cross-sectional	33 (80 %)
	Non-residential relocation-related	23 (56 %)		Longitudinal	8 (20 %)
Research Focus Scope	Single case	32 (78 %)	Reasoning modes	Causal	25 (61 %)
	Series of cases	4 (10 %)		Relational	5 (12 %)
	Comparative studies	5 (12 %)		Both	11 (27 %)
			Interpretation of the Governance -Outcome Relationship	Structure-oriented	26 (63 %)
				Process-oriented	6 (15 %)
				Assemblage-based	9 (22 %)

statements such as “governance structures shape project implementation effectiveness.” Process-oriented studies emphasized actor agency, interactions, and contingency, often using phrasing like “contingent dynamics drive certain outcomes.”

An overview of the data extracted from the 41 empirical studies is presented in Appendix 1.

4. Review results and discussion

In this section, we first present an overview of the data extraction results (see Table 2). Then, we elaborate on the extent to which patterns and dynamics emerging from the studies’ theoretical or methodological orientations relate to their differences in interpretation of the dialectics of the governance–outcome relationship.

4.1. Overview of review results

The data extracted showed remarkable patterns in four themes: (1) (re)development issues/programs researched; (2) selection of governance–outcome variables; (3) data collection and methodologies; and (4) reasoning modes. First, the studies examined a diverse range of (re) development issues, including state-led urban redevelopment, small-scale regeneration, and cross-regional projects. State-led urban (re) development ($n = 28$), particularly in residential relocation ($n = 18$), predominated. Second, although the conceptual model in Section 2 prescribes four interdependent governance–outcome variables—structure, process, context, and outcome—only seven studies incorporated all four. The vast majority ($n = 34$) isolated specific variables, examining their interdependencies rather than their holistic entanglement. Third, clear trends emerged in the temporal characteristics of data and methodological approaches. Most studies adopted a cross-sectional perspective ($n = 33$), analyzing governance–outcome dynamics at a fixed point, while longitudinal studies ($n = 8$) were notably scarce. Among the latter, half relied on retrospective data ($n = 4$), reflecting the challenges of tracking urban (re)development over extended periods. Methodologically, only one study employed purely

quantitative methods, whereas qualitative ($n = 36$) and mixed approaches ($n = 4$) dominated. Fourth, studies varied in their reasoning approaches. Most ($n = 25$) employed causal reasoning, assuming predefined causal sequences between selected governance–outcome variables, while a smaller subset ($n = 5$) used relational reasoning, emphasizing dynamic interdependencies. Additionally, 11 studies applied a hybrid approach, incorporating both causal and relational perspectives.

Based on their different interpretive orientations of the dialectical governance–outcome relationship, studies were grouped along three interpretive tendencies: structure-oriented ($n = 26$), emphasizing governance structures as primary determinants of outcomes; process-oriented ($n = 6$), prioritizing the role of actor agency and interactions; and Assemblage-based ($n = 9$), conceptualizing governance–outcome dynamics as an emergent, co-evolving process. A comparative analysis showed that the three methodological factors identified in the conceptual model in Section 2—variable selection, temporal dimensions, and reasoning modes—were closely related to studies’ interpretations of governance–outcome dialectics (see Fig. 5). However, whether and how variations in these methodological factors shape different interpretations, as prescribed by the Assemblage–dialectical model, warrant further examination.

The review results highlight two key issues. First, Shen et al. (2020) was the only empirical study among the 41 selected that specifically applied Assemblage, although only descriptively. In this study, Assemblage was primarily employed as a conceptual lens to characterize governance in a mega-urban project in Shanghai as a processual, dynamic, and horizontal network, where state-owned corporations, agencies, and multi-level governments collectively formed the core governance entity. This arrangement blurred traditional administrative boundaries, enabling a flexible division of labor between state and non-state actors. Unlike conventional hierarchical governance models, actors within this horizontal network did not hold predefined roles or fixed positions of authority. Instead, their roles were shaped dynamically through ongoing interactions within the network and adapted fluidly to shifting circumstances. While this perspective underscored governance

