

Exploring the new urban age: three trends in literature

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Abstract

Current trends amongst the global urban population have led to scholars claiming we live in a new urban age (Derickson, 2015; Beauregard, 2018; Harman & Wani, 2019). This is because, for the first time, more than half of the world's population lives in urban areas. Therefore, this article provides a brief review of literature regarding the new urban age – identifying ways it has been displayed in contemporary human geography literature. Key factors characterising literature involve urban form, governance, transport, environment, social inclusion, public space, health, housing, and the economy. Thus, this article discusses some of the ideas surrounding the urban age, summarising key points of human geography knowledge.

1. Introduction

For the first time in human history (as of 2007) over half of the world's population now reside in urban areas (UNCTAD, 2021). Whilst scholars such as Wells, Geddes, and Spengler all theorised the expansion since the twentieth century (Madden, 2012), it appears that Davis (1955) was the first, on empirical grounds, to predict the transition (Brenner & Schmid, 2014). There is no exact definition of the new urban age. For some, it simply marks a demographic tipping point whereby the majority of people live in urban areas (Champion & Hugo, 2004; Madden, 2012). On the contrary, Derickson (2015: 654) suggests a more complex transformation in 'spaces of everyday life as it shapes and is shaped by power structures, political economic processes, and geopolitical orders'. This paper provides a review of studies regarding the new urban age, especially in its vast interpretation amongst human geography literature. This article will first present the methodology adapted from Ogawa and Malen's (1991). After this, the review categorises findings according to nine key factors, leading to a discussion section with a brief summary of findings and recommendations for future studies.

2. Methodology

The methodology of this article has been developed from Ogawa and Malen's (1991) method of qualitative literature review. Their work has been widely

cited and picked up by other scholars too (e.g., see Randolph, 2009). Literature was taken from academic search engine: Google Scholar and Science Direct. Brief reading of already published articles by key scholars (Gleeson, 2012; Brenner & Schmid, 2014; Derickson, 2015) and their work helped create a pre-defined list of words including ‘new urban age’, ‘urbanisation’, ‘city-regions’, ‘nation-state’, ‘future cities’, etc. Literature was then selected (based on title and abstract) if it had association with any of the nine key factors of the new urban age (see table 1). Results concluded with a total of 25 sources – 15 articles and 10 books – justified by reaching sufficient evidence to convince viewers that everything that could be reasonably done was undertaken. Origins of journals can be found in table two. Literature was then qualitatively assessed and given points based on the depth it provides in any of the nine key factors (see table 3).

Key factor	Definition in the context of the new urban age
Urban form	The morphology of the urban environment in relation to population density. High densities facilitate more efficient urban infrastructure whilst low densities (e.g., urban sprawling) stretch facilities and contribute more to pollution and social exclusion.
Governance	Different scales of administrative bodies (i.e., national, regional, metropolitan, and local) are becoming challenged as urban areas extend beyond their historically defined realms.
Transport	The relation between mode of transport to places (e.g., work commute) and the measurable impacts on the environment (e.g., sustainable cities) and the economy (e.g., commuting times).
Environment	Increasing levels of urbanisation places new levels of pressure upon the environment. Few highly developed countries have low environmental impacts. Sustainable policy and practices in urban areas have become a marketing opportunity.
Social inclusion	Cities have become a melting pot for cultural diversity. However, unequally concentrated pockets of wealth (and other factors) have caused high levels of segregation.
Public space	The idea of publicness and society’s use of free-access space. Contentious opinions in what should be considered public or private.
Health	The proximity of healthcare services and their efficiency in cities is advantageous; however, past events (e.g., COVID-19) has witnessed urban areas as an exacerbation for unwanted health issues.
Housing	Natural increase in population and rural-urban shifts places unprecedented levels of stress on the need for housing in addition to what can be considered a comfy, city living experience.
Economy	Cities contribute to over seventy percent of the global GDP – efficiency of urbanised economies has come to fruition with concentration of jobs, urban regions outperforming national contexts, and accessibility of advanced producer services.

Table 1. key factors of the new urban age that have, and continue, to shape urban areas across the world (LSE, 2021).

