

NOCTURNAL FUTURES: A NECESSARY REFLECTION IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY

FUTUROS NOCTURNOS: UMA REFLEXÃO NECESSARIA EM TEMPOS DE INCERTEZA

FUTUROS NOCTURNOS: UNA REFLEXION NECESARIA EN TIEMPOS DE INCERTIDUMBRE

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Abstract

This text serves as an epilogue of the special issue entitled *Nocturnal Cities : Past, Present, and Future*. The first part of the text below presents a series of research topics that are central to the interdisciplinary area of Night Studies, and whose objects of research and reflection can be referred to as 'nocturnal urban futures'. The second half denounces the absence of 'the night' in the design of the so-called '15-minute city', which is the main paradigm of ongoing urban development in many cities worldwide (especially from the Global North). The final section sheds light on the urgent community, institutional, industry and academic need for debating and discussing the role that the 'nocturnal city' should have in the construction of climate-neutral cities in the long-term future.

Keywords: nocturnal city, future, uncertainty

Resumo

Este texto serve como epílogo do número especial intitulado *Cidades Noturnas : Passado, Presente e Futuro*. A primeira parte do texto que se segue apresenta um conjunto de temas de investigação que podem ser centrais na área interdisciplinar dos Estudos Noturnos, e cujos objectos de pesquisa e reflexão podem ser designados por "futuros urbanos noturnos". A segunda metade denuncia a ausência da 'noite' no desenho da chamada 'cidade de 15 minutos', que é o principal paradigma do desenvolvimento urbano em curso em muitas cidades do mundo (especialmente do Norte Global). A secção final lança luz sobre a urgente necessidade comunitária, institucional, empresarial e académica de debater e discutir o papel que a 'cidade noturna' deve ter na construção de cidades climaticamente neutras num futuro a longo prazo.

Palavras-chaves: cidade noturna, futuro, incerteza

Resumen

Este texto sirve de epílogo del número especial titulado *Ciudades Nocturnas : Pasado, Presente y Futuro*. La primera parte del texto presenta una serie de temas de investigación que pueden ser centrales en el área interdisciplinar de los Estudios Nocturnos, y cuyos objetos de investigación y reflexión pueden denominarse 'futuros urbanos nocturnos'. La segunda parte denuncia la ausencia de 'la noche' en el diseño de la llamada 'ciudad de los 15 minutos', que es el principal paradigma del desarrollo urbano actual en muchas ciudades del mundo (especialmente del Norte Global). La sección final arroja luz sobre la urgente necesidad comunitaria, institucional, industrial y académica de debatir y discutir el papel que la 'ciudad nocturna' debe tener en la construcción de ciudades climáticamente neutras en un futuro a largo plazo.

Palabras-claves: ciudad nocturna, futuro, incertidumbre

INTRODUCTION

Franco Bianchini (1990, 1995) and Charles Landry (1991), who are the authors that conceptualised the idea of 24-hour cities, most likely did not anticipate the challenges that would threaten this paradigm in today's world. Many complex phenomena are emerging today as potentially negative factors in the present and future development and viability of 24-hour cities in many regions across the globe. The case of European 'nocturnal cities' is paradigmatic of this uncertain scenario. The changing global power dynamics resulting from the emergence of a new hegemonic block led by China, Russia, and India has mainly led to the depreciation of the value of Western currencies, leading to inflationary pressures that severely punish the financial and commercial balance of the nightlife industry which had already been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this sense, and in particular, the case of the United Kingdom is tragic. According to the Nighttime Industries Association, "more than half of nighttime economy businesses had seen trading costs increase more than 30 % compared to pre-pandemic levels while more than 70 % were barely breaking even or losing money in the current financial climate" (Weller, 2023). Moreover, both local and transnational speculative real estate funds remain as the main agents of an extractivist urban (re-)development that, in London, Manchester, Dublin, Berlin, Lisbon, Mexico City and Miami (among many other worldwide cities), has over the past years led to the destruction of a significant part of their nocturnal cultural fabric.