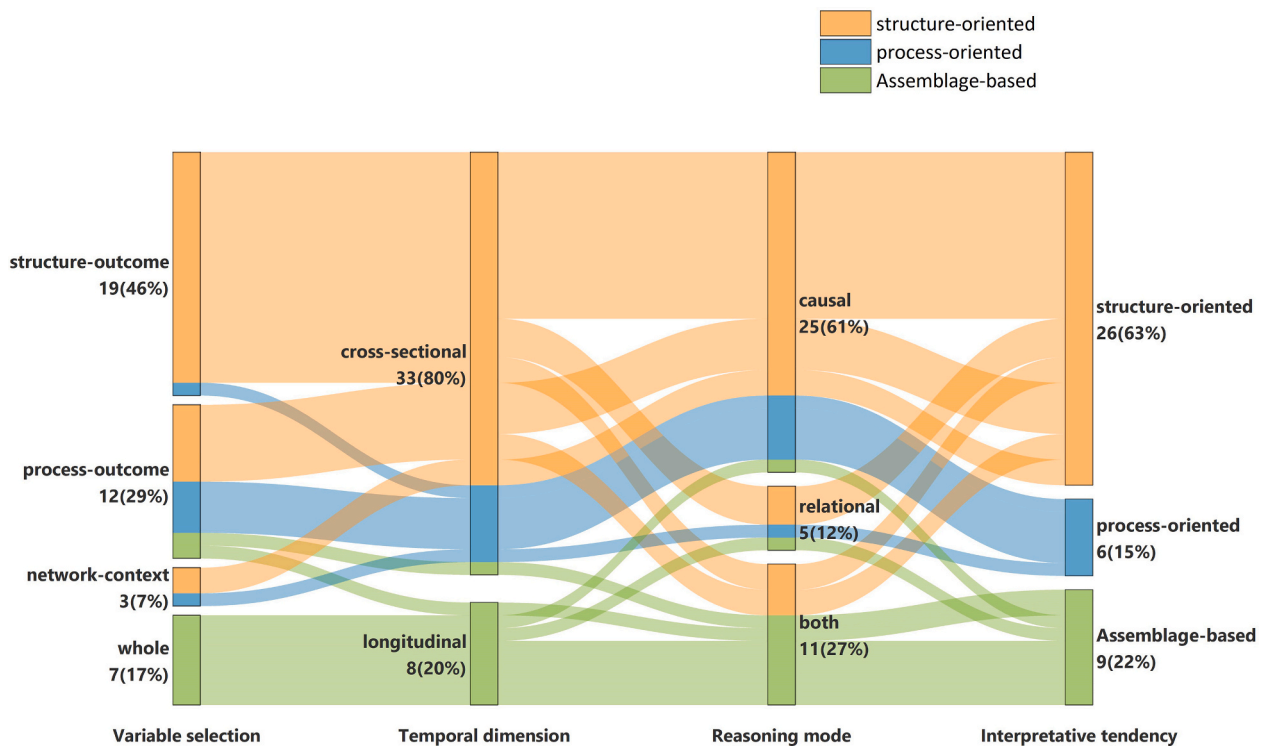


Fig. 5. Distribution of articles with different interpretations of the governance–outcome relationship by different methodological orientations.

as an adaptive and emergent process, it stopped short of fully operationalizing Assemblage as an analytical framework for systematically examining governance–outcome entanglements. However, it effectively demonstrated that the adoption of Assemblage-related perspectives could inform future governance practices by emphasizing the necessity of accommodating shifting actor relationships, emergent policy responses, and changing contextual conditions rather than relying on rigid institutional structures.