Journal	Number of selected papers
<i>City</i>	1
<i>Current Option in Environmental Sustainability</i>	1
<i>Clinical Medicine</i>	1
<i>Environment and Planning D: Society and Space</i>	1
<i>International Journal of Urban and Regional Research</i>	1
<i>International Journal of Urban Sciences</i>	1
<i>Palgrave Communications</i>	1
<i>PNAS</i>	1
<i>Progress in Human Geography</i>	2
<i>Science</i>	1
<i>The Lancet</i>	1
<i>Transportation Research Procedia</i>	1
<i>Urban Geography</i>	2
	15

Table 2. the origins of journal articles selected for review.

Reviewed articles	UF	G	Ec	SI	PS	En	Ho	He	T
Ash <i>et al.</i> , 2008	H	M	L	N	N	H	N	L	N
Bettencourt <i>et al.</i> , 2007	L	H	H	M	N	N	N	N	N
Brenner & Schmid, 2014	H	H	N	M	N	N	H	N	N
Brenner & Schmid, 2015	H	H	H	L	M	M	L	N	L
Castells, 2002	M	H	M	L	M	H	L	N	M
Champion & Hugo, 2004	H	M	N	N	M	H	N	N	L
Cooke & Behrens, 2017	H	L	N	N	L	L	N	N	H
Davis, 2005	H	M	H	N	H	M	N	N	N
Derickson, 2015	M	M	N	N	H	H	N	N	M
Derrible, 2017	L	L	L	N	H	H	H	N	H
Drakakis-Smith, 2012	L	M	L	H	M	M	H	N	N
Godfrey & Julien, 2005	N	L	N	L	M	M	N	H	N
Jonas & Moisio, 2018a	H	H	M	N	L	M	L	N	L
Jonas & Moisio, 2018b	H	H	N	M	L	H	N	N	N
Jonas & Moisio, 2021	H	H	H	N	N	N	N	N	N
Jonas & Wilson, 2018	H	H	N	M	H	M	N	N	L
Jonas <i>et al.</i> , 2018	M	L	N	H	H	M	N	N	N
Joss, 2018	M	H	N	H	H	L	L	L	L
Madden, 2012	L	M	N	H	H	M	N	N	M
Sallis <i>et al.</i> , 2016	H	H	N	M	H	H	L	H	L
Satterthwaite, 2007	L	M	H	N	M	L	H	H	H
Schmid, 2006	H	H	L	M	M	N	N	N	H
Soja, 2000	M	H	M	N	N	L	N	N	L
Soja, 2011	H	H	L	N	M	L	N	N	L
Webster <i>et al.</i> , 2020	N	N	L	N	M	N	N	H	M

Table 3. reviewed articles and their relevance to the nine key factors.

Factors: *UF* = Urban Form, *G* = Governance, *Ec* = Economy, *SI* = Social Inclusion, *PS* = Public Space, *En* = Environment, *Ho* = Housing, *He* = Health, *T* = Transport.

Score: *H* = high (three points), *M* = medium (two points), *L* = low (one point), *N* =

no (zero points).

3. Review of existing studies on the new urban age

3.1 Urban form, governance, and the economy

Amongst the 25 sources, new urban age literature was most commonly associated with governance (57 points) followed closely by urban form (54 points) and then the economy (27 points) (see figure one). Scholars such as Jonas, Brenner, and Schmid (Schmid, 2006; Brenner & Schmid, 2015; Jonas & Wilson, 2018; Jonas *et al*, 2018; Jonas & Moisiso, 2018a; Jonas & Moisiso, 2018b; Jonas & Moisiso, 2021) are key pathfinders in this topic of research. Indeed, all three scholars have produced relevant, recent work regarding this trend. Synthesis of their work draws upon common themes of territoriality, spatial development, and issues regarding power of the nation-state. Indeed, the work of these scholars: Champion & Hugo (2004), Davis (2006), and Soja (2000, 2011) are intertwined in nature. Their work focuses on how cities have become major nodes for explosive urbanisation, uneven spatial development, and mass production/consumption. Aggregation of these scholars and the fruition of their work showcases their sculpting of new urban age knowledge amongst human geography literature.

