

Progressive Urbanism

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Abstract

It is time to better understand how despite numerous constraints innovative, equitable practices that lead to progress have emerged in cities in the global south and east, especially acknowledging new development pathways which are different than how cities in the developed countries had evolved. This essay proposes a new understanding of “progress” and “urbanism” building on recent research on development- and urbanism-literature. The term ‘progressive’ is meant to signify an advancement of and a convergence towards a new form of economic development which leads to climate-friendly urbanism, in line with the global urban agenda, which calls for an inclusive built environment for the majority. Cities and regions in the Global South are the best places to understand about progressive urbanism right now.

1. Introduction: Progressive Urbanism

The term “progressive” in the development literature has been used in multiple ways. I take two main works into consideration here, to criticize and build on a “progressive urbanism” that emerged from the Global South and East: first, Walt Rostow’s stages of growth (Rostow, 1960) and the Stiglitz Commission’s report (2008) on Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress. I argue that based on a broader understanding of progress and human well-being, including environmental concerns, the global urban agenda like the Paris Agreement, UN’s Sustainable Development Goals, and New Urban Agenda were formulated. And the essay conceptualizes the “Progressive urbanism” term grounded in a context where such global urban agenda are being localized and implemented. In doing so, it accumulates new meaning as well, such as, incremental development.

India, being rapidly urbanizing now, and being known for large share of informality (e.g. around 90% jobs are in informal sector), it would be important to understand how these components could be captured in the “progressive urbanism” concept. Census of India defines “urban” by population, density and share of non-agricultural jobs. This is quite unique way of defining. A World Bank Report published in 2015 called India’s urbanization as messy and hidden, along with other South Asian countries. It is called “hidden” as based on a different methodology like Agglomeration Index, India’s urbanization rate was found to be around 55%, when by the census it was found to be 33%. It’s called “messy” as a major part of urbanization is informal and unplanned. In India, 65 million people live in unplanned settlements. 40% of South Asia’s urbanization lives in slum. The essay aims to understand what sort of changes could define “urban” in Indian context as progressive, in the contemporary times, including a combination of economic growth and social progress. There is need to critically look into whether Indian cities are truly urban, as Mukhopadhyay (2021)¹ does based on social emancipation, political agency, and economic progress or engines of growth. “Unplanned urbanisation” has become a buzz word. Planning may not be a single step intervention, it could be a step by step process. One recommendation could be at least defining a sub-level of “progressive urban” category.

There is a large share of jobs, housing and other infrastructure sectors in informal sector. In Indian context, informality and/or unorganized sector is defined quite broadly. It is important to focus on informal sector due to its large contribution towards the nation’s GDP (around 45%), its relevance with social equity, and hence, social progress for all. In South Asia, informal sectors contribute towards 40%-60% of GDP. As prescribed by multiple civil organizations that directly work with the vulnerable population on the ground, and as recommended by academics, a progressive and differentiated formalization is the way out. We would like to cite some examples showing how such “progressive and differentiated” formalization are already taking place on the ground, including the acknowledgement of “informal spaces” needed in the formal spatial plans.

•The link between progressive urbanism and the Informal Sector could be:

- o **Initial Growth:** During the early stages of urbanization, the informal sector often experiences rapid growth, fuelled by migration from rural areas and the need for basic services.
- o **Challenges of Informality:** Rapid urbanization can also lead to challenges for informal workers, including low

wages, lack of social security, limited access to finance, and precarious working conditions.

o **Potential for Formalization:** Some argue that progressive urbanization should focus on supporting the formalization of the informal sector, providing more stable employment and better working conditions for workers.

One of the predominant understandings of “progress” in development literature has been measuring the economic development, and meeting the western standard, not only in terms of economy, but also in the development sector. In the essay, this popular meaning of “progress” is contested. As explained in the essay, the term can potentially capture the need to measure qualitative (social) growth including fulfilling the aspiration of the majoritarian or pluriverse, in addition to an inclusive economic growth, and yet drastic reduction of wasteful resource uses in cities of the Global South and East. The essay proposes multiple usage of “progress”. Although the contested meaning is provoked by the development predominantly taking place in India, many Southern and Eastern countries are going through a similar transition. In many cases, such as India, such transitions come about because of national-level policies (e.g. Make in India), which can remain path dependent to some extent, and influenced by the international agenda (e.g. Paris Agreement, Sustainable Development Goals etc.). “Progressive” here is not used as a drastic transition, rather a step-by-step transition or advancement, an incremental process. I would like to explicitly point out the difference here between Global South and East. Global South and East is specific geographical and cultural context. ‘International’ as a term involves more than two countries. I use certain concepts and terms below that originated from international organizations. However, I consider them relevant here as these international organizations are operative in large numbers of emerging countries or Global South and East countries as well. The essay brings a critical understanding of “progressive” (based on two works as mentioned above), the changing meaning of “urbanism” including behavioral changes, supporting the majoritarian ideology, and based on innovative practices emerging mainly from the Global South and East context together.

