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The contradictions of youth participation for intergenerational justice in urban environmental planning

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Intergenerational justice (IGJ) has long been utilized in academic contexts such as philosophy and political theory. However, IGJ has increasingly become politicized. That is, it has been translated into more tangible ideas and discourses for public scrutiny, contestation, and action. This politicization is strongly represented by youth activism, which has utilized the concept to demand urgent political action and to defend the right to be included and represented in decision-making processes, particularly regarding climate change-related issues. The central topic of discussion in this perspective article is the strategic identification of youth inclusion with IGJ, and specifically the risks involved in accepting this identification. In this article we focus on urban environmental planning and argue that it is important to separate the practice of youth inclusion and the concept of IGJ to address these concerns and explore alternative strategies for incorporating IGJ in urban environmental planning. We then proceed to explore potential urban environmental planning approaches that are more intergenerationally just and conclude by critically reflecting on how the current political economy enables or hinders a more intergenerationally just approach to urban environmental planning.

KEYWORDS

intergenerational justice, youth participation, urban environmental planning, generational justice, social sustainability

1. Introduction

Intergenerational justice (IGJ) continues to be an important topic within philosophy and political theory (Meyer, 2021), where many different definitions exist. Key characteristics of IGJ include obligations to preserve resources (Slobodian, 2019) and capabilities for future generations, to recognize the sovereignty rights of future generations (Gibson, 2006), and to account for the actions of past generations (Lumer, 2009). Regardless of the definition of IGJ, *time* is a central element. Therefore, we argue that the temporal focus of IGJ must be clarified upfront. For that, we use the theory by Tremmel (2009) on generational justice, which differentiates between intra and inter-generational justice. While the former deals with justice within the same generation (e.g., gender justice), the latter concerns justice between generations existing contemporaneously (temporal generations) or not (intertemporal generations) (Figure 1). For example, the limited opportunities for present youth to become independent homeowners, relative to other age groups (Cournède and Plouin, 2022), is an example of intergenerational (in)justice between temporal generations. Similarly, past greenhouse gas

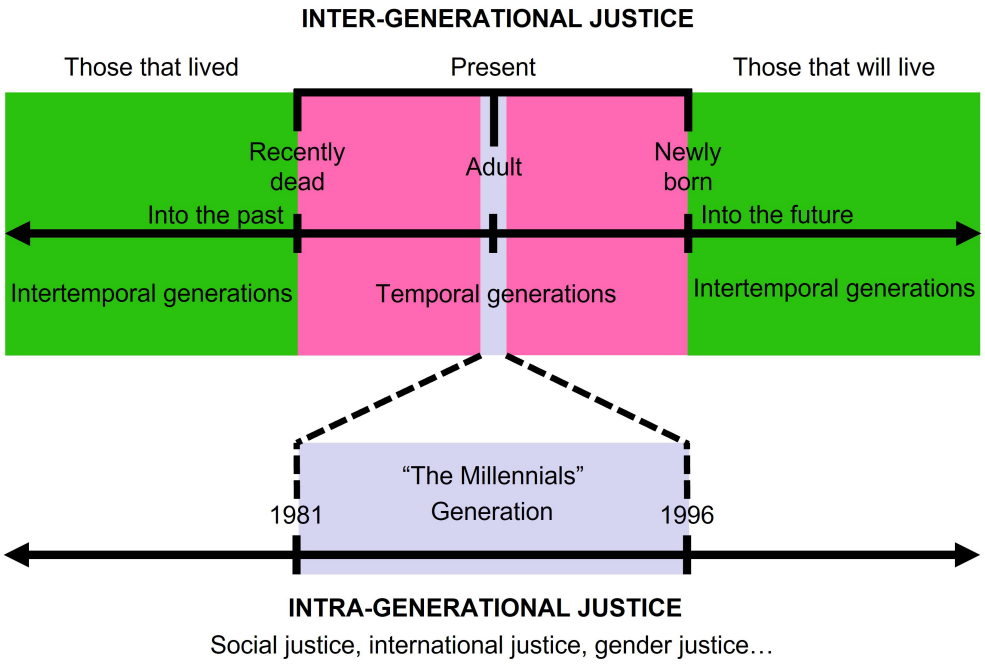

FIGURE 1
Inter-generational and intra-generational justice. Inspired by Tremmel, 2009.

emissions, which will remain in the atmosphere contributing to climate-change related hazards for generations to come (Duus-Otterström, 2014), is an issue of intergenerational justice between intertemporal generations.

