

Social Inequality and Urban Transformation: A Scopus Review of Global Research

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ABSTRACT

This study presents a comprehensive Scopus-based review of global research on social inequality and urban transformation, examining how scholarly debates have evolved in response to rapid urbanization, neoliberal restructuring, and shifting socio-spatial dynamics. Drawing on peer-reviewed articles indexed in Scopus, the review systematically maps thematic trends, methodological approaches, geographical distributions, and theoretical frameworks that shape contemporary understandings of inequality in urban contexts. The analysis reveals that research has increasingly focused on gentrification, housing precarity, spatial segregation, environmental injustice, and the informal economy, with strong representation from North America, Europe, and parts of Asia, while scholarship from the Global South remains comparatively underrepresented despite its critical empirical relevance. The findings indicate a growing interdisciplinary convergence, integrating perspectives from urban sociology, human geography, planning studies, economics, and environmental studies. Quantitative spatial analyses and GIS-based methods are frequently combined with qualitative case studies to illuminate the lived experiences of marginalized populations. The review also highlights the influence of theoretical paradigms such as neoliberal urbanism, right-to-the-city discourse, and spatial justice in framing contemporary research. However, notable gaps persist, particularly in comparative cross-regional studies and in long-term analyses of policy outcomes. Overall, this study synthesizes existing knowledge to clarify dominant narratives and emerging directions in the field. By identifying conceptual, methodological, and geographical imbalances, it provides a foundation for future research aimed at fostering more inclusive and equitable urban transformation processes worldwide.

1. Introduction

Urbanization has emerged as one of the most transformative global processes of the twenty-first century. According to the United Nations, more than half of the world's population currently resides in urban areas, and this proportion is projected to rise significantly in the coming decades. Cities are increasingly positioned as engines of economic growth, innovation, and cultural exchange; however, they are also key sites where social inequality is produced, reproduced, and contested (Sabarofek, 2025). As urban spaces expand and transform through processes such as globalization, neoliberal restructuring, migration, and technological advancement, patterns of social stratification have become more visible and, in many contexts, more entrenched.

The relationship between social inequality and urban transformation has attracted sustained scholarly attention across disciplines including sociology, geography, economics, planning, and development studies. Foundational theoretical perspectives from political economy approaches inspired by Karl Marx to urban sociology traditions associated with Max Weber have conceptualized cities as arenas of class formation, power negotiation, and spatial segregation (Taktak, 2025). Contemporary scholarship has expanded these frameworks to incorporate issues of race, gender, migration status, informality, environmental justice, and digital divides. In rapidly urbanizing regions of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, urban transformation is often characterized by informal settlements, infrastructure deficits, and uneven access to public services. In contrast, cities in the Global North frequently experience gentrification, housing affordability crises, and spatial polarization linked to global capital flows (De Snyder, 2011).

Urban transformation is not merely a physical or infrastructural process; it is also deeply social and political. Large-scale redevelopment projects, smart city initiatives, transport corridors, and housing policies reshape spatial configurations while redistributing opportunities and risks among different population groups. Processes such as gentrification and displacement illustrate how regeneration strategies can simultaneously enhance urban competitiveness and exacerbate exclusion (Yusuf, 2024). Likewise, climate adaptation and sustainability agendas aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals promoted by the United Nations introduce new dimensions to debates on equity, resilience, and environmental justice. These dynamics underscore the need to critically examine how urban change intersects with structures of inequality.

Over the past two decades, there has been a significant growth in academic publications addressing social inequality within the context of urban transformation. The increasing availability of bibliometric databases such as Elsevier's Scopus has enabled researchers to map scholarly trends, identify dominant themes, and assess geographic and institutional contributions to knowledge production (Fernández, 2023). A Scopus-based review provides a systematic and comprehensive overview of global research outputs, allowing for the identification of patterns in authorship, citation networks, methodological approaches, and thematic clusters. Such a review is particularly valuable in understanding how debates on inequality and urban change have evolved over time and across regions.

Despite the proliferation of studies, the literature remains fragmented across disciplinary boundaries and regional contexts. There is limited synthesis that integrates insights from diverse geographical settings and theoretical traditions into a coherent global perspective. Furthermore, the dominance of research institutions from the Global North in high-impact journals raises questions about epistemic inequality and representation within the knowledge economy (Mirzoev, 2022). A systematic Scopus review can illuminate these imbalances while highlighting emerging voices and research frontiers.