Second, the analysis reveals an unexpected geographical concentration of studies in the Asia–Pacific region, particularly China, along with authorship centered around a few key scholars. As the systematic search and screening process did not predefine geographical scope or specific authorships (as outlined in Section 3), we argue that the predominance of China-focused studies and the recurrent presence of scholars such as Fulong Wu reflect empirical patterns rather than selection bias. This trend likely reflects China’s rapid urbanization, institutional complexity, and policy-driven development, which generated diverse governance outcomes within a readily observable timeframe, making it a focal point for governance–outcome research. Author centrality coincides with geographical concentration: in the raw dataset, Fulong Wu was already the most frequently appearing author, concurrently with China being the most frequently studied country. This synchronicity reinforces his scholarly influence and leadership in urban governance debates, particularly in research on urban China. These patterns highlight the broader structure of the field, where rapidly developing countries like China serve as focal points for urban governance research, and a few highly influential scholars shape the discourse on Chinese governance. However, as these patterns reflect prevailing academic trends and citation networks rather than methodological constraints in our selection process, and given that geographical distribution is not the primary focus of this review, the following sections will focus on the correlation between the methodological orientations of empirical studies and their interpretations of governance–outcome relationships.

4.2. Governance–outcome variables studied

Distinct patterns emerged in how studies selected governance–outcome variables for examination. First, most articles examined specific variable combinations rather than holistically considering all four prescribed variables (structure, process, context, and outcome). The three most frequently analyzed combinations were structure–outcome ($n = 19$), process–outcome ($n = 12$), and network–context ($n = 3$). Second, studies that examined only a subset of variables, rather than all four, tended to develop structure-oriented or process-oriented interpretations. These studies primarily focused on outcomes that were closely linked to specific aspects of governance networks, such as the advantages or limitations of different power structures, the roles and impacts of specific actors, or the dynamics associated with contextual factors. This narrowed analytical scope often simplified governance–outcome relationships, making structure-oriented or process-oriented interpretations less robust. Third, studies that incorporated all four variables (classified as “whole”) tended to present more nuanced depictions, often aligning with an Assemblage-based interpretation. These studies were more likely to highlight the fluid and dynamic interdependencies among governance components, benefiting from and enabling more comprehensive theoretical or methodological engagements, such as AT and asymmetric structural analysis (Kim et al., 2021; Li, 2015; Li et al., 2018; Shen et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2022; Wu & Zhang, 2022; Yao et al., 2021).

The selection of analytical units in the studies reviewed exhibited two distinct characteristics. First, many studies further disaggregated structure and process into finer components to examine their relationships with particular outcomes. For example, structure was broken down into institutional hierarchies (Lin, 2018; Tian & Yao, 2018), customary and cultural connections (Wang, 2022; Wu & Xiong, 2022), interpersonal relationships (Parés et al., 2014), discursive elements (e.g., statements, plans, and policies), instruments and mechanisms (McGuirk, 2000; Xu & Lin, 2019; Zhang et al., 2021; Zhuang et al., 2019). Similarly, governance actors were differentiated based on human/non-human (Feng et al., 2022; Zhuang et al., 2019), material/immateral

(Lin, 2018; Tsang & Hsu, 2022; Zhang et al., 2016), and fixed/mobile (Kim et al., 2021) distinctions. Second, some studies examined governance using hybrid analytical units that combined structure and process elements. This was particularly evident in research on local governance in urban China, where institutional arrangements were the primary focus during the decision-making phase, while interactions between state and non-state actors became central in the delivery phase of projects (He, 2007; Li & Wu, 2012a, 2012b; Wu, 2016, 2018; Wu et al., 2022). This fits what Gross (2017, p. 565) defined as “hybrid governance”—“a unique combination of national infrastructure and local agency”—where agenda-setting remains highly nationalized, project operations are localized through civic actors, and strategies rely on market-based resource dependencies due to weak local fiscal capacity. Notably, the selection of analytical units did not necessarily determine studies’ interpretative tendencies regarding governance–outcome relationships. As shown in Fig. 5, a focus on structure- or process-related variables did not always lead studies to adopt structure-oriented or process-oriented explanations. This is largely related to the temporal perspectives of studies, which will be discussed in Section 4.3.

