

JUSTICEPUR: WHY PEOPLE, NOT PROFIT, MUST GUIDE URBAN INTERVENTIONS

Bilal Mahmood Sulehri

ORCID ID: [0009-0000-7245-8019](https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7245-8019)

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Corresponding Author: *
Bilal Mahmood Sulehri

Abstract

Contemporary urban planning often defaults to economic rationale, which is not always conducive to human happiness, as it results in cities that are designed for profit instead of people. The essay presents "Justicepur," a normative framework for creating a "Just and Flourishing City", where social outcomes reign over economic efficiency. Applying this framework to Barcelona, the study reveals critical duality, the article shows that city's Superblocks have successfully implemented the 15-Minute City concept regarding proximity and green infrastructures but at the same time it hides deeper structural inequalities. Analysis reveals that environmental interventions in areas such as Poblenou brought property prices up by about €3,000 per square meter, hence effectively forcing working-class people out of the area. Moreover, the Decidim platform in Barcelona, despite being billed as an instrument of digital participatory democracy, channels a maximum 0.5–1.5% of eligible resident participation and is mo.



INTRODUCTION

What makes a 'Good City'?

JUSTICEPUR: Why People, Not Profit, Must Guide Urban Interventions

For me thinking about a good city is not daydreaming. As John Friedmann argues, engaging in utopian thinking is vital because it creates "genuine futures around which political coalitions may be built" (Friedmann, 2000). If we lack this kind of vision, planning often boils down to a narrow economic rationale obsessed with profit, failing to address the fundamental need for meaning in society, and hence turns to what Friedmann called the "terrible void" (Friedmann, 2000).

This essay sets out my vision of the good city, which will essentially be a **Just and Flourishing City**, which I will call **Justicepur**. My vision is an achievable dream built with courage, justice, and imagination, founded on the core principle of prioritizing people over profit, ensuring that human flourishing, security, diversity, and justice are realized as "everyday realities". My explorations of urban interventions have crystallized the implementable mechanisms necessary for this vision. I will try to use this framework to critically assess Barcelona and analyze how it fits my vision.

Justicepur, the Just & Flourishing City



The Justicepur model has been designed to establish a benchmark against which all city policies must be judged (Friedmann, 2000). The economy, infrastructure, and technology must

exist to serve the fundamental values of human dignity and justice. A visual diagram of some of the ingredients of Justicepur is given below:



Figure 1- Visual representation of ingredients of Justicepur

Key Outcomes and Importance

Justicepur strives for structural guarantees of opportunity, ensuring social outcomes are paramount.

1. Human Flourishing and Health Equity:

Dignity is the foundation of Justicepur, requiring every resident to have equal access to opportunities and dignified livelihoods. Planning must treat health equity as its guiding "north star" (Tan et al., 2024), ensuring that health is

inseparable from design and actively countering spatialized inequities (Tan et al., 2024).

2. Multiplicity, Diversity, and Belonging:

The city is "a mosaic of social worlds" (Pile, 1999), and diversity forms the essence of resilience and creativity. This requires fostering an autonomous civil life relatively free from state supervision (Friedmann, 2000), supporting tolerance (Florida, 2003), and providing robust spaces of encounter.

3. **Inclusive Economic Resilience:** The economy must focus on fairness and the distribution of opportunity, attracting talent but actively resisting labour bipolarity (Sassen, 2022). Environmental goals are embedded through circular systems for resource management (Kenworthy, 2006) and the use of local networks to strengthen resilience.

4. **Democratic and Accountable Governance:** Governing matters as much as the outcomes. Justicepur mandates genuine citizen participation and co-creation that moves beyond consultation (Arnstein, 1969). Planning must be a visionary "debate and decide" process (Kenworthy, 2006), supporting community-driven development (Wong, 2018).

Built Environmental Characteristics and Daily Life

The physical structure of Justicepur is engineered to reinforce these social values, designing residents' daily routines around proximity and justice.

- **Housing and Residential Patterns:** Housing is treated as a non-commodified right. Provisions must embody human-scale design and reject the "sterile, space-mangling high-rise slabs" that undermine community life, as critiqued by Mumford (Mumford, 1961).

