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Transmodern Urban Cartographies: A Speculative Inquiry

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Abstract

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This study aims to critically examine the impacts and reflections of transmodern approaches in the field of urban design and planning through a speculative approach. By discussing the inadequacies of modernism's rational and universalist planning paradigm and postmodernism's fragmented, contextual, and critical approach in addressing contemporary ecological, social, and cultural crises, the study addresses transmodernism within a conceptual framework. The research adopts a qualitative methodology based on a literature review and theoretically examines the transmodern approach in relation to design and planning tools, governance and power structures, and ethical principles such as social justice, equality, inclusivity, and ecological sensitivity. Concepts that influence urban design within the framework of transmodernity are explored through speculative representations. The analysis suggests at a conceptual level that while the transmodern approach proposes a more holistic and ethically grounded framework, it remains open to critique due to conceptual ambiguities, limited engagement with institutional structures, critiques related to power relations, and difficulties in translating theory into practice.

Keywords: Transmodernism; Urban Design; Urban Cartography; Critical Urban Theory.

1. Introduction: Urban Thought in an Age of Multiple Crises

Contemporary urban theory has extensively examined the transformations of cities under conditions of globalisation, neoliberalism, and planetary ecological crisis. Contemporary urbanism is increasingly shaped by intertwined ecological, social, and cultural crises that expose the limits of growth-oriented development models. Moreover, climate change, environmental degradation, and biodiversity loss have revealed the ecological unsustainability of growth-driven urbanisation (Brenner & Schmid, 2015; Harvey, 2012; Aziz Amen, 2021). Besides, cities are marked by deepening social inequalities, expressed through spatial segregation, housing precarity, uneven access to infrastructure, and environmental injustice (Harvey, 1973; Soja, 2000). Cultural transformations driven by globalisation, migration, and digitalisation further destabilise urban identities and produce fragmented senses of belonging and place (Zukin, 2010). These overlapping crises highlight the inadequacy of urban approaches that prioritise efficiency, competitiveness, or aesthetic differentiation over ethical responsibility and relational complexity.

Modernist planning, grounded in universal rationality and expertise, sought to manage urban complexity through standardized solutions and functional segregation. While dominant strands of modernist planning often privileged functional efficiency and standardisation, important internal variations and socially responsive traditions also existed. This paradigm often ignored local knowledge, and ecological limits (Hall, 2002; Scott, 1998). Later, postmodern approaches emerged as a critical response, emphasizing plurality, context, and the deconstruction of dominant narratives (Lyotard, 1984; Dear, 2000). However, postmodern planning, despite its critical insights, frequently resulted in fragmented urban visions and lacked strategic coherence (Harvey, 1991; Healey, 1997). Both paradigms, albeit in different ways, have remained limited in their capacity to address systemic crises that require ethical, long-term, and relational forms of urban thinking.

In response to these limitations, transmodernism has emerged as a critical paradigm that transcends the binary opposition between modernism and postmodernism, incorporating ethical concerns, plural epistemologies, and relational thinking into urban theory and practice. Reinterpreted by Enrique Dussel (2002), transmodernism integrates modern achievements and postmodern critiques within an explicitly ethical and relational framework. It foregrounds social justice, inclusivity, ecological responsibility, and plural epistemologies, particularly from marginalised and non-Western perspectives

(Dussel, 2008; Mignolo, 2011). Within urban theory, transmodernism has been mobilised to rethink governance, spatial agency, and the role of ethics in design and planning (Seif, 2019, p. 114, 115). Therefore, this study aims to examine transmodern approaches in urban design and planning through a speculative lens, using visual and narrative methods to explore both their transformative potential and their conceptual and practical limitations.

However, despite the growing interest in transmodernism, there remains a lack of clarity regarding how this paradigm can be operationalised within urban design and planning. Existing studies often remain conceptual, offering normative arguments without adequately addressing spatial tools, representation methods, or governance processes. In particular, the role of urban cartography as a medium for translating transmodern ethics and relationality into spatial knowledge production remains underexplored. This research is therefore guided by the need to bridge this gap between theory and practice. By approaching transmodern urbanism through speculative and cartographic methods, the study seeks to explore how this emerging paradigm can be visualised, questioned, and critically assessed. In doing so, the study aims to contribute to ongoing debates on the future of urban thought in an age defined by interconnected ecological, social, and epistemological crises. Rather than reiterating these crises as isolated categories, this study approaches them as relational conditions that demand new ethical and spatial frameworks.