4.3. Temporal characteristics of studies

While all eight longitudinal studies unraveled the dialectical interactions between governance and governance outcomes as Assemblage-based, cross-sectional perspectives dominated, often framing the governance–outcome relationship as either structure-oriented or process-oriented. We identified two key factors contributing to the prevalence of cross-sectional observations. First, cross-sectional perspectives effectively capture the fundamental characteristics of governance–outcome relationships (Parés et al., 2014; Wang & Clarke, 2021). Take the neoliberal governance model as an example. Generally, cross-sectional studies emphasize an inertial and stable association between market-oriented, profit-driven behaviors and specific outcomes, such as rapid economic growth coupled with socio-economic segregation and inequality (Parés et al., 2014). This facilitates rapid identification of the adoption of neoliberal governance and provides a simplified explanatory framework for predicting its likely outcomes. Second, outcome measurements were typically made in the later stages of urban (re)development, meaning most studies presented a snapshot of the post-completion governance–outcome relationship (Wang, 2022). A common tendency in the governance–outcome studies reviewed is that they tended to focus on immediate outputs and short-term effects, with little attention paid to impacts that take longer to materialize. As a result, studies rarely connected long-term social issues to specific governance processes, limiting the depth of governance–outcome analysis.

Two notable findings on the temporal perspectives of studies emerged. First, cross-sectional observations exhibited two distinct patterns. One was the divergence in conclusions about the relationship between the same pair of variables. For example, studies examining participatory governance reached contrasting findings. Some post-assessments concluded that greater civic autonomy and public participation enhanced residents’ satisfaction with urban redevelopment (Jin et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2022). However, studies focusing on the execution phase of (re)development argued that excessive autonomy weakened the state’s leadership in decision-making, leading to inefficiencies and slower (re)development progress, ultimately negatively impacting residents’ satisfaction (Chen & Zhang, 2021). The second pattern was the varying interpretations of governance–outcome dialectics depending on temporal perspectives, even within similar scenarios. For instance, studies investigating city-level participatory governance arrived at different conclusions based on their temporal framing. Case-specific cross-sectional studies, such as Zhuang et al. (2019), emphasized structure-related elements, such as enabling policies, participation agendas, and digital platforms, as key factors driving higher-quality and more efficient public participation. In contrast, Cao (2022a)

longitudinally reflected on the trajectory of transforming public participation in the city of Nanjing and pointed out that process elements, such as unforeseen and contingent informal participation (e.g., protests and resistance), were more influential in shaping governance dynamics than pre-designed participation schemes.