Likely moved by eco-anxiety (Hickman, 2020) and the perceived disproportionate effect that global environmental change will have on their lives, children and youth have channeled feelings of anger and powerlessness into more empowered responses such as climate activism. To legitimate their claims for urgent action, children and youth activists have politicized terms like climate and intergenerational justice (Knappe and Renn, 2022). The discourse of these activists translates narrow, technical, and/or strictly theoretical terms into more tangible concepts for public scrutiny, contestation, and action (Zürn et al., 2012). Of particular interest to us is the politicization of IGJ, particularly in regard to two claims made by youth activism: first, the need to protect the earth for young people and future generations, and second, the recognition of present youth as representatives of the future.

Undoubtedly, this represents a powerful political and rhetorical move on the part of youth activists to claim space and compel action. We are concerned, however, by the potential shortcomings inherent in this articulation of IGJ, which risk eroding the full, transformative potential of IGJ to build more sustainable futures.

This is especially concerning for the case of urban environmental planning, where current evaluation approaches and protocols have failed to adopt a temporal framework that considers different generations (e.g., Lombardi and Cooper, 2018). In this article, we refer to urban environmental planning as the process of guiding and directing the sustainable allocation of natural resources, development of land, and design of urban environments for the welfare of people and the protection and enhancement of natural processes (McHill University, School of Urban Planning, 2008; Bibri and Krogstie, 2017). In other words, urban environmental planning concerns the technical and political process of decision-making concerning current and future environmental quality of the urban built environment. Therefore, we argue there is a pressing need to engage a fuller understanding of IGJ and guide its translation into different fields concerning sustainable development. In this paper, we aim to do so for the field of urban environmental planning. The following questions guide our inquiry:

- *How are current movements of youth climate activism in Europe engaging with IGJ? What is at stake?*
- *What are good examples of more intergenerationally just urban environmental planning?*

After exploring these questions, we conclude by reflecting on how the current political economy of planning supports or challenges principles of IGJ.

2. The contradictions of youth inclusion as intergenerational justice in practice

To date, IGJ is most frequently engaged in either relatively abstract academic elaborations of sustainability or strategically by youth activists to demand immediate action on the climate crisis. In between sit formal, practical engagements with IGJ, of which there are few. This is in large part due to the difficulty

of representing future generations in democratic processes, which poses an important ethical and practical challenge (Tremmel, 2006; Hiskes, 2009). Nevertheless, discounting future costs and benefits in economics (Portney and Weyant, 2013), considering the option and bequest value in environmental economics (Beltratti et al., 1992), and youth-led litigation demanding climate action (Slobodian, 2019; Kotzé, 2021; Kotzé and Knappe, 2022; Rodela and Stuber, 2023) all reflect applications IGJ that aim to influence decision-making and public discourse regarding sustainability and the well-being of future generations.

As Knappe and Renn (2022) argue, the absence of representatives in the "future generations slot" has created an opportunity for youth climate activists to position themselves as such, a position that has been supported by several recent court rulings (Slobodian, 2019). By "translating" IGJ into a demand for immediate climate action, these activists create a space for direct youth participation in politics as those most affected by climate change and consequently the suitable representatives of future generations to be affected. Governments, NGOS, and other formal institutions wishing to respond positively to youth demands for IGJ emphasize youth inclusion as a form of accountability and have moved to include youth in their processes or further highlight their existing role.[1]

We wish to be clear that youth inclusion in planning and policy development is important and should occur. Democratic processes are ones in which all affected are able to participate. Youth are no less—and often more so—affected by contemporary decisions than other groups and their inclusion is necessary for realizing just, democratic processes. As such, it is our contention that youth inclusion can be thought of as a form of representational or social justice, wherein youth are present as representatives of their own needs and desires, as well as a type of IGJ between temporal generations. The implication of youth inclusion in the name of IGJ, however, is frequently that youth are present as proxies for all future generations.