Therefore, this study discusses the transmodern paradigm by addressing a consciousness aimed at transforming existing economic and political systems, based on global interconnectedness, shared life, and the elimination of inequalities.

Drawing on critical urban theory (e.g., Harvey) alongside transmodern perspectives (e.g., Dussel), this study emphasises that space is not independent of social processes and that social justice requires engaging with these structures. Ultimately, it examines the philosophical and material foundations of a transition from a history focused on domination and control to a new phase of humanity focused on solidarity and interdependence. In this context, we attempt to critically examine the problems brought about by the transmodern paradigm, even though it emerged as an approach to resolving the impasses of the past. The article contributes in three ways: (1) conceptualizing transmodern urbanism within planning theory, (2) linking it to critical cartography, and (3) proposing speculative visualisation as a methodological tool.

2. Methodology: A Speculative and Visual Research Approach

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on a critical literature review and speculative inquiry. The literature review examines key debates on modernist, postmodern, and transmodern urban theory, as well as critical cartography, to establish a conceptual framework. The literature review was conducted through thematic selection of key texts on modernism, postmodernism, and transmodernity and was guided by relevance to urban theory and transmodern debates. Building on this, the study employs speculation to explore alternative urban scenarios and reveal underlying power relations and ethical dimensions. In this context, visual representations are used as critical cartographic instruments. Visual representations are produced using generative AI tools (Gemini and ChatGPT) based on structured prompts derived from the conceptual categories identified in the literature review, including relationality, plurality, ethics, and governance. These visuals were not treated as empirical evidence but as speculative artefacts for conceptual exploration. Their analysis followed a critical cartographic reading framework focusing on three dimensions: representational logic, relational assemblages, and embedded power structures. In this context, AI-generated visualisations functioned as heuristic devices for speculative inquiry rather than objective representations, while their limitations in terms of abstraction, bias, and reproducibility were critically acknowledged. The paper is structured as follows: 1) Literature research and theoretical framework, tracing the evolution from modernist and postmodern paradigms to transmodern thought, 2) Transmodern urban cartographies regarding epistemological and political dimensions, 3) Visual narratives illustrating potential scenarios of transmodern urbanism, and 4) Discussion of the limitations and tensions of the approach, and the final section reflects on its broader implications for urban theory and practice. In this context, visual production is not treated as a representational output, but as an integral part of the analytical process, contributing to knowledge generation through speculative cartographic thinking.

3. Theoretical Framework: From Modernity to Transmodernity

Modernist urban planning emerged in the early twentieth century in response to industrialisation, urban congestion, and public health concerns, drawing heavily on Enlightenment rationality and positivist thought (Hall, 2002; Scott, 1998). Influenced by figures such as Le Corbusier, CIAM, and the rational comprehensive planning tradition, modernist urbanism conceptualised the city as a system that could be objectively analysed, optimised, and controlled through universal principles and technical expertise (Fishman, 1982). Zoning, functional segregation, and large-scale master planning were promoted as neutral tools capable of producing efficiency, order, and social progress. However, critical urban scholars have extensively documented the limitations of this approach. Jacobs (1961) famously criticised modernist planning for ignoring everyday urban life and social complexity, while Scott (1998) demonstrated how high-modernist schemes often failed due to their disregard for local knowledge and informal practices. Moreover, Trancik (1986, p. 3, 4, 36) defines residual spaces in cities, such as unstructured landscapes at the base of high-rise towers or unused plazas, abandoned waterfronts, and marginal public housing projects, as “lost spaces” and argues that they should be reclaimed with traditional values. Harvey (1973, p. 10, 23, 97) argues that spatial forms involve social processes and that urban planning should be integrated with the concept of “social justice.” He highlighted how modernist rationality contributed to spatial fragmentation, social inequality, and the commodification of urban space. This body of literature reveals that the modernist pursuit of universal rationality, while infrastructurally transformative, proved inadequate in addressing the relational, ethical, and ecological dimensions of urban life.