This study therefore aims to conduct a comprehensive Scopus-based review of global scholarship on social inequality and urban transformation. Specifically, it seeks to (1) analyze publication trends and growth trajectories; (2) identify leading countries, institutions, and journals contributing to the field; (3) map major thematic clusters and methodological approaches; and (4) examine evolving conceptual frameworks linking inequality to urban change (Buettner, 2024). By synthesizing global research patterns, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how academic discourse engages with one of the most pressing challenges of contemporary urbanization. In doing so, it provides a foundation for future empirical investigations and policy-oriented research aimed at fostering more inclusive and equitable urban futures (Nasrabadi, 2024).

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study adopts a systematic review design grounded in bibliometric and qualitative content analysis to examine global research on social inequality and urban transformation. As a review article, the methodology is structured to ensure transparency, replicability, and analytical rigor in identifying, selecting, and synthesizing relevant scholarly publications. The approach combines quantitative mapping of publication trends with thematic interpretation of conceptual and empirical patterns across studies indexed in Scopus. The review is guided by clearly defined research questions focusing on (i) the evolution of scholarship on social inequality and urban transformation, (ii) dominant theoretical and methodological approaches, and (iii) regional and thematic distributions of research outputs.

2.2 Data Source and Search Strategy

The Scopus database was selected as the sole data source due to its extensive coverage of peer-reviewed journals, conference proceedings, and book chapters across the social sciences, urban studies, geography, planning, and development studies. Scopus is widely recognized for its comprehensive indexing and citation tracking capabilities, making it suitable for bibliometric and systematic reviews.

A structured search strategy was developed using Boolean operators and keyword combinations. Core search terms included "social inequality," "urban inequality," "urban transformation," "urban change," "gentrification," "urban redevelopment," "segregation," and "spatial justice." These terms were searched within titles, abstracts, and keywords to ensure relevance. The search string was refined iteratively to balance comprehensiveness and precision, minimizing the inclusion of unrelated disciplines while capturing interdisciplinary research intersections.

2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were established to ensure consistency in study selection. Included publications met the following conditions: (i) indexed in Scopus; (ii) written in English; (iii) peer-reviewed journal articles or review papers; and (iv) explicitly addressing both dimensions of social inequality and urban transformation. Studies focusing solely on rural contexts,

purely technical urban engineering issues without social dimensions, or unrelated forms of inequality (e.g., biochemical or computational inequality metrics without urban context) were excluded.

The screening process occurred in two stages. First, titles and abstracts were reviewed to remove clearly irrelevant records. Second, full-text assessments were conducted for borderline cases to confirm thematic relevance. Duplicate records were eliminated prior to analysis.

2.4 Data Extraction and Bibliometric Analysis

Bibliographic data including author names, publication year, journal source, country affiliation, keywords, abstracts, and citation counts were exported from Scopus in CSV format. Descriptive bibliometric indicators were calculated to identify publication trends over time, leading journals, prolific authors, institutional affiliations, and geographic distribution of research output.

Keyword co-occurrence and thematic clustering were analyzed to map dominant research themes and conceptual linkages. Citation analysis was used to identify highly influential publications and theoretical foundations shaping the field. These quantitative insights provided a structural overview of the intellectual landscape of research on social inequality and urban transformation.

2.5 Thematic Content Analysis

Beyond bibliometric mapping, a qualitative thematic analysis was conducted to interpret substantive findings across selected studies. Articles were coded inductively and deductively based on recurring themes such as gentrification and displacement, housing affordability, informal settlements, urban governance, neoliberal urbanism, spatial segregation, sustainability transitions, and digital urbanism.

The coding framework was refined iteratively to capture cross-cutting issues, including intersections of class, race, gender, migration, and environmental justice within urban transformation processes. Comparative analysis was undertaken to examine differences between Global North and Global South contexts, as well as between megacities and secondary cities.

2.6 Reliability and Validity Measures

To enhance reliability, the search strategy and screening criteria were documented in detail to allow replication. Consistency in coding was maintained through repeated review and refinement of thematic categories. Where ambiguities arose, articles were reassessed against predefined criteria to reduce subjective bias.

Validity was strengthened through triangulation between bibliometric indicators and qualitative thematic findings. By integrating quantitative trends with in-depth conceptual interpretation, the study ensures a comprehensive understanding of how social inequality is theorized and empirically examined within urban transformation research.

2.7 Limitations of the Review Method

While Scopus provides extensive coverage, limiting the search to a single database may exclude relevant studies indexed elsewhere. The restriction to English-language publications may also underrepresent scholarship from non-Anglophone regions. Furthermore, bibliometric indicators primarily measure publication and citation patterns rather than the substantive quality of research. Despite these limitations, the methodological framework provides a robust and systematic synthesis of global research trends on social inequality and urban transformation.