The positioning of current youth as representatives of future generations has been a deft political maneuver, used by young climate activists to gain a place at the table and in court rulings to avoid the problem of standing associated with generations yet to be born. We do not wish to question its legitimacy or value. We respect the tactical decision to deploy IGJ as a rhetorical support for youth inclusion in decision-making processes and a means for judicially compelling climate action. We wish to raise concerns, however, about some implications of this strategy for IGJ in practice, namely the narrowing of IGJ to youth inclusion. In particular, we identify two problems raised by the collapse of IGJ into youth inclusion.

First, the equation of youth inclusion and IGJ is unfair to current youth, who are asked to not only represent their needs and desires in decision-making fora, but also to advocate for those yet to come. Moreover, it is unclear that—beyond the rhetorical strategy of collapsing a future defined by climate change into the future of climate change youth face today—youth are any better positioned to effectively represent the needs and desires of future generations, and to compel the necessary action to secure viable futures, than adults (Slobodian, 2019).

Second, locating future generations' interests solely in their representability by current youth introduces the possibility for intergenerational domination (Ojanen, 2019). Assuming that the needs and desires presented by today's youth can stand in for those of future generations assumes static interests and (a) limits the interests of future generations to those raised by current youth and (b) forecloses the possibility of needs and desires yet to be imagined.

To grapple with these tensions, we propose maintaining a separation between the concepts and practices of youth inclusion and IGJ. While these two intersect—including the voices of all affected generations is a key part of IGJ—they are not isomorphic. In order to explore what a separate treatment of IGJ might look like in practice, we explore some potential strategies for an IGJ approach in urban environmental planning, where youth inclusion has received far more attention to date.

3. Toward a more intergenerationally just urban environmental planning

Direct representation of future generations' preferences, needs, and values is not possible. Similarly, it is very difficult to find urban environmental planning approaches that do not in any way limit the possibilities for future generations to develop freely. Consequently, operationalizing IGJ into urban environmental planning is a difficult task requiring further research. Here, we present examples of planning approaches that bring forward key dimensions of IGJ.

3.1. Tactical urbanism and urban acupuncture

Tactical urbanism and urban acupuncture encompass biophysical landscape interventions that are easily reversible, allowing for corrective measures and improvements (Balicka et al., 2021). The *Superblock* model, spearheaded by Barcelona's mayor Ada Colau, is an example of tactical urbanism to improve residential quality and safety (Fontes, 2021) (Figure 2). The implementation of tactical urbanism via *Superblocks* brings forward different aspects of IGJ in environmental planning.

The pedestrianization of streets, the promotion of active transport, and the traffic pacification structures are small-scale, cost-effective tactical interventions that can increase safety, social cohesion, and overall residential environmental quality (Balicka et al., 2021; Fontes, 2021). These improvements will particularly benefit special user groups such as children, the elderly, and people with mobility impairment whose differing needs and preferences are often disregarded in standard adult-oriented decision-making (Tonucci and Rissotto, 2001). As such, tactical urbanism encourages decision-makers to experiment with new planning approaches that address the needs of children and elderly adults

1 Examples include the United Nations Major Group for Youth and Children, Youth and Future Generations Day at COP27, the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child into law in Sweden, and the Copenhagen Youth Council, to name a few.

FIGURE 2
Example of tactical urbanism in Barcelona *Superblocks*. Summer 2021 - Photo: O G-A.

(IGJ for temporal generations) while reducing long-term effects on the urban environment (IGJ for intertemporal generations).

Indeed, the flexibility, impermanence, and reversibility of tactical urbanism and urban acupuncture (Balicka et al., 2021) are critical aspects for securing IGJ between intertemporal generations. The preferences of future generations for urban planning are uncertain, and attempting to project or anticipate their preferences could lead to issues of intergenerational dominance (Young, 1990). Intergenerationally just urban environmental planning will focus on preserving and fostering the capacity of future generations to shape their cities, as their interests are unknown to present decision-makers and voters (Ojanen, 2019).