Postmodern urban theory emerged in the late twentieth century as a reaction against universalism and technocratic determinism of modernist planning. Drawing on broader poststructuralist and postmodern philosophy (Lyotard, 1984; Foucault, 1980), urban theorists began to challenge grand narratives, singular truths, and claims of objectivity in spatial production. Authors such as Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour (1972) advocated for complexity, contradiction, and

symbolic plurality in urban form, while planners like Davidoff (1965) emphasised advocacy and participatory approaches to counter expert-driven decision-making. Soja (2000) and Dear (2000) further argued that postmodern urbanism foregrounded difference, contextuality, and multiple spatial narratives, exposing how power and representation shape cities. While this critical turn expanded urban discourse and legitimised marginalised perspectives, it also generated new challenges. Harvey (1991) and Healey (1997) argue that postmodernism's focus on fragmentation and indeterminacy limits its ability to develop clear strategic responses to systemic urban crises. Therefore, postmodern planning has been critiqued for remaining largely oppositional—effective at deconstruction but limited in offering coherent, ethically grounded frameworks for long-term urban transformation.

The term “transmodernity,” first coined by Rosa María Rodríguez Magda in 1989, represents a significant shift in human evolution that functions as a synthesis of modernity and postmodernity. While transmodernism critiques modernist universalism, it simultaneously advances normative ethical commitments, creating a productive tension between plurality and universal ethics. It is characterised as a globalised culture of interconnectedness, participation, and emancipation, where cosmopolitanism transcends universality by spreading differences beyond their traditional locations (Ateljevic, 2013, p. 38, 39, 45). However, this term has emerged since the early 2000s as a critical paradigm seeking to move beyond the epistemological limits of both modernism and postmodernism.

Although transmodernity has been theorised differently by Rodríguez Magda, Dussel, and Luyckx Ghisi, this study primarily adopts Dussel's ethical-relational interpretation as its main analytical framework. This choice is based on its stronger emphasis on social justice, pluriversality, and relational ethics in the production of urban space. Developed by Dussel (2002), transmodernity proposes neither a rejection of modernity nor a relativistic fragmentation of postmodernism, but rather a relational reconfiguration that integrates multiple epistemologies, ethical commitments, and cultural narratives. In urban theory, this shift has been increasingly mobilized to address global inequalities, ecological crises, and the persistence of colonial and technocratic power structures embedded in contemporary urbanism (Dussel, 2012; Escobar, 2018). It transcends modernity by keeping its best attributes while moving “through” it toward a reconstructed vision (Luyckx Ghisi, 1999, p. 972) (Figure 1).

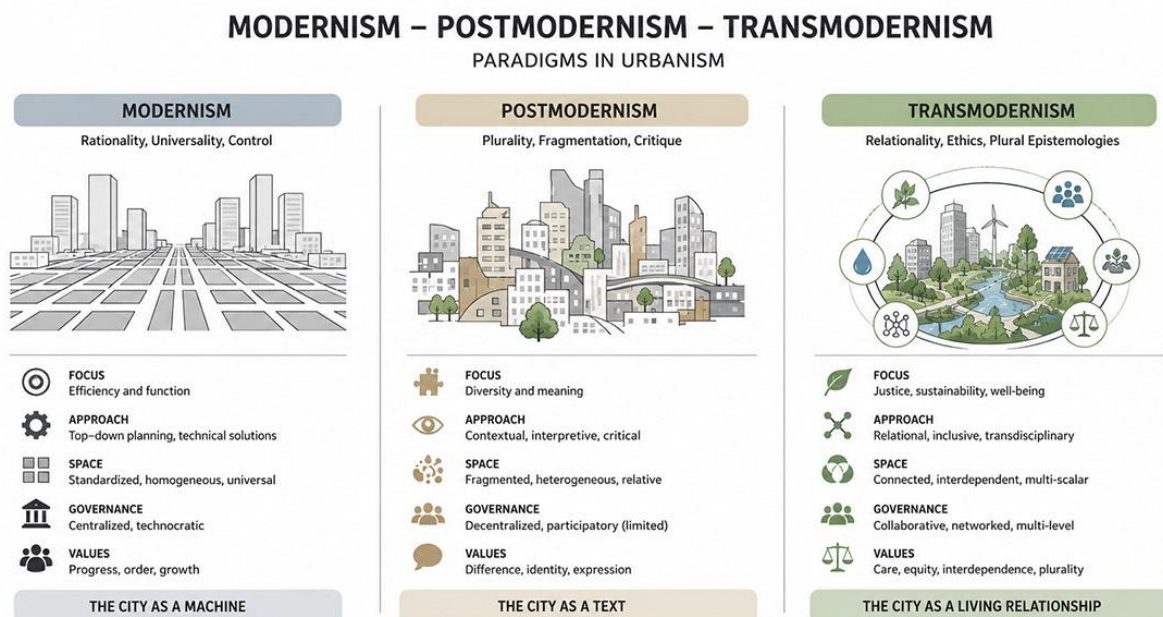


Figure 1. A comparison of modern, postmodern and transmodern urbanism
(Developed by the authors with AI-generated tools).