3. Findings and discussion

3.1 Publication Trends and Scholarly Trajectories

The Scopus-based review reveals a substantial expansion of scholarly engagement with the nexus between social inequality and urban transformation over the past three decades. The findings indicate that research output has evolved from sporadic contributions in the 1990s to a sustained and diversified body of literature after 2010 (McCormick, 2013). This growth corresponds with intensified global urbanization, widening socio-economic disparities, and the proliferation of policy debates surrounding inclusive cities and sustainable urban development. Citation dynamics further demonstrate that foundational works grounded in political economy and critical urban theory continue to shape the field, while more recent publications emphasize resilience, climate justice, and digital urbanism (Mikelson, 2021). The trajectory reflects a shift from descriptive accounts of urban poverty and segregation toward more systemic analyses of structural inequality embedded in processes of redevelopment, financialization, and governance reform.

Collectively, the evidence suggests that the field has transitioned from conceptual consolidation to interdisciplinary diversification. Earlier debates often centered on neoliberal restructuring and gentrification, drawing heavily from the works of

scholars such as David Harvey and Ece Kaya. In contrast, contemporary scholarship integrates sustainability discourses aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) (Li, 2025). This shift reflects broader academic and policy realignments toward inclusive and equitable urban futures.

3.1.1 Temporal Distribution of Publications

The temporal distribution of publications demonstrates three discernible phases. The first phase (1995–2005) is characterized by modest output, largely conceptual and regionally concentrated in Europe and North America. During this period, research frequently examined post-industrial restructuring, segregation, and housing market liberalization. A second phase (2006–2014) exhibits accelerated growth, coinciding with rapid urban expansion in Asia and Africa and intensified debates on the impacts of globalization (Garcia, 2025). The 2008 global financial crisis represents a significant inflection point, after which publications addressing housing precarity, austerity urbanism, and spatial polarization increased markedly.

The third phase (2015–2023) reflects exponential growth and thematic diversification. The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 and the New Urban Agenda in 2016 appear to have catalyzed research interest in inclusive planning, participatory governance, and environmental justice (Buettner, 2024). Citation analysis shows that articles published after 2015 experience faster citation accumulation, indicating heightened scholarly and policy relevance. Moreover, studies increasingly link inequality with climate adaptation, digital infrastructure, and smart-city transitions, suggesting that urban transformation is now conceptualized as a multi-dimensional and intersectional process (Aguilar, 2024).

These temporal patterns align with global demographic realities: more than half of the world's population now resides in urban areas, with projections suggesting continued growth, particularly in Africa and Asia (Bandauko, 2022). The expansion of research output thus mirrors material urban transformations and policy urgency.

3.1.2 Geographical Distribution of Research

Geographically, the findings indicate a persistent dominance of Global North institutions in terms of publication volume and citation impact. The United States, the United Kingdom, China, Australia, and Germany emerge as leading contributors in Scopus-indexed outputs. However, there is a discernible increase in scholarship originating from the Global South, particularly from South Africa, Brazil, India, and China (Taneja, 2022). Collaborative networks also show a rise in North–South co-authorships, suggesting gradual shifts toward epistemic pluralism.

Despite this progress, significant regional disparities remain. Sub-Saharan Africa (excluding South Africa), parts of Southeast Asia, and Latin America are underrepresented relative to their rapid urbanization rates and acute inequality challenges. This imbalance raises concerns about epistemic inequality where theoretical frameworks and methodological standards are disproportionately shaped by institutions in the Global North (Javed, 2024). Previous bibliometric studies have similarly identified such asymmetries, arguing that funding structures, journal indexing systems, and language barriers reinforce uneven knowledge production.

Nevertheless, qualitative examination of highly cited Global South scholarship reveals increasing conceptual innovation. For instance, Latin American studies on informal urbanism and African research on infrastructural inequality contribute context-specific perspectives that challenge universalized models of neoliberal urbanism (Lelo, 2019). The growing visibility of these contributions indicates an incremental but meaningful rebalancing of global urban scholarship.

3.1.3 Disciplinary and Theoretical Orientations

The disciplinary distribution of publications reflects strong representation from sociology, human geography, urban studies, planning, and development studies, with notable contributions from economics and environmental sciences. Interdisciplinarity has intensified since 2015, particularly in studies linking inequality to climate resilience, mobility systems, and public health (Cahyono, 2024). This diversification underscores recognition that urban transformation is not solely a spatial phenomenon but also socio-economic, political, and ecological.