Urbanism is defined as a way of life. “Progressive urbanism” is a form of urbanism that converges or synergizes every interest groups’ (mainstream, marginalised and subaltern groups’) interests or the interests of the pluriversal actors (e.g. heterogenous onto-epistemological positions), including meeting the need of both built environment and ecology/environment (referring to ecological priorities); it is progressive for all groups that allows socio-economic mobility, along with achieving economic development, while respecting the environment/ecology. The way Wirth (1938) mentions that the urban mode of life is not confined to cities, similarly, the urban mode of life is not confined to the concrete jungle/built environment either in “progressive urbanism”. Nature is brought into the city/built environment in the form of nature-based solutions, nature-based infrastructures, green infrastructure as an integral component of “urban” to take climate action and to be sustainable in the long run. Urban farming, green and blue infrastructures, roof gardens, vertical gardens are increasingly becoming part of urban life. Climate-friendly urbanism also promotes the lifestyle change for all, which is essential to deliver climate actions. Low-carbon urbanism (Bulkeley et al., 2012); Climate urbanism (Long and Rice, 2019). In addition, circular economy/ circular urbanism (ICLEI, no date) adds new dimension to the “way of life” through behavioural changes. The idea aligns with the majoritarian view, which is a political philosophy or ideology with an agenda asserting that a majority, whether based on a religion, language, social class, or other category of the population, is entitled to a certain degree of primacy in society, and has the right to make decisions that affect the society. “Majoritarian urbanism” is a term that has been used in explaining the neoliberalism, informality, resistance and well-being in Mumbai (Patel et al., 2022).

The term “progressive urbanism”, in a nutshell, means the way of life that is progressive, in terms of delivering socio-economic mobility over generations, economic development, prioritising ecology, progressive for the “pluriversal” (Moreno-Tabarez et al., 2023), including mainstreamed, marginalised, subaltern, and externalised groups, progressive for “where many worlds fit in”, for multiple elsewhere (Gandy, 2022), and has an emerging meaning of “urbanism” which is not confined to the concrete jungle/built environment, encourages behavioural changes for circularity, and explains the neoliberalism, informality, and resistance for the sake of the majoritarianism. The essay argues that such “progressive urbanism” has emerged being inspired from the

complexities and dynamics in the southern and eastern contexts, and originated by the Global South and East.

2. Progressive in what sense? : A new definition

For unplanned and hidden urbanization, progressive in the sense of combined impact of economic growth or engine and social progress. Progress in terms of improving the quality of urbanisation.

For informality and messy urbanization, progressive formalization in terms of slowly or step-by-step formalization.

I take two major works on “progress” in the development literature, to criticize and build the new meaning. Following Rostow (1960), there are five stages in Walt Rostow’s stages of growth (Rostow, 1960): Traditional society, Preconditions for take-off, Take-off, Drive to maturity, and Age of High mass consumption. Rostow’s (1960) view on development in the South has been closely linked to the World Bank and International Monetary Fund’s politics of progress, where ‘progress’ means becoming like the West. Based on this understanding, the term “progressive” is highly critiqued within the Global South and East in the essay. The essay develops the concept of “progressive urbanism”, which is considered “progression” by the Global South and East.