Despite all the potential negative factors mentioned up to this point, it is worth highlighting the ongoing but still insufficient urban ecological transition towards more sustainable and livable cities. However, the lack of resilience strategies, mechanisms and tools at local, national, and global levels for the readaptation of urban nighttime economies and social activities in times of climate

emergency is unexplainable (Nofre & Garcia-Ruiz, 2023). Moreover, and surprisingly, two-thirds of the Resilience and Recovery Plans approved under the European Next Generation Funds make no mention of the nightlife industry and offer no support for its green transformation, although a growing number of Europe's nightlife industry stakeholders have initiated a promising path for its 'green' transformation based on reducing their carbon footprint, energy and water consumption, and waste generation (Nofre & Garcia-Ruiz, 2023). However, Europe continues to be a privileged bubble of the world system whose political stability, the relative solidity of the economic-financial system and the fabric of civil society allow the implementation of processes of profound economic, social and cultural depth, such as the new European Green Deal. In most of the Global South, the urban ecological transition is still far from constituting a transnational urban transformation agenda, due in large part to the urgent need to address as far as possible the enormous socioeconomic inequalities that characterise the cities in this region of the world. The differentiated geo-economic, political, social, cultural and urban context between the Global North and the Global South is clearly reflected in the range of actions (or lack thereof) related to the governance of cities at night (Acuto et al., 2021).

The nocturnal city is indeed much more than pubs, clubs, and discotheques. In broadening our scientific gaze, the nocturnal city appears as a complex system – in the terminology of Ortman et al. (2020) and Rybski and González (2022) – made up of a dense network of informal/formal economies, mobilities (at urban and metropolitan scale), social and cultural activities (in domestic, private, and public spaces), and their multiple actors (both formal and informal, institutional and non-institutional). In the current transition towards more ecological and inclusive cities, the nocturnal city, which has been neglected worldwide in policy-making processes until very recently (Acuto et al., 2021; Seijas &

Gelders, 2021), is called to play a fundamental role in the path towards the achievement of the United Nations' *Sustainable Development Goals* and, more particularly, of the specified objectives of the United Nations' *New Urban Agenda* (2017). However, at the time of writing, the academic community has only timidly expressed the urgent need for more sustainable, resilient and egalitarian nocturnal cities.

Today, as never before in the forty years of interdisciplinary epistemological development of urban night studies, Night Studies is enjoying growing interest among the scholarly community of the Global North, South and East. This not only demonstrates how the excellent quality of most of the works published to date has awakened a growing interest in colleagues from different scientific disciplines and geographic regions, but also the need to reflect on (1) what our nocturnal cities should be like in the future, and (2) the civic commitment of a growing part of the nightologist community that denounces how our nocturnal cities have been, and still are, highly marked by inequalities in class, age, sexual orientation, transport provision, dis/ability, ethnic/national origin, cultural and religious backgrounds and their multiple intersections (e.g., Aramayona & Guarneros-Meza, 2023; Koren, 2023; Kosnick, 2018; May 2022).

This text serves as an epilogue to the special issue entitled *Nocturnal Cities: Past, Present, and Future*. The first part of the text below presents a series of research topics that are central to the interdisciplinary area of Night Studies, and whose objects of research and reflection can be referred to as "nocturnal urban futures". The second half proposes to denounce the absence of 'the night' in the design of the so-called "15-minute city", which is the main paradigm of ongoing urban development in many cities worldwide (especially from the Global North). The final section sheds light on the urgent community, institutional, industry and academic need for debating and discussing the role that the 'nocturnal city' should have in the construction of climate-neutral cities in the long-term future.

RESEARCHING NOCTURNAL FUTURES

The design of urban futures can be seen as an ongoing dialectic between the 'politics of probability' (the desires of the ruling classes) and the 'politics of possibility' (the desires of the governed) (Appadurai, 2013). This has been particularly accentuated since the coronavirus pandemic and the irruption of the media-institutional discourse of the "new normal" (e.g., Dixon & Tewdwr-Jones, 2021; Jon, 2021; Kabisch et al., 2022). As expected, the number of publications on the impact of pandemic politics on both the present and the future of cities has been overwhelming worldwide (e.g., Askarizad & He, 2022;

Pasqui, 2022; Sharifi & Alizadeh, 2023). However, the number of scholarly publications on the impact of the pandemic on the nocturnal city and its implications for its future is very small – despite a few brilliant exceptions such as Acuto et al. (2021) and Dunn (2022a). Interestingly, Nick Dunn also argues that the potential for urban places after dark can be seen as "a means of thinking and moving through processes of change that could lead towards a more sustainable, diverse, and nuanced future city [lit.]" (Dunn, 2022b).