3.2. Investing in seeds for the future: urban forestry policies

Urban trees and forests offer various intrinsic, instrumental, and relational values that enhance the wellbeing of human and other-than-human city dwellers. As trees age and grow in size, their socio-ecological contributions increase, making them more valuable (Hauer and Johnson, 2003; Stephenson et al., 2014). Older, larger trees store more carbon, intercept more particulate matter, provide habitats for urban wildlife, and hold aesthetic and symbolic significance for people (Schwab, 2009; Blicharska and Mikusiński, 2014; Le Roux et al., 2014).

Present generations enjoy the benefits of trees planted in the past, while incurring the costs of investing in new trees for the benefit of future generations. This temporal disparity poses challenges, as it takes decades for the benefits of trees to outweigh the expenses associated with planting and maintenance (Vogt et al., 2015). Economic constraints, compounded by budget reductions and global economic recessions, have compelled local governments to prioritize essential services over urban forestry, further exacerbating the issue (Tate, 2000; Ottitsch and Krott, 2005). To ensure IGJ, proactive maintenance of urban forests and trees is crucial. By implementing policies that prioritize the protection of existing trees, increasing tree planting efforts, securing optimal conditions for new and existing trees, and promoting species diversity, cities like Copenhagen with their Tree Policy 2018–2025 (*Københavns Kommunes træpolitik*) exemplify a forward-thinking approach to urban forestry (Copenhagen Municipality, 2018). Such measures guarantee the rights of future generations to enjoy a healthy and well-established urban tree cover and require careful consideration of the balance between up-front investments (temporal IGJ)—including their effects on contemporary generations—and the rights of future generations to a mature and thriving urban forest (intertemporal IGJ).

3.3. The new normal and social-ecological-technological systems perspectives

Climate hazards such as urban flooding, storm surge, drought, and heat waves, are increasingly impacting urban areas with high concentrations of people and critical infrastructure (Bouwer, 2011; Dickson et al., 2012). Traditionally, cities have responded with coping strategies and incremental adaptations (Fedele et al., 2019), relying on isolated governance models and technical fixes. However, research emphasizes the need to shift toward a social-ecological-technological systems (SETS) perspective, recognizing

the intricate interactions among people, the environment, and technology (Depietri and McPhearson, 2017). Solely relying on compartmentalized solutions, like building sea walls to protect coastal areas, can result in maladaptive responses and undesirable long-term environmental and social outcomes.

From an IGJ perspective, neglecting these social and ecological dimensions of urban systems not only overlooks better potential solutions to present climate hazards, but also paves the way for system lock-ins and path dependencies. System lock-ins (i.e., infrastructural constraints in the present due to past decisions) are usually exacerbated by path dependency (i.e. systems constraints on change), and often translate into escalating climate risks over time (Depietri and McPhearson, 2017; Markolf et al., 2018). These risks are especially present for climate-driven hazards. Adopting systemic views that embrace the social and ecological, as well as technological, dimensions of urban systems can lead to transformative, resilient adaptation, better able to respond to current environmental disturbance while safeguarding resources and capacities for future generations (intertemporal IGJ).

For example, in Copenhagen, Denmark, a collaborative effort involving planners, social workers, and architects has focused on climate adapting the green commons of Hørgården, a housing area with 1,600 residents located in the district of Amager. The process emphasizes inclusive and resident-driven planning, encompassing social, ecological, and technological systems (Gulsrud et al., 2023; Manzo et al., 2023). Hørgården's green commons are being transformed to address climate challenges by implementing underground stormwater and sewage separation, while also creating new trail systems and green gathering spaces that foster community identity and biodiversity. Notably, resident engagement has been a key focus, involving a diverse range of Hørgården's population, including youth, in envisioning the future of the green commons and participating in the stormwater management project. Coordinated through the social master plan, Amagerplan, funded by the state, municipal, and national foundations, this approach prioritizes youth involvement across social, ecological, and technological aspects (temporal IGJ) while creating resilient infrastructures that secure opportunities for future residents (intertemporal IGJ).