Scholars from diverse fields have contributed to this umbrella term, which encompasses various socio-cultural, economic, and political shifts (Ateljevic, 2013). Dussel frames transmodernity as a “philosophy of liberation,” advocating for a critical cosmopolitanism that moves beyond Eurocentrism toward a “pluriversal” utopia built on authentic intercultural dialogue (Dussel, 1995; Dussel and Ibarra-Colado, 2006; Dussel, 2012, p. 29, 42; Ateljevic, 2013, p. 39, 40). This involves the affirmation of cultural “exteriority”—those values and traditions ignored by Modernity—(Dussel, 2012, p. 42) to create a future that is “multicultural,” “hybrid,” and “democratic” (Dussel, 2002, p. 236). Complementing this, Marc Luyckx Ghisi (1999, p. 973, 974) defines the paradigm as a “re-enchanting” society that reintegrates intuition and spirituality with rational brainwork, referring to a transition toward post-patriarchal and post-secular value systems.

Transmodern thought is grounded in an explicit ethical orientation. Unlike modernist rationalism and postmodern critique, it emphasizes social justice, inclusivity, and responsibility toward both human and more-than-human actors (Dussel, 2008; Seif, 2019). This ethical grounding reframes urban design and planning not merely as technical or aesthetic practices, but as moral and political acts embedded in asymmetric power relations. Scholars argue that transmodern urbanism calls for a rethinking of governance structures, emphasizing participatory processes, relational forms of knowledge production, and the redistribution of spatial agency (Healey, 2007; Thibault et al., 2020, p. 2692, 2694, 2701). Relationality constitutes another key dimension of transmodern urbanism. Rather than conceiving the city as a fixed object or a collection of discrete fragments, transmodern approaches understand urban space as a dynamic assemblage of social, ecological, technological, and cultural relations. Drawing on systems thinking and post-anthropocentric

perspectives, this view aligns with emerging discussions on planetary urbanisation and more-than-human geographies (Brenner & Schmid, 2015). Within this framework, urban cartography becomes a critical tool for mapping not only physical territories, but also invisible relations, power structures, and ethical tensions across multiple spatial and temporal scales. However, literature also highlights significant critiques of transmodernity. Researchers note that transmodern urbanism often remains conceptually diffuse and lacks clear methodological pathways for implementation (Mignolo, 2011). Its emphasis on ethical universality may risk reproducing new forms of abstraction when not adequately grounded in specific institutional and political contexts. Consequently, transmodernity is best understood not as a fully consolidated planning model, but as a critical horizon—one that invites continuous negotiation between ethics, practice, and power in the production of urban space.

In the realms of design and urban studies, transmodernity facilitates a move toward transdisciplinarity and the integration of virtual with the real (Rodríguez Magda, 2017). Farouk Y. Seif introduces “De-sign” as the fusion of design and semiotics, providing a robust framework for envisioning reality beyond absoluteness and navigating through diaphanous space and polychronic time (Seif, 2019). This evolution culminates in the concept of “transurbanism,” which reimagines smart cities for transhuman citizens (Thibault et al, 2020). This perspective acknowledges a multi-directional dependency between technologically enhanced humans and augmented urban environments, where physical, cognitive, and emotional augmentations fundamentally reshape the design, management, and social layers of future cities (Thibault et al, 2020). However, these developments also risk reinforcing technocratic power and reproducing existing inequalities.

4. Transmodern Urban Cartographies

Urban cartographies are deeply entangled with regimes of power and knowledge. Decisions about what to map, how to map, and for whom to map are inherently political. Traditional cartography has long been associated with objectivity, measurement, and the representation of physical space. Modernist cartography often reinforced centralised control and technocratic governance, while postmodern approaches exposed the multiplicity of perspectives and contested spatial narratives. However, critical cartography has challenged this assumption by demonstrating that maps are not neutral tools, but rather socially constructed representations embedded in power relations (Harvey, 1991). Within this shift, mapping practices have evolved from descriptive instruments to critical and speculative tools capable of revealing hidden relations, exclusions, and alternative spatial imaginaries.