If we take into consideration what Appadurai (2013) argues about 'future-making' as an object of analysis, we can establish a list of big research topics on the urban night whose both empirical results and the scientific discussions associated with them could be very useful on the road to more ecological, resilient, inclusive, egalitarian and violence-free nocturnal cities. We therefore identify the following topics: environment; transportation; urban planning and development; tourism and mobilities; public health management; personal safety and public security; governance and policy-making; nocturnal informal work and economies; nocturnal formal work; nighttime culture and leisure (both formal and informal); social and cultural heritage; and, finally, the intangible dimension of the night (Andersson, 2023; Aramayona & Guarneros-Meza, 2023; Dunn & Edensor, 2023; García-Carpintero et al., 2023; Kapitza, 2022; Liu et al., 2023; Pawlusiński, 2023; Zhang & Zhang, 2023; Zielinska-Dabkowska, 2023). We argue that these big topics are meant to make up a research agenda for the development of the interdisciplinary field of Night Studies in the coming years. This is an open, non-exhaustive list that aims to demonstrate the magnitude and importance of a research object, the urban night, whose bibliographic production is much smaller than that which characterises the 'daytime city' (Shaw, 2018). In the second part of this text, the authors have chosen the future of the nighttime leisure industry and its relationship with the currently in vogue 15-minute city model as an item of special relevance, to demonstrate the lack of academic and public debate on the present and future of the nocturnal city.

A NIGHT OF PROXIMITY?

A retrospective analysis of the evolution of nightlife in cities around the world over the last half-century unequivocally establishes that nighttime leisure remains a central aspect of social and cultural life in our global society, evoking vibrant memories for people all over the world (Chatterton & Hollands, 2003; Nofre & Eldridge, 2018; Thurnell-Read, 2021). In the particular case of Europe, nighttime commercial leisure has often been crucial for place branding strategies and local/regional development, in various

settings, ranging from metropolitan cities and coastal tourist areas to Southern European islands and even small to medium-sized towns in mountainous regions (Cardona et al. 2019; Eldridge & Smith, 2019; Gössling et al., 2023; Nofre, 2021a; Río-Rama et al., 2019; Segreto et al., 2009). In the Global South, nighttime leisure has gained popularity as a local development instrument, mostly in tourist areas and in the large metropolises of the region. However, while there is already a solid epistemological body on the transformation of the tourism industry into a more socially and environmentally sustainable industry (Fennell & Cooper, 2020; Hardy et al., 2002; Harris et al., 2012; McMinn, 1997; Seraphin & Gowreesunkar, 2021; Yfantidou & Matarazzo, 2017), the study of how Europe and Latin America's nighttime leisure industry can contribute to a climate-neutral and 'socially just' world still remains largely unaddressed – with the exception of Nofre and Garcia-Ruiz (2023).

The lack of debate on the role of the nighttime leisure industry in the transition to more sustainable cities highlights the need for a thoughtful discussion on how the nighttime leisure industry should be in the mid and long-term future, and how it can contribute to fostering more ecological, resilient, inclusive, and egalitarian nights in a climate-neutral world. Interestingly, this discussion entails two critical questions that still do not have a clear answer. Firstly, the political and civic debate on the urban ecological transition of the nighttime leisure industry should not be restricted to a purely environmental discussion such as reducing its ecological and carbon footprint. It should consider that the environmental discussion cannot be dissociated from two of its fundamental components: "the spatial" and "the social". In other words, the question of whether city centres can experience a sustained growth of the nightlife economy, whether it should decrease, or whether these activities should be located away from urban residential areas, needs to be thoroughly investigated in the current context of a climate emergency. On the other hand, the second critical question related to the discussion on '*how the nightlife industry should be in the mid and long-term future*' inherently involves a debate on the spatial distribution pattern of nightlife activities in the city (Mercado-Celis 2017, 2020). Crucially, this debate is strongly related to the still unresolved conflict between the *right to rest* of the residents and the presence of a large number of nightlife venues, especially in central urban areas (e.g. Aramayona & García-Sánchez, 2021; Mach et al., 2022; Ngesan & Karim, 2012; Roberts & Turner, 2005). But at the same time, this debate is strongly linked to the so-called right to the city at night (Acuto et al., 2023) as well as, more broadly, to the development of the proximity city model, or 15-minute city model (Allam et al., 2022; Khavarian-Garmsir et al., 2023).