The second work I focus on is the Stiglitz Commission-published report on “Measurement of Economic performance and Social Progress” in 2008, authored by Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi, which was a French initiative. Their report provided an opportunity to redefine the meaning of human progress. Instead of relying on a one-dimensional measure of success, i.e., the gross domestic product (GDP), the Stiglitz Commission argued that societies should insist on a broader understanding of their achievements and predicaments. Besides social progress, the component of environmental and/or ecological crisis was added as an urgent issue. The central message of the report was that human wellbeing is far more than the sum of the economic resources. Wellbeing also depends upon health, education, environment, housing, access to information, the ability to communicate, and the overall quality of life experience. Sen’s capability approach explains how provision of basic services and infrastructure improves the communities’ capability for socio-economic mobility (Sen, 1993). Instead of measuring the performance of national economies, the activities and experiences of households should also be considered to understand progress. Rather than absolute levels of wealth, the distribution of income and the extent of inequality should be deciding factors. Kanbur et al (2016) including Joseph Stiglitz as one of the authors draws a link between the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) introduced by the UN with a number of goals and targets going beyond GDP, with a focus on developing countries, and the logic behind defining “progress” in the Stiglitz Commission Report (2008). The essay builds on its definition of “progress” depending on this idea.

The term Global North and South are basically defined based on economic well-being, and the term East-West is defined based on cultural identity (Yiftachel, 2006). In the essay, in order to define “progressive” for Global South-East, the proposed use of the term is NOT limited to economic progress, however, it includes economic growth as well (explained below in relation to degrowth literature). It indicates technological, financial, institutional innovative pathways and practices taking place in the cities in Global South and East, with converging positive outcomes including economic progress, synergic relationship between (economic) development, climate action and poverty alleviation, towards a better, liveable, and healthy urban life. For instance, the Deep Decarbonisation Pathway Program¹ that aims to deliver GreenHouse Gas (GHG) emission mitigation and economic development while promoting socio-economic mobility of all interest groups. The essay defines this approach as progressive, in the sense of progressing towards both socio-economic and ecologic progression for all or the pluriversal². On the ground, planners are working towards delivering both the Paris agreement and United Nation’s (UN’s) Sustainable Development Goals in synergy. The essay argues that in the southern theory literature, it is timely to start theorizing about the innovative approaches, and re-define the term “progressive” for the South and

1 Accessed at <https://www.iddri.org/en/initiative/deep-decarbonization-pathways>.

2 Pluriversal indicates the existence of many worlds somehow inter-connected, including the human world is connected to the natural world and to the spiritual world.

East. Synergic³ urbanism or converging⁴ urbanism could be alternative terms. Converging cities, as already used, indicate to decreasing gap between the rich and poor, however, in Europe. Similarly, progressive urbanism will finally lead to decreasing inequality.

Based on Stiglitz Commission's report (2008) on Measurement of Economic performance and Social well-being

Economic Performance (A)	Quality of Life (B)	Sustainability (C)
GDP per capita	Health: Years of potential life lost	Private sector net fixed capital formation (% of GDP)
GDP per hours worked	Education: Students (ISCED 1-6) aged between 15 and 24 years	R&D investment (% of GDP)
Employment rate (15-64 age group)	Personal activities: Employees on shift work	Cyclically adjusted fiscal balance (% of GDP)
Net national income per capita	Political voice and governance:	Fiscal sustainability gap S2
Final consumption expenditure per capita (including government consumption)	Voice and Accountability	Total private credit to GDP gap
Distribution measure of net income per consumption unit (income quintile share ratio (S80/S20); internationally harmonised)	Social connections and relationships: Frequency of time spent with people at sport, culture, communal organisations	Real equity price gap
	Environmental conditions: urban population exposure to air pollution by particulate matter	Real property price gap
	Personal and economic insecurity:	Level of greenhouse gas emissions
	Not-at-risk-of-poverty rate	Greenhouse gas emissions per capita
		Resource productivity (GDP relative to non-renewable Domestic Material Input, DMI)
		Resource consumption (non-renewable Domestic Material Consumption - DMC, per capita)
		Biodiversity (preliminary indicator: bird index)

Figure on Dashboard for Monitoring Economic Performance, Quality of Life and Sustainability
Source: Kroll (2011)

Global Urban Agenda: Paris Agreement, UN's SDGs, New Urban Agenda (~2015)

Conceptualising Progressive Urbanism

Figure 1. A conceptual diagram on conceptualising Progressive urbanism
Source: Kroll (2011) and Author

Unlike the traditional use of the word "progressive" in development sector, in the essay, "progress" or "progressive" has multiple meanings as follows:

- Example 1: Deep Decarbonisation Pathway as progressive:

The Deep Decarbonization Pathways⁵ initiative helps global and national decision-makers take actions towards a deeply decarbonized world with drastically reduced inequalities. The program aims at keeping the global warming well below +2°C, which requires immediate changes, through choices that will lead economies towards a carbon-neutral world by the second half of the century. The program aims to deliver both economic development and GHG emission mitigation in synergy. They ground their national and international engagement on the principles of being country-driven, country-led, country-owned. DDPP's partners are both from the developed and emerging economies. The emerging economies or Global South and East countries are South Africa, Indonesia, Argentina, Nigeria, Senegal, Mexico, India, China, Brazil etc. Comparing the pathways adopted by the developed economies and emerging economies, and specially considering the pathway developed by India, the essay argues that

³ Accessed at <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9783035606867-028/html>.