3.2. Social inclusion, public space, and the environment

Both public space (45 points) and the environment (42 points) ranked third and fourth respectively for association with new urban age literature. Social inclusion (27 points) was joint sixth. Two prominent scholars include Derickson (2015) and Castells (2002). Similarities in their work goes beyond the demographic factoid and begins examining socio-spatial transformations. Elements of sustainable development, the lived experience in cities, and rescaling of the urban environment were scrutinised. Their work is still very much relevant today and continues to be used in research advancing new urban age studies. Madden (2012) had some of the earliest ideas surrounding social inclusion in new urban age literature. His work took a synthesis approach by comparing the works of Jean-Luc Nancy (1986; 1992; 1997; 2000; 2007a; 2007b) and Henri Lefebvre (1984; 1991; 1995; 1996; 2003; 2009). This culminated in the conceptualisation of urbanisation and its unequal manifestation across space – creating forms of ex/inclusion. Joss (2018) takes this further by discussing how citizens are now becoming co-producers in public space – reforming what is meant by governance and bringing the public into the decision process. More recent literature has since focused on the COVID-19 pandemic. Webster *et al* (2020) drew upon the built

environment (e.g., density, land use, public space, and housing) as a means for employing more advanced science technology to create healthier cities for tomorrow.

3.3. Housing, health and transport

Housing (17 points), health (14 points), and transport (28 points) were among the lowest in association new urban age literature. Ranked highest amongst the three, transport issues may have risen more readily due to the increasing awareness of climate change and people beginning to understand our own impact on the environment around us. Initially, Satterthwaite (2007) drew attention to public services as a whole in urban areas. This was then advanced upon with Cooke and Behrens (2017) who related dense urban landform to increase public transport viability in South African cities. Research regarding housing and health are yet to make significant presence amongst new urban age literature. Relatively new literature from Drakakis-Smith (2012) and Derrible (2017) analyses the housing shortage across cities with its effect on first-time buyers, the lived experience of cities, and quality of living. Whilst Drakakis-Smith took a Global South approach, analysing countries from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, Derrible procured a more holistic stance conceptualising future cities and their networked infrastructure systems.

The common denominator of urban infrastructure and services amongst cities helps unite research. From a variety of approaches to the variable levels of depth and scale in case studies; despite acute association with new urban age literature, they are becoming all too relevant to be ignored.