Second, all Assemblage-based interpretations were embedded within longitudinal perspectives, which ensured greater comprehensiveness in capturing the dialectics of the governance–outcome relationship. These studies were more likely to portray governance as fluid and dynamic, effectively illustrating the interplay between structure and process. While cross-sectional studies tended to focus on “big moments” and highlighted only governance–outcome dynamics that stood out, longitudinal studies allowed for a more holistic observation of both macro- and micro-level changes, as well as the interconnections between various dynamics. For example, both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies examined shifts in China’s urban governance over recent decades (Shin, 2009b; Wang, Zhang, & Wu, 2022; Wu, 2002; Wu et al., 2022; Wu & Zhang, 2022; Zhang et al., 2016), yet they interpreted these dynamics differently. Cross-sectional studies tended to develop structure-oriented explanations, identifying distinct governance models across different scales, ranging from large-scale property-led redevelopment to small-scale participatory renewal, and separately profiling their relationships with specific outcomes (Shin, 2009b; Wang, Zhang, & Wu, 2022, 2024; Zhang et al., 2016). In contrast, longitudinal studies viewed governance variations across scales and time points as an evolving “life course” of a single governance model, linking it to multiple interrelated outcomes. For example, the longitudinal reflection by Wu et al. (2022) emphasized the continuum between different (re) development programs across China’s various urban practices and highlighted the inheritance of one specific governance model, which he termed “state entrepreneurialism.” Rather than labelling different governance practices as discrete models, Wu et al. (2022) interpreted these differences between cases as the flexibility and adaptiveness of state entrepreneurialism, where governance continually evolved through interactions with different governance outcomes. This perspective also sheds light on the longstanding dilemma of China’s state role in urban (re)development: the oscillation between seemingly contradictory missions—“ensuring the functioning of the welfare system and maintaining social stability,” while simultaneously engaging in “entrepreneurial behavior of maximizing revenue/profits” (Wu, 2004, p. 461). These dual missions reflect the dual logic of governance as both structure and process: while welfare provision and stability maintenance rely on institutional continuity and top-down control (structure), entrepreneurial practices demand flexibility, negotiation, and adaptive strategies (process). In this sense, state entrepreneurialism exemplifies governance as a dynamic Assemblage in which structure evolves alongside process, rather than standing in opposition to it. This fluid interplay enables governance to respond to shifting contextual demands while still adhering to underlying structural logics. As such, studies focusing on structure- or process-related variables do not necessarily adopt structure- or process-oriented interpretations—especially from a longitudinal perspective where structure and process are fundamentally interdependent and co-productive in shaping governance–outcome dynamics.

4.4. Reasoning modes

Both causal and relational reasoning were employed to analyze the dialectics between different variables. Overall, studies that applied causal reasoning have predominantly adopted structure-oriented frameworks to depict the governance–outcome relationship (19/25). Notably, only a few studies (5/41) applied relational reasoning. Surprisingly, contrary to the expectations set by the conceptual model, relational reasoning in empirical cases rarely resulted in an Assemblage-based interpretation, occurring in only one out of five studies. Instead, a larger number of studies (11/41) integrated both reasoning modes, often

leading to Assemblage-based interpretations: seven of the nine studies that presented Assemblage-based perspectives combined causal and relational reasoning. The wide application of causal reasoning in empirical studies is largely due to its ability to provide tangible, actionable insights that can directly inform decision-making. In contrast, pure relational reasoning is more effective in revealing the complexity and dynamism of governance but tends to focus on broader structural and systemic reflections rather than offering concrete, immediately implementable governance solutions. It prioritizes understanding the interdependencies and emergent properties of governance rather than prescribing specific policy interventions. However, across the selected studies, two sets of research critically challenged the applicability of causal reasoning in governance–outcome analysis.

The first group of studies identified two forms of entanglement in governance outcomes, making it difficult, if not impossible, to delineate a clear causal sequence between different variables, particularly across different types of outcomes. First, outcomes with varying temporal and spatial characteristics were inherently nested. While the causal links between governance networks and macro-level, immediate outputs are relatively straightforward, the interrelations between governance and long-term, localized impacts are significantly more complex. For instance, in many urban regeneration projects (Jin et al., 2020; Li et al., 2018; Lin et al., 2022; Shin, 2009b; Wu & Xiong, 2022; Zhang & Moore-Cherry, 2022), immediate effects such as improved infrastructure and increased economic activity are clearly attributable to governance actions. However, long-term local impacts reveal a far more intricate interplay (Lin et al., 2022; Yang & Ley, 2019). While regeneration projects may initially boost property values and attract investment, they can also trigger gentrification, leading to the displacement of original residents and significant shifts in the social fabric of certain areas (Liu & Yau, 2020; Shin, 2009a, 2009b; Wu, 2016). Over time, areas with a high concentration of displaced residents often face severe social challenges due to limited access to affordable housing and weakened community cohesion, contributing to broader city-level socio-economic inequalities (Wang, Shen, & Luo, 2022; Wang & Wang, 2019). These complex, long-term consequences tend to emerge at a larger spatial scale and take longer to materialize, shaped by an interplay between multiple socio-economic factors and local responses (Jin et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2021; Tsang & Hsu, 2022; Yao et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2022). This makes it difficult to attribute broader impacts to specific governance processes in a purely causal manner.