⁴ Accessed at <https://www.conted.ox.ac.uk/news/converging-cities>.

⁵ Initiative on Deep Decarbonisation Pathway Program (2017): <https://www.iddri.org/en/initiative/deep-decarbonization-pathways>.

India is following a complicated pathway in order to deliver both economic development and global urban agenda including the Paris Agreement through innovation in a context with complexities that the developed economies did not have to do while becoming a developed economy. With economic development and socio-economic mobility, one's lifestyle would improve along with their economic activity, therefore there are chances of increased GHG emission. The program takes a progressive approach in terms of innovative pathway through which socio-economic mobility over generations is achieved while delivering climate action in synergy.

There are some recent studies that have already attempted to develop a link between the Stiglitz report and climate action based on IPCC report. For instance, Tokimatsu et al.'s (2019) "Tackling the Stiglitz Report: Measuring Social Progress and Economic Performance under **Various Climate Policy Scenarios**", connects the measurement of social progress from the Stiglitz report and climate change mitigation (CCM) by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) assessment reports. They operationalize this in terms of various climate policy scenarios ranging from business as usual to economically efficient, CO₂ double stabilization, and targeting two degrees Celsius (DC).

Another example to be considered through the lens of deep decarbonisation pathway program in India would be to understand the planning and implementation of the economic and industrial corridors, where business induced scenarios increase or improve manufacturing sector production, output and export, while still achieving deep decarbonization. The national government's vision is to achieve economic development through rapid urbanization using these corridors as tools; hence, it is imperative to understand what "progressive" pathway would be taken to implement these corridors, achieve economic development, and yet deliver deep decarbonisation.

- Example 2: Localising and implementing multiple Global urban agenda as "progressive":

Cities across the globe aim to implement multiple global urban agenda such as the Paris Agreement, Sustainable Development Goals, and New Urban Agenda. In this regard, Global South could be used in an analytical way to address how these agenda are localised and implemented in an inclusive way to address the need of the vulnerable groups. It is progressive in terms of delivering multiple global urban agenda through minimal interventions.

Here are some examples from the various sectors of infrastructure. For instance, in urban transport sector, accessible and affordable electric public transports are sourced by renewable energy. Low-carbon public transport modes are both climate-friendly and healthy. For instance, the use of electric three-wheelers or e-rickshaws both achieve GHG emission mitigation and deliver multiple SDGs such as SDG1 on reducing poverty, SDG3 on health and well-being, SDG5 on gender equality, SDG11 on inclusive cities. Planners and designer make decisions as providers, and industry and individuals as consumers.

Within water supply and the sanitation sector, which is a nature-built environment interface, nature-based infrastructures deliver both mitigation and adaptation strategies in climate action, and implement relevant SDGs as well at a lower cost. For the Solid Waste Management (SWM) sector, segregation of waste at source imparts public awareness about what is waste, how it is related to one's consumption pattern, what waste that can be recycled. A sense of responsibility amongst the public that the pre-capitalism era had is reviving. This also delivers economic development, climate action, and UN's SDGs in synergy.

- Example 3: Post-growth or de-growth in the South

Post growth or degrowth is a northern concept that aims to create a sustainable and equitable society by reducing economic output and throughput. While the southern scholars aim to apply this in a southern context, the use has been limited so far. Economic development remains a priority for the Southern countries unlike the northern context. Hence, even though the concept is originated from a northern context, its application in

the south shows that 'growth' in the south (and eastern) part of the world, will still incur economic growth as a priority. [Why would this be progressive?]

- Example 4: Using new vocabularies in Planning as "progressive":

Bhan's (2019) list of new vocabularies for planning in southern cities is progressive. Acknowledging informality, accepting activism for planners is progressive. Progressive in terms of developing new vocabulary in planning practice that fits into a context, repairing, squatting, organising etc. [This is South specific.]