3.4. Empowerment and meaningful participation of youth in urban environmental planning

Efforts to include youth in decision-making bodies have increased in recent years. This is a response to both the demands from youth climate activists (see for example the United Nations' Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change and the Children and Youth Pavilion at COP27), and the UN Convention on the Rights for the Child (UNCRC), which recognizes the right of children to participate and influence decisions relevant to their lives (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). While the UNCRC represents an effort to operationalize the rights of children and youth into international law, of the 196 countries party to it (OHCHR - Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2023), thus far only Sweden has transposed the UNCRC into national law in the context of spatial planning. One of the basic principles of the convention is the right of youth and children to form, express, and have their own opinions in all matters concerning them, including participation in societal development (Boverket, 2015, 2020). The transposition of the UNCRC into national law in Sweden, therefore, has been interpreted to grant rights to children and youth to participate in urban design and urban planning processes (Cele and van der Burgt, 2015) and is a concrete example of the instantiation of temporal IGJ in law.

Many benefits to youth participation in urban environmental planning exist (García-Antúnez, 2021). Moreover, according to Derr et al. (2013), socially just, intergenerational urban spaces should engage children and young people as participants in the planning and design of spaces to make them welcoming to all generations. Youth participation can be used as a tool for action research to address structural disparities (Schensul, 2004), while centering youth voices and valuing their perspectives on issues that affect them can enhance the self-confidence, resilience, and capacities of marginalized youth in efforts to counter social exclusion (Wearing, 2011; Lyiscott et al., 2020). Including youth in urban environmental planning does not only benefit young people. For example, youth can contribute new perspectives that broaden planners' view of the relationship between people and the environment in urban design processes (Nordström and Wales, 2019; Rodela and Norss, 2023), and bring with them a different orientation toward the future that potentially reorients the time-frame of most environmental planning processes. In this way, youth empowerment demonstrates how other types of justice, such as social justice across age groups, can intersect with intergenerational justice. Including youth in urban environmental planning serves to both empower young people and create a space for engagement with longer-term futures and future generations, helping to secure both temporal and intertemporal IGJ.

4. The political economy of urban environmental planning

These examples of IGJ in planning practice illustrate how preserving resources and capabilities for future generations stretches far beyond youth inclusion. Planning bodies wield considerable power in shaping current and future landscapes by realizing political goals and budgets, and by determining which voices are heard through stakeholder engagement. This power, however, is directed and limited by the political and economic structures in which planning occurs. It is thus necessary to engage with the political economy of urban environmental planning, which is understood here as the distribution of decision-making power across institutional bodies and scales and how that distribution shapes the production and allocation of resources with respect to the environmental quality of the urban built environment (Logan and Molotch, 2007). This includes the critical task of examining why the institutional structures and practices of urban environmental planning exist in the form they do, what sorts of political arrangements and influence shape urban environmental planning, what resources are made available and generated through urban environmental planning, and how the implementation of environmental management and climate adaptation strategies can

be affected by dynamics between local histories, bureaucratic cultures, material resources, and social contexts (Chu, 2016; p. 282).

For example, carbon offsets have emerged to help increase the sustainability of urban development. The destruction of natural resources, such as old trees, for new-build is quantified by the amount of carbon released and "offset" through investment in carbon sequestration, e.g., in new tree planting or conservation, typically spatially removed from the site in question. Support for this approach arises from the intersection of top-down multinational and national regulatory bodies favoring easily measured and standardized metrics, the ability of quantified carbon and resultant offsets to be traded in financial markets, and the pressure on municipalities to support short-term economic growth through urban development (Rauland and Newman, 2015; Webber et al., 2022). The loss of high-quality nature, however, raises questions regarding IGJ and urban environmental planning, as the lack of localized compensation and the long time spans for trees to reach maturity mean that young people and future generations in these areas lose environmental benefits such as shade and cooling, beauty, and connection to history, among many other instrumental and relational values associated to urban nature (Kavanagh, 2022). A more intergenerationally just approach would seek to assess what is lost to youth and future generations when, for example, mature trees are cut down to make way for new urban development. Implementing this approach necessitates assessing at which scale decisions can effectively be made, recognizing the undue burden placed on cities with respect to environmental planning and the role of local conditions such as housing prices. It also requires attention to economic models of distribution or exclusion, and legacies of class, race, or gender-based exclusion as they exist both in specific sites and through institutions and institutionalized processes. Operationalizing IGJ requires engaging in these structural analyses—at multiple levels of governance—in order to pinpoint challenges and opportunities for policies that preserve resources and capabilities for future generations.