- **Transportation Networks:** Mobility is governed by proximity over speed (Kenworthy, 2006). Justicepur follows the 15-Minute City Model, which ensures daily essential functions are accessible via walking or cycling, advancing

health equity and reducing environmental harm (Moreno et al., 2021).

- **The Look, Feel, and Smart Technology:**

The city integrates a visible green matrix of open spaces (Oosterbroek et al., 2024). Moreover, I want my city to be a smart city. Technology is deployed via the Smart City concept to utilize closed-loop systems for environmental sustainability (Picon, 2015; Kenworthy, 2006) and to use sensors and cameras for security and urban resilience (Goodman & Powles, 2019). Critically, this technological adoption is constrained: the city must establish sovereignty over its data systems and infrastructure (Goodman & Powles, 2019), ensuring technology reinforces democratic accountability rather than surveillance and control.

- **The physical experience** of Justicepur is designed to embrace rather than intimidate. Residents encounter their city through a rhythm of human-scaled encounters: a morning walk through parks that punctuate every neighborhood ensures green is not a luxury but a baseline (Wachsmuth & Angelo, 2018). Streets prioritize the pedestrian through traffic-calming and continuous tree canopies that provide comfort. Public squares host diverse market stalls, children's plays, elderly activities and community gatherings, rather than being designed for single purposes or corporate consumption (Gehl, 2010).

- **The residential fabric** emphasizes what Mumford called "community life." Courtyards and communal gardens create semi-public spaces where neighbors encounter one another regularly, building what Oldenburg (1989) termed "third places", neither home nor workplace, but sites of belonging. Mixed-income and mixed-tenure housing (owner-occupied homes alongside subsidized rentals and cooperative housing) ensures social diversity is built into street-level reality, not segregated across neighborhoods (Galster & Lee, 2021a). The architectural language is modest, medium-rise, human-scale buildings with active ground floors,

eschewing both the anonymity of towers and the exclusivity of gated neighborhoods.

- **Public transport nodes** become neighborhood social hubs rather than mere transit interchanges. Bus stations integrate retail, cultural programming, and community services to make transit use a social experience. Importantly, the digital layer is invisible to the user; sensors and smart grids operate behind the scenes,

optimizing flows without imposing surveillance aesthetics (Picon, 2015). Residents do not feel monitored; they feel supported. The “look and feel” of Justicepur is one of openness, accessibility, and genuine care.

Case Study: Assessing Barcelona’s Dual Reality

Barcelona is an interesting case study because its innovative physical planning presents an opportunity to compare it with Justicepur.



Figure 2- Aerial view of the Sagrada Família basilica surrounded by the Eixample district in Barcelona, Spain.

Alignment: Where Barcelona Meets Justicepur Vision

Barcelona excels in realizing the physical components related to proximity and environmental design:

1. **The Superblocks and Proximity:** The city's retrofitting of its dense gridiron via Superblocks is a powerful application of the 15-Minute City mandate (Moreno et al., 2021), prioritizing pedestrian life and enhancing

accessibility, which fits Justicepur goal of restructuring daily routines (Mumford, 1961).

2. **Infrastructure as Meaning:** The physical presence of these walkable, green areas aligns with the poetics of infrastructure (Larkin, 2013), representing a progressive, resilient vision that aids in decentralization and resilience against shocks (Amirzadeh et al., 2023; Meerow et al., 2016).



Figure 3- A street in a Barcelona Superblock, an urban planning concept that reclaims space from cars for public use

Shortcomings: Where Barcelona Falls Short

Barcelona's successful branding as a global city that attracts talent (Florida, 2003) has undermined Justicepur's core principles of equity and democratic control. Three critical shortcomings reveal this contradiction.

Failure of Structural Housing Justice

The housing crisis demonstrates a profound failure to treat shelter as a right (Galster & Lee, 2021a). Investments in physical amenities trigger gentrification, inflating land values and displacing residents. In Poblenou, property prices rose approximately €3,000 per square meter in the decade following the 22@ redevelopment (World Crunch, 2024).

This reveals how environmental improvements, absent housing protections, accelerate displacement rather than ensure inclusion (Anguelovski et al., 2016). Barcelona's global city success has been purchased through working-class displacement, reinforcing Sassen's observation that city-level growth often masks widening internal inequalities (Sassen, 2022).