- Example 5: Decentralisation and hybridisation of infrastructure as problem-solving and progressive

With rapid unplanned urbanisation process, it is a challenge to provide basic services such as water supply and sanitation, and solid waste management towards the periphery of the cities and regions specially in the low-income areas. Decentralised and hybridised infrastructures are the solution with incremental investment in a step-by-step manner depending on resources and in an inclusive manner, and to upgrade the infrastructure or development in the future. Such infrastructures are mainly provided in the global South context. For instance, city-wide inclusive sanitation is a great example.

- Two synonymous terms with added meaning:
 - a. Synergetic urbanism: A combination of top-down and bottom-up planning.⁶ Progressive in terms of democratic decision making within built environment. Participatory democracy.
 - b. Converging urbanism/cities: Reducing inequality.⁷ Progressive in terms of reducing inequality. Stiglitz's "progress" includes reducing inequality.

3. Urbanism: What is new about the way of life?

Wirth (1938) defines urbanism as a way of life. "Progressive urbanism" introduces the new meanings of way of life within an urban area:

a. Definition of urbanism/urbanisation:

Over-defined: Need to modify the definition

Messy: informal settlements. With economic growth, social progress, also concern about public health.

Hidden: urbanisation rate is actually higher than calculated.

b. Shift to non-western & traditional behaviour to deliver climate action:

In order to effectively implement climate actions, both behavioural change and change of life style are integral to the process. For instance, such urban way of life is about:

- Growing own food in on your roof or within a plot in cities: urban farming, roof garden.
- Creating lesser waste- consumption pattern change, and recycling your own waste.

c. Way of life as urbanism is not confined to the concrete jungle/ built environment:

Nature is brought into urban life. Green and blue infrastructure is brought in within the city fabric at different scale: Urban farming, roof garden, bioswales, lakes, Vertical green. (IUCN)

d. Circularity as a urban way of life (traditionally non-western):

Circular urbanism is becoming a way of life, such as, using biogas produced from municipal waste and wastewater

6 Accessed at <https://www.archdaily.com/1005567/top-down-and-bottom-up-urban-planning-a-synergetic-approach>.

7 Accessed at <https://www.conted.ox.ac.uk/news/converging-cities>.

in running buses. Many of such projects are delivered at the community level, and require public awareness and public acceptance.

e. Synergetic urbanism:

The term synergetic urbanism is already in use, which indicates a combination of top-down and bottom-up approach. Improved public participation and democratic decision making in planning- Way of urban life is about participating in democratic decision-making in urban decisions with trust.

f. Converging urbanism:

Converging urbanism is also a term already in use, which indicates reduced inequality. Increasing equality for all-way of life is in not discriminating between various income groups, which is also reflected in built environment and in actions.

4. Representative Spatial imaginaries for Progressive Urbanism

Spatial imaginaries are deeply grounded, widely circulated collective understanding of socio-spatial relations that are performed by, give sense to, make possible and change collective socio-spatial practices (Davoudi et al., 2018). They are produced through political struggles over the conceptions, perceptions and lived experiences of a place. They are circulated and propagated through images, stories, texts, data, algorithms, and performances. This section attempts to offer spatial imaginaries on what “Progressive urbanism” could be. Although it is not usual to use actual pictures to represent spatial imaginaries, and more focus is on the narratives, I attempt to use both images and narratives below to establish how spatial imaginaries could represent “progressive urbanism”. For each example, there is one component of “progressive”, in a way moving towards sustainability, and an associated component on “way of life” or lifestyle.

Spatial imagery 1. Is there an urban form for inequality? Reduced inequality can be represented through urban form in terms of individual land holding.



Figure 1. Aerial view of Dharavi housing in Mumbai showing inequality

Source: <https://qz.com/india/1396785/drone-photos-capture-the-staggering-inequality-in-mumbai>

Spatial imagery 2. Sponge cities as spatial imaginaries of bringing nature into the urban way of life, which is progressive in terms of climate action. Climate urbanism. Stated in China in 2014. China is considered to be the Global East.



Figure 2. Representing Sponge City in China

Source: <https://earth.org/sponge-cities-could-be-the-answer-to-impending-water-crisis-in-china/>

Spatial imagery 3. Decentralisation and hybridisation of infrastructure as form of circular urbanism.