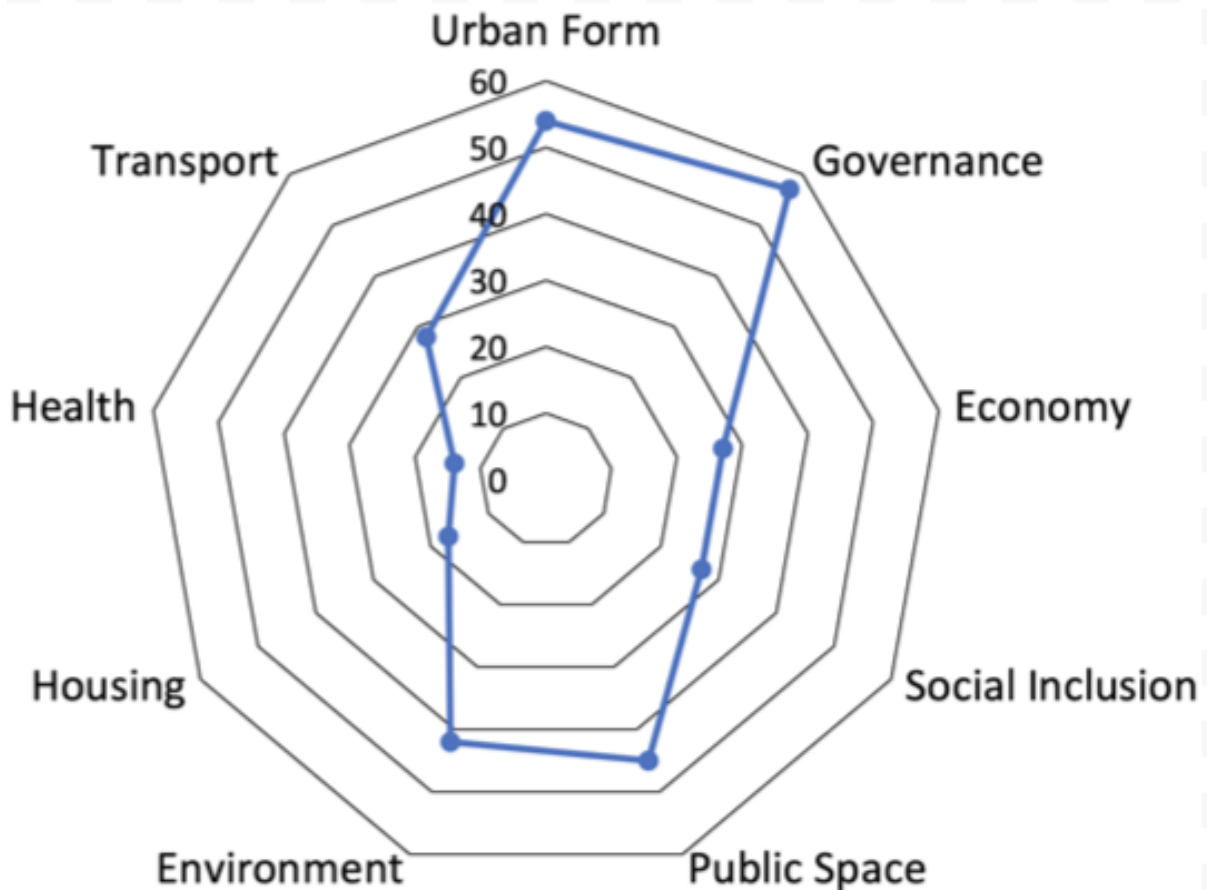


Figure 1. total amount of points from table three showcasing the association of each theme with new urban literature in human geography.

4. Discussion

The evaluation process is to collect and analyse information to provide a summary article. Evaluation of literature is an effective way to understand the new urban age – identifying areas of strengths and weakness. It is clear that factors such as urban form, governance, public space, and the environment are common amongst new urban age literature. These factors have been reinforced in knowledge via a strength of literature. A multitude of credible scholars, such as Jonas, Soja, Davis, Champion, and Hugo, have made viable attempts in understanding the complex global process with regards to the defined new urban age factors. Critique of work is also present; this is a desirable process to check the robustness of literature. Brenner and Schmid made this clear in one of their articles claiming that new urban age literature is both a ‘statistical artifact and chaotic conception’ (2014: 731) outlining methodological perspectives as an alternative approach to understanding the global process. Nonetheless, scholars have released credible, fulfilling research surrounding the new urban age amongst human geography literature.

Literature, or lack thereof, regarding other new urban age factors (He, Ho, T, E, SI) has created a gap for which can be progressed further. Much like previously, scholars such as Satterthwaite (2007), Cooke & Behrens (2017), Derible (2017), etc., have all made viable attempts in progressing new urban age literature. Despite literature been sparse, this has helped issues come to light more easily in comparison to the already-saturated factors. Thus, scholars such as Drakakis-Smith (third world) and Derrible (holistic) have opted for different approaches to showcase their thoughts. These thoughts have highlighted key issues such as unequal socio-spatial transformation to conceptualising the built environment of future cities. Lack of literature also makes easy suggestion for new research topics.

5. Proposed ideas for future research

From the evaluation process, a series of solutions have been sought after in order to encourage progress of new urban age literature. These solutions have been suggested based off the synthesis and evaluation of literature.

1. There is demand for literature concerning the five identified areas of low association. Scholars should aim to concentrate research in these areas and then attempt to bring their work into the wider context of new urban age literature.
2. Failing point one, scholars should focus their attention on why these particular areas have been neglected in academia. Is it a novel factor that is yet to flourish or is there more of a reason behind the limited amount of literature?
3. Scholars should continue to use a wide range of approaches. Different techniques and geographical examples have shown to be successful in displaying a range of issues that not necessarily all countries will witness.

6. Conclusion

For the first time in human history, over half of the world's population lives in an urbanised area. The very nature of this process being global is testament to the importance of this topic. Exploring the new urban age and its current literature has brought nine factors to light. These factors have helped categorise the literature review allowing for presentation, analysis, and synthesis of literature. This article has identified levels of association of academic literature with urban age factors. However, the primary nature of this review has been to identify trends amongst urban age literature; not to establish under researched factors based on the review of 15 articles.

Post-evaluation of the methodology adopted for this review shows its successful nature in highlighting trends easily. This was accomplished by providing a quantitative meaning to colours on table three and then easily viewed via figure one in the form of a radar diagram. The scale and simplicity of this article made the methodology easy to adopt. However, on a larger scale, this would take much longer and therefore require the input of a team or computer software. In fact, this review can be used to highlight those areas of literature that was not studied. For example, the context in which urban age factors were discussed did not account for their function within cities. The exploration of these factors functioning in the city environment, via use of case studies, would prove beneficial in understanding the urban age process. Furthermore, attention should also be paid to cities as an assemblage. Key similarities and disparities could be drawn between case studies and allow for cross analysis. In return, we can begin to understand why these factors may vary across different places. Thus, new urban age literature has showcased a variety of different ways in which it has been deployed across contemporary human geography literature.

7. References

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