Tokenistic Rather Than Genuine Participation

Barcelona pioneered the Decidim platform ODP. (n.d.) or participatory budgeting, allocating €30 million since 2020 through

resident-driven proposals and voting (Palma et al., 2023). Yet participation remains structurally limited: only 0.5–1.5% of eligible residents engage (Platoniq, 2024). The digital-first approach creates barriers for working-poor residents, elderly populations, and undocumented migrants. Participants skew toward college-educated homeowners; working-poor renters are least likely to support neighbourhood improvements they ultimately cannot afford (Anguelovski et al., 2016).

More troublingly, participation operates as "consultation without genuine power-sharing" (Arnstein, 1969). In Poblenou's Superblock pilot, the city implemented street reconfigurations without meaningful prior consultation. When residents eventually voted, 87% opposed continuation, yet the city proceeded anyway (Sustainable Just Cities Wiki, 2018). Residents could advise on implementation details but not contest fundamental decisions.

Barcelona adapted after Poblenou, incorporating co-design workshops. However, structural barriers persist. Participation remains dominated by organized groups while precarious workers and migrants remain absent (Fincher et al., 2014). Participatory processes continue within predetermined municipal frameworks (Fainstein, 2018). Justicepur demands residents hold

genuine veto power over neighborhood-transforming projects, coupled with structural housing protections. Without permanent affordable housing, rent stabilization, and

community land trusts, participatory budgeting becomes complicit in gentrification, democratizing process while accelerating displacement (Fainstein, 2018; Iveson, 2015).



Figure 4 - A panel discussion at an event related to the Decidim platform

Environmental Shortcomings

Barcelona's environmental achievements mask inequities that defy Justicepur's circular systems. Superblocks enhance central green access and reduce emissions, yet peripheral areas endure uneven benefits, with industrial zones like El Besòs facing ongoing pollution (Beatley, 2012). This "green and grey" divide perpetuates spatial disparities, failing the comprehensive green matrix for resilience (Wachsmuth & Angelo, 2018).

Technological Domination Over Democratic Governance

Barcelona's "smart city" vision risks delegating public policy to private platforms. Reliance on vendor-supplied solutions, notably Cisco's City Protocol, means private vendors control data architecture, algorithms, and how urban problems are defined (Greenfield, 2013; Cugurullo, 2018). As Sidewalk Toronto demonstrates, this creates systems where cities become "clients" of private corporations, with power asymmetries emerging from technological determinism: the assumption that "smart" inherently means "good" (Goodman & Powles,

2019). Barcelona risks "surveillance capitalism," where data systems prioritize corporate profit over resident welfare (Zuboff, 2019).

Justicepur demands an alternative: municipal data commons where cities own infrastructure-generated data, employ their own data scientists, and make algorithmic decisions transparent and contestable (Kitchin & Cardullo, 2019). This requires genuine capacity-building. Cities must become stewards of digital commons, not consumers of corporate technology. Barcelona's Activa platform is promising but remains inchoate (Kenworthy, 2006). Justicepur insists on "debate and decide", technological deployment must follow democratic deliberation, not technical feasibility.

The Deeper Challenge: Political Power

Implementing Justicepur's vision faces three entrenched interests. First, real estate resists inclusionary zoning, vacancy penalties, and progressive taxation (March & Ribera-Fumaz, 2016). Second, technology firms resist municipal data sovereignty through contractual lock-in and intellectual property claims; corporate preference for "public-private partnerships" reflects power

asymmetries where public partners remain junior (Greenfield, 2013; Goodman & Powles, 2019). Third, Barcelona's institutions include district representatives, business associations, and technocrats favouring market-driven development (Sassen, 2022).

Implementation requires not policy design but political organizing, building durable coalitions through tenant unions, community land trusts, and participatory bodies that maintain pressure across electoral cycles (Fainstein, 2018). Justicepur is not a policy blueprint but a normative vision requiring sustained political struggle (Friedmann, 2000). Barcelona can advance it only if residents collectively assert their vision against entrenched interests. The deeper challenge is not design or policy, but power.

Recommendations for Urban Interventions

To move Barcelona toward Justicepur, interventions must holistically target economic policy and democratic structure.