Cartography becomes a key medium because transmodernism requires representing relational, multi-scalar, and non-human interactions that cannot be captured through conventional planning tools. In a transmodern context, cartography is no longer limited to the depiction of territory, but becomes a medium for articulating ethical concerns, relational networks, and plural epistemologies. Transmodern cartographies go a step further by not only revealing these power dynamics but also attempting to reconfigure them. They seek to include marginalised voices, indigenous knowledge systems, and alternative spatial practices, thereby challenging dominant epistemologies. In this sense, mapping becomes an act of negotiation and co-production rather than mere representation.

This involves integrating qualitative data, narratives, and non-human actors into mapping practices, thereby expanding the scope of what can be represented and understood as urban space. The conceptual foundations of transmodern cartographies rest on three interrelated dimensions: relationality, ethics, and plurality. First, relationality emphasises the interconnectedness of human and non-human actors, infrastructures, and ecosystems. Second, ethics foregrounds questions of justice, responsibility, and inclusivity in the production of spatial knowledge. Third, plurality recognises the coexistence of multiple ways of knowing and experiencing space. These dimensions position cartography as a speculative and transformative practice. Rather than producing fixed representations, transmodern mapping operates as an open-ended process that visualises possibilities, tensions, and alternative futures. In this way, it aligns closely with the aims of this study, which seeks to explore not only what cities are, but what they could become.

5. Visualizing the Transmodern City

This section presents AI-generated visualisations as speculative and diagrammatic cartographic tools for interpreting transmodern urbanism. Rather than functioning as literal representations, these images operate as critical mappings that reveal relations between social, ecological, and technological systems. Through this approach, cartography is redefined as a dynamic and interpretative practice, enabling alternative readings of urban space and future possibilities (Figures 2, 3). The figures reveal the epistemological shift from modernist and postmodern paradigms toward a more inclusive, plural, and interconnected urban condition, illustrating key dimensions of transmodern urbanism, and emphasizing ethical, ecological, and technological transformations in contemporary cities.

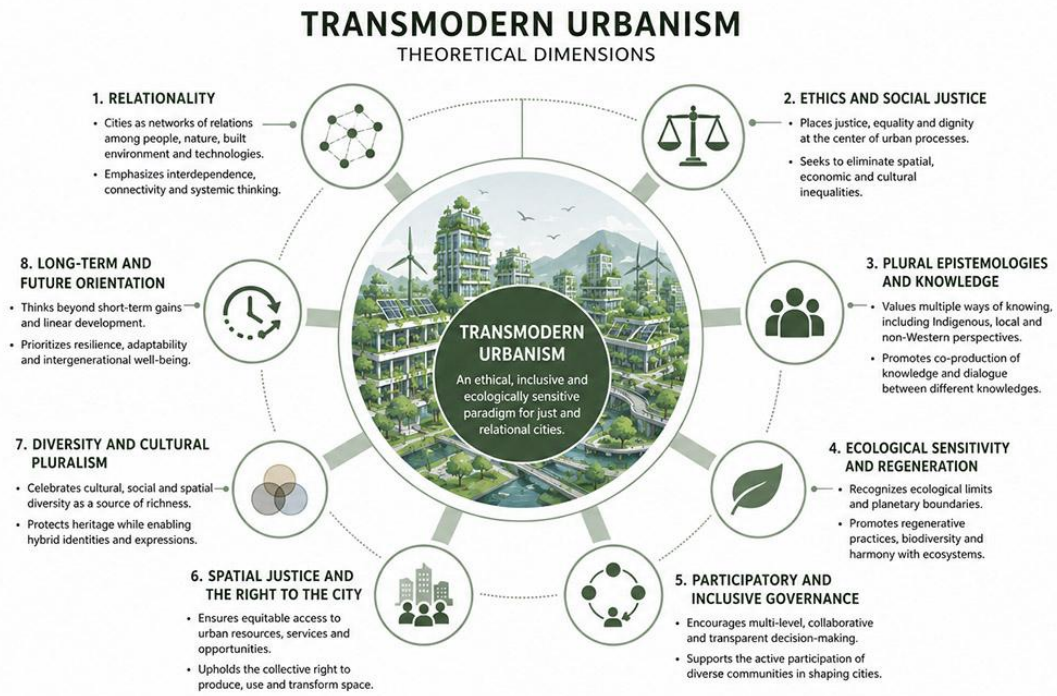


Figure 2. Theoretical dimensions and core principles of transmodern urbanism, illustrating the relational integration of social, ecological, and governance systems (Developed by the authors with AI-generated tools).