Second, a single governance outcome can be multidimensional, with different aspects responding inconsistently to governance interventions. For instance, Van Marissing et al. (2006) investigated the relationship between urban governance and social cohesion in Dutch urban restructuring processes and highlighted inconsistencies between different dimensions of social cohesion in the case of Hoograven's Heart. They distinguished between “horizontal social cohesion” (bonds among residents within neighborhoods) and “vertical social cohesion” (linkages between citizens, policymakers, and stakeholders), demonstrating that governance interventions influenced these dimensions in divergent ways. In this case, unclear divisions of responsibility among local authorities, developers, and tenants led to the failure of a planned restructuring project aimed at revitalizing the main shopping street and its surrounding blocks. This governance failure weakened vertical social cohesion by eroding trust between residents and institutional actors, damaging residents' confidence in future collaborations with the same organizations. However, it unexpectedly strengthened horizontal social cohesion, as shared frustration and opposition to the failed restructuring plan reinforced neighborhood bonds and a collective sense of attachment among residents.

The second group of articles argued that cause-and-effect mechanisms rarely work linearly between governance actions and governance outcomes in reality. For instance, active citizenship is often framed as a reaction against hierarchical governance, with citizens, in defense of their interests, actively seeking to engage in collective decision-making

from which they were previously excluded (Shin, 2013; Smith, 2020; Tian & Yao, 2018). However, Cao (2022b) provided a counterexample. In the early 2000s, the city of Nanjing, China, underwent extensive neoliberal urban redevelopment, gentrifying neighborhoods into commercial districts and tourism attractions, often at the expense of large-scale displacement and eradication of dwellers. The prevailing perception that urban redevelopment equated to the exclusion of non-profitable populations and properties became deeply ingrained in the public consciousness, fostering enduring skepticism toward redevelopment initiatives. This deep-seated historical perception led to residents' long-lasting reluctance to cooperate with authorities, even after participatory mechanisms were introduced and redevelopment objectives shifted away from gentrification. In this sense, residents' inherent resistance was not a direct effect of a specific governance model, nor was governance style a clear cause of their opposition, challenging the linearity of cause-and-effect reasoning in governance–outcome relationships. Similarly, exogenous interventions can abruptly disrupt or redefine cause-and-effect cycles. Wu et al. (2022) noted that China's recent transition in urban redevelopment schemes from large-scale urban renewal to incremental regeneration, was more a reinforcement of the new state ethos under President Xi Jinping rather than a sequential response to excessive Chinese urbanization and increasing land development costs. The national policy shift immediately translated into halting real estate-driven projects, enforcing government austerity measures, and restructuring governance models to reinforce state centralization. In this case, governance and outcome dynamics were not causally linked in a linear fashion but rather shaped by broader political imperatives, demonstrating the contingent and non-sequential nature of governance transformations.

Studies integrating causal and relational reasoning offer methodological insights into interpreting governance–outcome dialectics from an Assemblage-based perspective. Causal reasoning helps trace direct links between governance changes and macro-level measurable outcomes, while relational reasoning captures how governance evolves through emergent, contingent dynamics at the micro-level. Combining both enables more comprehensive variable selection—especially a fuller spectrum of outcome dimensions—and underscores the need for longitudinal analysis. It also reveals the fluid interdependence between structure and process, reinforcing the Assemblage-based interpretation. The Lingang mega-urban project in Shanghai (Shen et al., 2020) exemplifies this methodological synthesis. Causally, after the 2008 global financial crisis disrupted project financing and delayed Lingang's planned development as a high-end manufacturing base, the management committee implemented structural reorganizations to stabilize finances and attract investment. These macro-level governance adjustments realigned the project's trajectory, illustrating a relatively linear mechanism linking major structural transformations to expected economic outcomes. Relationally, governance adapted incrementally at the micro-level to emerging social issues. While Lingang's physical development generally progressed as planned—and compensation for relocatees and infrastructure delivery exceeded expectations—early planning focused primarily on infrastructure and industrial layout, paying limited attention to social integration. As a result, social bonds within the newly built communities were weakly established. In response to emerging social tensions and localized resistance, township governments and social welfare agencies gradually assumed more central roles in the governance network. Governance adjustments—such as enhanced community engagement, expanded public services, and the growing prominence of local actors—did not result from a single top-down policy directive but emerged through ongoing negotiation and adaptation. The Lingang case thus illustrates how governance functions in practice as a fluid and interwoven interplay between structure and process, necessitating strategic cross-sector collaboration, adaptive policymaking, and flexible governance mechanisms to effectively navigate challenges and mitigate bottlenecks in urban (re)development projects.