These latter concepts have recently emerged in the field of urban planning, offering a new framework for fostering sustainable, livable and healthy urban environments (e.g., Allam, Bibri, Chabaud & Moreno, 2022a; Allam, Nieuwenhuijsen, Chabaud & Moreno, 2022b). However, Khavarian-Garmsir et al. argue that the 15-minute city model may not adequately address the need to protect local culture and heritage, among other factors (Khavarian-Garmsir et al., 2023). In parallel, they point out that differences in urban morphology between cities in the Global North, South and East, or between Nordic and Southern European cities (just to provide another example) reveal the potentially unfeasible nature of the implementation of this '15-minute city' model worldwide (Khavarian-Garmsir et al., 2023).

The 15-minute city model as a driver of sustainability, livability, and health in dense urban areas is not novel in the global urban geography (Alberti & Radicchi, 2023). Moreover, the history of utopian urban planning and regeneration aimed at creating sustainable, inclusive and vibrant communities has largely been based on desegregating disadvantaged groups (Casarin et al., 2023), while the role of powerful transnational corporations has become central to the development of smart cities' governance (Fonseca Alfaro et al., 2023; Pieterse, 2022). In addition, and related to the purpose of this text, the nocturnal city has never been a central element in the history of urban theory in the Global North, South and East. In fact, there is still no publication to date that clearly presents the role of 'nighttime leisure' and 'nighttime culture' (formal or informal) in the 15-minute city. In the existing scholarly works on the 15-minute city, leisure only refers to the playful practices of children in the public space of the neighbourhoods, or to the range of sports in which citizens take part (e.g., Di Marino et al., 2023; Janpavle & Īle, 2022). However, we should not forget that urban planning is intrinsically linked to moral values about how the habitat in which we live should be in the future (Gébert et al., 2023; Krarup, 2022; Lau et al., 2021). Therefore, the absence of nighttime leisure and nighttime culture in the numerous works already published on the implementation of the 15-minute city model should lead us to discuss the hypothetical existence of a conservative, anti-night moralising agenda that would underlie the expansion of the 15-minute city model.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The absence of references to the city at night by the theorists of the 15-minute city demonstrates the urgent need for further exploration of the multifaceted, complex, non-linear factors and processes that characterise the nocturnal city in the present – and that should characterise it in the future. Although

this final section is therefore not intended to confirm or refute any specific statement, the conspicuous absence of formal and informal nighttime leisure activities from future city design and planning models is surprising to say the least, since these activities contribute to socio-emotional well-being, community building, and multicultural understanding (Mercado-Celis 2018; Nofre, 2021b; Wheatley & Bickerton, 2022). In sum, the irruption of the '15-minute city' and its implications for daily urban life makes visible the urgent community, institutional, industry and academic need for debating and discussing the role that the 'nocturnal city' should have in the construction of inclusive, egalitarian, violence-free, climate-neutral cities. Assuming that many nightologists love the night and their work (which, in many cases, is part of a very personal lifestyle), the juxtaposition of an uncertain present scenario and an unknown future challenge us to adopt a "militant/activist socio-environmental approach" to promote greener, more resilient, inclusive and egalitarian nights. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that as we express this "eco-militant/activist approach" in the interdisciplinary field of Urban Night Studies, we should not forget the (growing) existence of a wide range of inequalities and injustices that continue to characterise the Nocturnal City worldwide.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Contribution of authors

The first and the second authors were responsible for the article's conceptualization, and writing (draft, review & editing). The third author was responsible for writing (review).

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