Guaranteeing Housing through Structural Market Intervention

To secure housing as infrastructure for human flourishing (Galster & Lee, 2021a), Barcelona must implement aggressive measures:

- **Mandatory Inclusionary Zoning:** Implement high minimum requirements for affordable, permanently subsidized units in all new market-rate developments (Goetz, 2003), thereby mitigating gentrification (Anguelovski et al., 2016).

- **Vacancy Penalties:** Enact punitive taxes on residential units intentionally held vacant (Galster & Lee, 2021b) to combat land speculation and ensure shelter availability.

The success of these housing interventions hinges not merely on policy design but on fiscal capacity and political will. Barcelona must simultaneously implement three revenue-generation measures. First, a progressive property tax calibrated to land value rather than building value, exempting owner-occupied homes while taxing vacant investment properties and speculative holdings at punitive rates (Galster & Lee, 2021b). This funds the inclusionary zoning subsidy and the

participatory budgeting expansion discussed below. Second, a portion of tax revenue from the technology sector, specifically, a “data dividend” on firms exploiting Barcelona’s urban data (Zuboff, 2019; Kitchin & Cardullo, 2019). This acknowledges that urban data is collectively generated; its commercial value should be partially reclaimed by the public. Third, debt-financed infrastructure investment in Superblock expansion and transit, justified on the grounds that improved accessibility and reduced car dependence generate downstream health system savings and increased economic productivity (Giles-Corti et al., 2016).

These revenue streams address the political economy question directly: without identifying fiscal sources, anti-gentrification and housing justice policies remain aspirational. Barcelona possesses the institutional capacity to implement this (it has sophisticated tax administration and a progressive political coalition), but commitment is required (Fainstein, 2017). Justicepur demands that urban leaders prioritize redistribution even when market pressures push otherwise.

Institutionalizing Co-Creation and Public Control

To mandate democratic governance (Friedmann, 2000) and technological accountability, Barcelona needs structural change that achieves genuine co-creation (Arnstein, 1969):

- **Participatory Budgeting Expansion:** Institutionalize robust participatory budgeting at the neighbourhood level (Wong, 2018), with clear mechanisms that ensure redistributive outcomes and accountability, moving beyond placation (Arnstein, 1969; Fainstein, 2017).

- **Data Trust and Control:** The Smart City implementation must be reversed-engineered to establish municipal control over all data generated by smart infrastructure. This requires public policy rulemaking before technology deployment to ensure data sovereignty and prevent domination by corporations (Goodman & Powles, 2019).

Equitable Infrastructure Planning

Future Superblock expansion must counteract the tendencies toward unequal distribution and displacement:

- **Distributional Equity in Benefits:** Employ distributional weights during project evaluation to ensure that benefits (e.g., improved air quality) preferentially favour historically marginalized populations (Durrant, 2017), embedding health equity into design (Tan et al., 2024).
- **Integrated Physical Planning:** Ensure that physical improvements are always structurally linked to affordable housing provisions, guaranteeing that enhancements improve neighbourhood quality without causing displacement (Goetz, 2003).

Environmental Interventions

To embed Justicepur's environmental equity in Barcelona, prioritize targeted green interventions:

- **Green Equity Redistribution:** Develop a citywide index to channel resources to underserved peripheries, converting industrial sites into community parks with circular urban farming (Beatley, 2012; Kenworthy, 2006).
- **Resilience Integration:** Require co-created vulnerability assessments for Superblock expansions, linking climate adaptation to health equity (Meerow et al., 2016; Tan et al., 2024). Funded via proposed taxes, these ensure sustainability serves justice (Friedmann, 2000).

Conclusion

Justicepur offers the benchmark to measure Barcelona's aspirations (Friedmann, 2000). The city's physical transformations, especially the proximity-based Superblocks, demonstrate visionary urbanism (Moreno et al., 2021). However, persistent failures in housing justice and genuine citizen participation expose profound democratic and economic deficits (Galster & Lee, 2021a; Arnstein, 1969).

Barcelona can fulfil its potential as an achievable dream of a just and flourishing city only through structural reforms that prioritize people over

profit, implementing aggressive housing reforms, participatory processes and ensuring public control over data.

Justicepur remains an achievable dream, but only if residents and planners choose people over profit with sustained courage and collective action.

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