5. Conclusion and reflection

This research addresses a critical yet underexplored topic: the dialectical relationship between governance and governance outcomes in urban (re)development. Given the dynamic and multidimensional nature of this relationship, a nuanced understanding not only advances conceptual models beyond static, linear frameworks but also equips decision-makers with actionable insights, enabling the design of adaptive and precise interventions that steer governance toward desired outcomes while mitigating unintended consequences. Building on this premise, this study makes a threefold contribution.

First, by integrating AT with dialectical perspectives, we propose a conceptual model that extends AT's application in governance research to better capture the relational and processual nature of governance–outcome dynamics. While Assemblage has been increasingly applied in urban studies, its involvement in governance–outcome relationships remains largely descriptive. This study operationalizes Assemblage within a dialectical framework, illustrating how governance shifts between its material role, i.e., stable power/resource relations (structure) that organize actors, and its expressive role shaped by contingent interactions (process). These shifts reveal various governance outcomes over time and across contexts. Retaining the same four core variables³ as previous dialectical models—structure, process, outcome, and context—our conceptual model embeds them within an evolving structure–process entanglement, ensuring continuity across different dialectical frameworks while addressing the long-standing structure–process dichotomy in network studies.

Second, this research provides a structured synthesis of empirical studies, identifying key methodological factors that influence how governance–outcome dialectics are interpreted. Our conceptual model informs a systematic review of empirical studies on governance–outcome dialectics in urban (re)development, revealing how three methodological orientations—variable selection, temporal dimensions, and reasoning modes—shape studies' interpretations of governance–outcome dynamics. The review findings largely validate our model, showing that studies using isolated variables, cross-sectional analysis, and causal reasoning tend to depict governance as static and deterministically linked to outcomes, reinforcing structure-oriented or process-oriented interpretations. However, the review also challenges aspects of the model. While we expected holistic, longitudinal, and relational reasoning to align with an Assemblage–dialectical approach, the review shows that studies combining causal and relational reasoning with holistic, longitudinal perspectives more often adopt an Assemblage-based interpretation. This divergence emphasizes that governance–outcome dynamics vary in frequency and dominance at different levels. At the macro-level, governance–outcome dialectics are more structure-oriented, as resource dependency shapes power flows, decision-making, and implementation within a more-or-less cause-and-effect framework. The stability of macro-level resource dependencies renders causal reasoning applicable. At the micro-level, contingent actor interactions driven by shifting contexts exert greater influence, surpassing static structural relations in shaping urban (re)development. Consequently, local-scale governance–outcome dialectics tend to be process-oriented, making longitudinal and relational perspectives necessary.