Moreover, this attention to the political economy of environmental planning helps to realize that youth engagement does not change these underlying structures, or even shift significant influence to youth. Elise Sydendal, a youth climate activist and member of the Danish Parliament's Youth Climate Council in a media interview published for the PwY In Conversation Series reflects on how to realize change through youth engagement:

> *"If politicians really wanted to include us, they should have some courage and give us real power. By that, I mean that they should at least be voting on the recommendations we put forward … But other things have to change too. As a society, we need more compassion and empathy. We are very greedy. We think we can't live without certain things, we can't live without eating meat, or driving our cars. But actually, we can."*

Sydendal is calling not only for a transfer of generational power but for major structural and institutional transformations linked to economic modes of production and consumption and the political will to live within planetary boundaries (visit Dominguez, 2023 for full interview). These are transformations that should involve youth, but importantly, cannot be accomplished solely through greater youth inclusion. They require committed change from institutional actors across the social, political, and economic spectrum and coordination through multiple levels of governance from the municipal to the multinational.

5. Conclusion

The long-term sustainability of urban environmental planning can be supported by a correct and comprehensive operationalization of the theory of intergenerational justice (IGJ) into planning practice. Through the example of youth climate activism in Europe, we illustrate in this paper how IGJ has been strategically translated to advocate for and defend the right of youth to be included in decision-making concerning present and future environmental quality (Knappe and Renn, 2022). While not wanting to delegitimize the desperate effort of youth activists for a more just future, we warn that rendering IGJ solely as representational justice carries risks; namely the unjust —and unjustified— burden for youth to represent future generations, and a potential scenario of intergenerational domination (Ojanen, 2019), where current preferences and values could outweigh those of unknown future generations. Thus, we remind scholars and practitioners of the need to carefully distinguish between IGJ and youth inclusion, acknowledging that these are intersecting but are not isomorphic concepts.

To concretize this intervention, we present examples of what we believe are more intergenerationally just planning approaches. The adaptability and flexibility of tactical urbanism, the forward-looking investment in urban forestry policies, the resilience offered by transformative responses to environmental hazards, and the representational justice of youth inclusion in decision-making are all examples that advance temporal and intertemporal aspects of intergenerational justice in urban environmental planning. Yet, we recognize the challenge of inserting the fundamental IGJ principles underlying these cases into more universal planning criteria. As argued in this paper, these urban environmental planning approaches can indeed help address issues of intergenerational injustice. However, we also discuss how the versatility of the concept of IGJ is susceptible to adaptation in ways that may further dominate political economies, ultimately favoring powerful and privileged elites while exacerbating injustices for marginalized and underrepresented segments of society (Kotsila et al., 2021). Here, we defend that a comprehensive operationalization of IGJ can help challenge potentially unjust instrumentalizations of the concept in urban environmental planning and thus safeguard emancipatory and just futures (Kotsila et al., 2021) for generations to come. Lastly, we invite future research to further mature the theoretical and practical integration of IGJ into urban environmental planning and the current neoliberal political economy of planning.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material,

further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

OG-A and MM developed the conceptual approach and led the writing process of the article. NG and SL wrote parts of the second, third, and fourth sections of this article. RR is the leader of the Planning with Youth project, provided us with data about youth-initiated legal cases, and helped write some parts of the second and third section of this article. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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