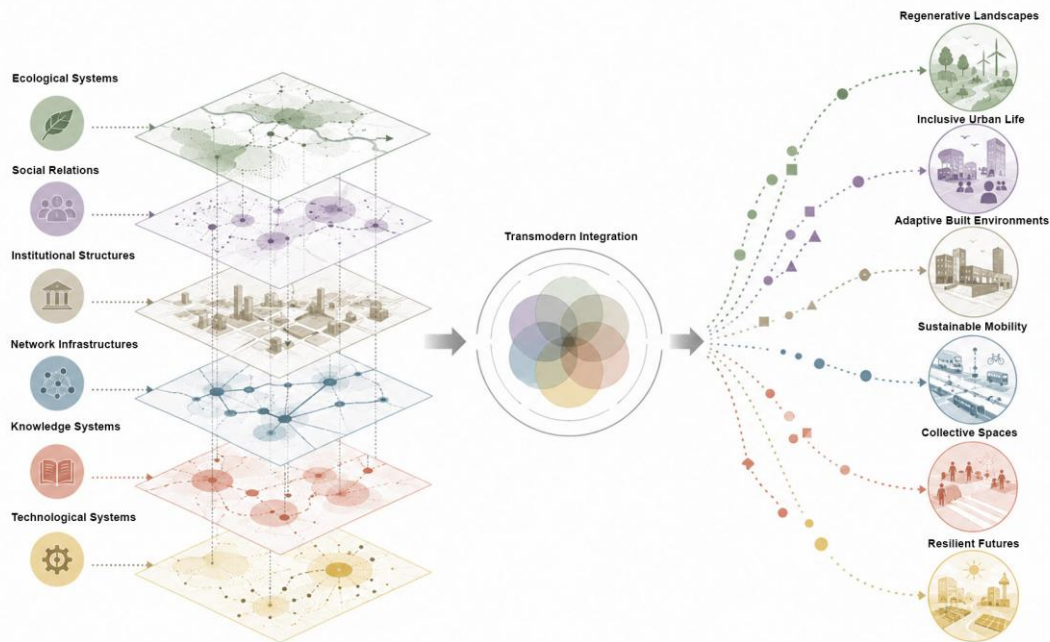


Figure 3. Diagrammatic representation of transmodern urban systems as a layered and relational cartography, illustrating the interaction between ecological systems, social relations, institutional structures, network infrastructures, knowledge systems, and technological systems (Developed by the authors with AI-generated tools).

A conceptual and cartographic interpretation of transmodern urbanism emphasises the integration of social, ecological, and technological dimensions. Rather than depicting fixed urban models, they articulate a relational framework in which multiple systems intersect and co-evolve. The notion of transmodern integration emerges as a key theme, referring to the synthesis of diverse knowledge systems, governance structures, and spatial practices. In this context, urban space is not understood as a static form, but as a dynamic and multi-layered assemblage shaped by interdependencies, ethical considerations, and adaptive processes (Figures 4, 5, 6).



Figure 4. Visualization of ethical and inclusive urban systems, highlighting justice, equality, and participatory spatial practices (Developed by the authors with AI-generated tools).



Figure 5. Representation of ecological interdependencies and more-than-human urban relations. It reveals how ecological relations are not external constraints but co-constitutive elements of urban systems (Developed by the authors with AI-generated tools).

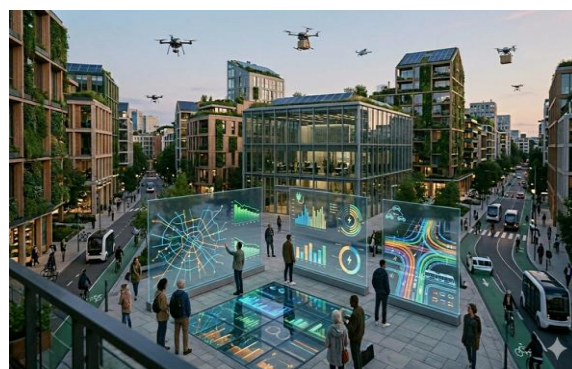


Figure 6. Governance transformations, focusing on AI-driven planning and emerging power structures. This also reflects emerging asymmetries in algorithmic governance (Developed by the authors with AI-generated tools).