Third, this study identifies key gaps in governance–outcome studies and proposes refinements for theoretical models and methodological approaches. Theoretically, while our conceptual model provides a foundation for understanding governance–outcome dialectics, a more targeted and detailed analytical framework is needed, which can: (1)

break down structure and process into finer components to radically renounce boundaries between them, potentially by integrating finer components of different variables as hybrid units of analysis³; (2) apply longitudinal observations to trace governance–outcome interactions over time; (3) employ different reasoning modes, i.e., causal reasoning for analyzing governance's link with expected outcomes and relational reasoning for understanding governance's entanglement with contingent and unpredictable outcomes; and (4) adopt a multi-scalar perspective, acknowledging that governance–outcome dynamics vary across macro- and micro-levels and often transcend geographical and administrative boundaries. Since urban (re)development projects rarely operate at a single scale and instead shift across multiple levels, analytical frameworks must be flexible enough to capture this fluidity. Empirically, we call for more research to develop a comprehensive understanding of governance–outcome relationships. Generally, holistic, longitudinal, and relational perspectives remain underrepresented among empirical studies, limiting the scope of current syntheses. Additionally, future studies should actively investigate how political, social, and geographical contexts shape governance–outcome interpretations, as previous studies have rarely taken context as a focal variable. Comparative research—either by analyzing cases across diverse contexts or by examining a single case at multiple scales and from different political, economic, and socio-spatial perspectives—could yield valuable insights. Also, tracing governance transformations across different stages of a project's life cycle or applying different reasoning modes to the same case could offer deeper insights into how governance adapts to shifting conditions and how methodological choices influence governance–outcome interpretations.

Beyond these contributions, we reflect on three limitations of our review and avenues for improving the future understanding of governance–outcome dynamics. First, governance–outcome studies remain fragmented and under-theorized. To date, the genre of governance–outcome relationship studies has not been well established, resulting in limited research attention specifically paid to disentangling this relationship. While both theoretical and empirical evidence supports the dialectical nature of governance–outcome interactions, no unified framework exists to categorize these studies, leaving research scattered across disciplines. Given the limited review materials, the synthesis of patterns or dynamics remains relatively general and abstract. Strengthening the theorization of governance–outcome relationships is essential for establishing a more structured foundation for empirical research. While AT offers a promising conceptual tool for capturing the fluid and relational nature of urban governance, only one empirical study we reviewed explicitly applied it. We recommend that future research systematically synthesizes Assemblage's application in related fields such as dialectical research, governance studies, and network analysis, to refine the conceptualization and methodologies of governance–outcome dialectics.

Second, the geographical concentration of studies in the Asia–Pacific region, particularly China, and the prominence of a few key scholars reflect prevailing academic trends and citation networks. However, this concentration introduces limitations, potentially resulting in regional biases and narrower representations of governance–outcome dynamics. Although this predominance is an empirical observation rather than a selection bias, broadening the geographical coverage and diversifying authorship perspectives in future research would provide more comprehensive and generalizable insights into governance–outcome interactions across diverse urban contexts.

Third, we argue that the three interpretative tendencies (structure-oriented, process-oriented, and Assemblage-based) function as heuristic tools rather than rigid categories. While they effectively capture variations in how the 41 selected empirical studies interpret governance–outcome dialectics, we acknowledge the possibility that future studies may not fit neatly within these tendencies. For instance, some studies incorporate both structure- and process-related factors yet treat them as analytically independent without showing a clear inclination toward

³ The terms “variables” and “units of analysis” follow established conventions in previous dialectical studies (e.g., Marsh & Smith, 2000; Sacli, 2011). They are adopted here as analytical and conceptual components rather than quantitative indicators.

either, making their interpretative orientation difficult to determine. This raises questions about whether additional interpretive categories or a more flexible framework might better reflect the continuum-based nature of governance–outcome interactions.

To conclude, this study underscores the importance of methodological choices in shaping governance–outcome interpretations and highlights the potential of AT in advancing governance–outcome research. By integrating conceptual insights with empirical findings, we provide a roadmap for future studies to systematically analyze governance–outcome dialectics. Moving forward, addressing the methodological gaps identified in this review, particularly the need for more longitudinal, relational, and comparative studies, will be crucial for refining governance–outcome theories and enhancing their applicability to diverse urban contexts.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Xiaoxia Zhang: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Reinout Kleinhans:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Lei Qu:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2025.106129>.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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