In developing countries or emerging economies, as an innovation to serve the informal sector with low income at the periphery.

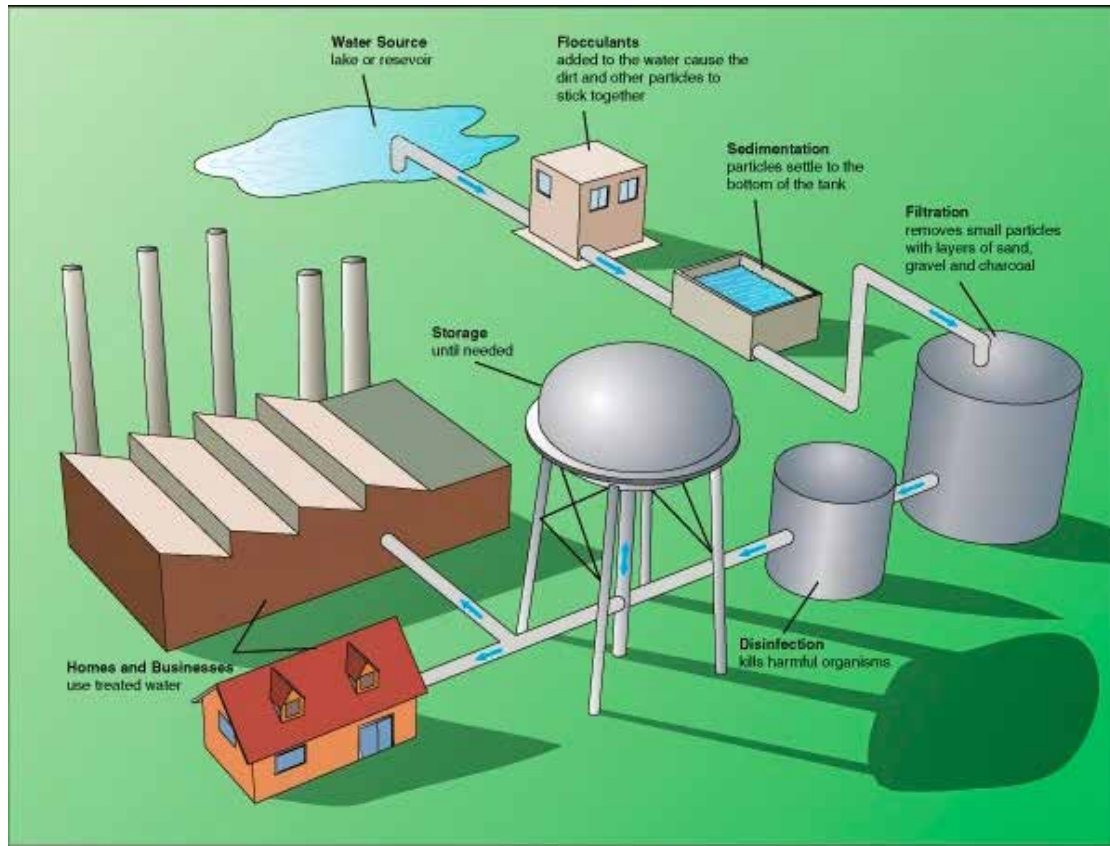


Figure 3. Decentralised wastewater system

Spatial imagery 4. Participatory budgeting

Participatory budgeting could provide a narrative for “progressive urbanism”, where “progress” is about participatory decision-making within built environment, and a new way of life where it is usual to participate in decision-making about the urban. Originated in Brazil in 1989.



Figure 4. Women-led participatory budgeting in Penang, Malaysia

Source: <https://www.socdemasia.com/latest/news/gender-responsive-and-participatory-budgeting-programme-penang>

5. Conclusion: Towards an emerging form of “progressive urbanism”

Progressive urbanism is not a large drastic transition; it is the summation of many little transitions in day-to-day activities. It is about the incremental day-to-day decisions made by all socio-economic groups, not only by the marginalised, subordinates, and externalised ones today, but even those who are in power, physically, wealth-wise, politically, as a society, towards a more equal, economically well-off, healthy future for tomorrow, for the next generation. This equal society, economically progressed than what it was before, healthier and climate-friendly urban for all, indicates the “progress” here, decided by those who are working as academics, scholars, practitioners, policy makers, based in the South-East. This generation is optimistic of delivering a better and competitive future.

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