As such, the figures do not aim to predict or prescribe urban futures, but to open a critical field of inquiry in which alternative spatial logics and possibilities can be examined.

6. Discussions: Critiques and Limitations of Transmodern Approaches

Transmodern urbanism provides an ethical and conceptual framework but also has significant challenges that need to be addressed. One such issue concerns the tendency to present modernism and postmodernism in relatively simplified terms—modernism as predominantly rational and problematic, and postmodernism as fragmented and limited. Such characterisations, while useful for establishing contrasts, risk overlooking the internal diversity and theoretical nuance within both paradigms. Modernist planning, for instance, has also produced socially responsive and context-sensitive approaches, while postmodern urban theory includes strands that engage constructively with governance, participation, and spatial justice. Acknowledging this heterogeneity would strengthen the theoretical grounding of the study and avoid reductive interpretations.

The first challenge is related to its conceptual ambiguity. The concept of transmodernity is subject to a wide range of interpretations, often resulting in theoretical vagueness and difficulties in defining its boundaries. This ambiguity, while allowing flexibility, also limits its analytical precision and practical applicability. The second challenge lies in its limited engagement with institutional and governance structures. Although transmodern theory foregrounds participation, inclusivity, and relationality, it offers few concrete strategies for transforming planning systems entrenched into bureaucratic, legal, and economic frameworks. As a result, it also invites critical scrutiny of power relations and the assumptions and value systems it relies upon. It seeks to contest Eurocentric and hegemonic frameworks, however, there is a danger that its universal ethical claims might reproduce new forms of abstraction or fail to engage with localized

power dynamics. This tension points to the need for transmodern principles to be applied in a more grounded and context-sensitive way. Finally, one of the most important challenges is the translation of theory into practice. The findings suggest that transmodern urban cartographies function more effectively as critical and exploratory tools than as direct planning instruments. They reveal hidden relations and alternative possibilities but require further development to influence decision-making processes. Compared to modernist and postmodern approaches, transmodernity provides a more ethically grounded and integrative framework. However, unlike modernism's clarity or postmodernism's critical rigour, it operates within a more fluid and less defined conceptual space. Its main strength lies in its holistic and ethical perspective, while its limitations stem from conceptual ambiguity and practical inoperability. Future research should focus on developing methodological tools and institutional strategies that can operationalise transmodern principles within urban planning practice.

7. Conclusion: Transmodern Urbanism—A Possibility or a Utopia?

Transmodern urbanism should be understood as a critical horizon that opens new possibilities for rethinking the relationship between space, society, and ethics. While it offers a compelling alternative to the limitations of modernist and postmodern paradigms, it simultaneously reveals its own constraints, particularly in terms of conceptual clarity and practical implementation. Transmodern urbanism operates as a meta-framework that reorients planning toward ethical-relational thinking. In this sense, transmodernity does not simply produce a utopia, nor does it provide a ready-made solution. Instead, it operates within a space of possibility—one that encourages experimentation, plurality, and continuous negotiation. In the context of the digital age, where data, artificial intelligence, and networked infrastructures increasingly shape urban life, transmodern approaches introduce a degree of flexibility into the social sciences by allowing for hybrid, multi-layered, and relational forms of analysis.

However, this flexibility also raises critical questions: To what extent can ethical frameworks influence technologically driven urban systems? How can transmodern principles be embedded within existing institutional structures? Based on the speculative underpinnings explored in this study, it can be argued that transmodern urban cartographies have the potential to open new discursive and methodological pathways. They encourage designers and planners to move beyond fixed categories and engage with uncertainty, complexity, and ethical responsibility. Transmodern urbanism evolves not only as a theoretical construct, but also as a transformative force in shaping more just and inclusive urban futures.

This study demonstrates that transmodern approaches offer a relational, ethical, and plural framework, yet remain limited in terms of practical applicability. It therefore calls for a shift toward more inclusive, interdisciplinary/transdisciplinary urban practices. Since this study is primarily conceptual, its arguments remain exploratory and should not be interpreted as empirically validated models of urban transformation. As a primarily theoretical inquiry, the research highlights the need for future studies to engage with empirical case studies, participatory approaches, and policy-oriented frameworks to operationalise transmodern urbanism. In this sense, transmodern urbanism should be understood not as a fixed paradigm, but as an open and evolving condition whose significance is shaped through experimental, situated, and often contradictory practices.

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