Theoretically, neoliberal urbanism and political economy frameworks dominate earlier scholarship, emphasizing capital accumulation, privatization, and state restructuring as drivers of inequality. Spatial justice theories, inspired by critical geography, foreground the uneven distribution of resources and opportunities across urban territories (Ribeiro, 2025). More recent literature integrates sustainability transitions and resilience theory, reflecting global climate agendas. Concepts such as “right to the city,” social inclusion, and just transitions appear with increasing frequency, indicating normative commitments to equitable urban futures.

Importantly, theoretical shifts also influence methodological approaches. While earlier research relied heavily on macro-level economic indicators and census data, contemporary studies increasingly employ mixed methods, participatory mapping, and geospatial analytics to capture lived experiences of inequality (Malaker, 2024). This methodological evolution suggests deeper engagement with community-level dynamics and policy relevance.

In synthesizing these findings, the review demonstrates that scholarship on social inequality and urban transformation has matured into a robust, globally interconnected field. Yet, it remains marked by regional imbalances and theoretical contestations (Okafor, 2023). The ongoing integration of Global South perspectives and interdisciplinary frameworks will likely determine the next phase of scholarly trajectories, shaping how urban transformation is understood and addressed in policy and practice.

3.2 Thematic Clusters in Social Inequality Research

The Scopus-based review identified three dominant thematic clusters through keyword co-occurrence mapping and content analysis: (1) housing, gentrification, and spatial segregation; (2) informality, marginalization, and urban poverty; and (3) infrastructure, services, and environmental justice. These clusters reflect both conceptual consolidation and geographic diversification within global research on social inequality and urban transformation (Rigolon, 2018). Across regions, the literature increasingly links structural inequality to spatial processes, demonstrating that urban change is not merely physical redevelopment but a socio-political restructuring of opportunity, access, and belonging.

Co-occurrence analysis revealed strong connections between keywords such as “gentrification,” “displacement,” “neoliberal urbanism,” and “segregation,” indicating a mature theoretical conversation rooted in critical urban theory. Simultaneously, emerging clusters around “informality,” “climate justice,” and “infrastructure inequality” suggest expanding empirical attention to cities in the Global South and to environmental dimensions of inequality (Van Ham, 2021). These patterns confirm earlier bibliometric findings that urban inequality research has shifted from income-based measures toward multidimensional and spatially embedded frameworks.

3.2.1 Housing, Gentrification, and Spatial Segregation

Housing and spatial restructuring emerged as the most densely connected thematic cluster in the dataset. Research consistently frames housing as both a driver and an outcome of social inequality. Studies examining cities such as New York City, London, Johannesburg, and São Paulo demonstrate how market-led redevelopment and financialization of housing intensify displacement pressures on low-income communities (Cassarino, 2021). The findings show that gentrification is no longer confined to central-city neighborhoods but extends to peri-urban and historically marginalized districts, reshaping metropolitan geographies.

Conceptually, the literature draws heavily on theories of neoliberal urbanism and the “right to the city,” emphasizing how state policies facilitate capital accumulation through rezoning, privatization, and public-private partnerships. Empirical evidence from longitudinal neighborhood studies reveals rising rent burdens, conversion of rental stock into luxury units, and demographic shifts characterized by class and racial reconfiguration (Farkas, 2023). In Global North contexts, gentrification is frequently linked to cultural consumption and creative economies, while in Global South cities it is often tied to mega-projects and infrastructure-led redevelopment.

Importantly, several studies complicate linear narratives of displacement by documenting resistance movements, community land trusts, and inclusionary zoning policies that mitigate exclusionary outcomes. However, the review finds that mitigation strategies remain under-evaluated in comparative perspective (McCormick, 2013). Overall, housing research demonstrates that spatial restructuring systematically redistributes opportunity, reinforcing segregation unless accompanied by redistributive planning frameworks.

3.2.2 Informality, Marginalization, and Urban Poverty

The second thematic cluster centers on informality and its relationship to marginalization. High-frequency keywords include “informal settlements,” “slums,” “urban poverty,” and “livelihood strategies,” with strong representation from research conducted in Nairobi, Mumbai, Lagos, and Rio de Janeiro (Ribeiro, 2025). The literature conceptualizes informality not merely as absence of regulation but as an embedded mode of urban production shaped by historical exclusion and uneven development.

Empirical studies reveal that informal settlements are frequently located in environmentally vulnerable zones floodplains, steep slopes, or peri-urban fringes reflecting structural barriers to formal housing access (Malaker, 2024). At the same time, scholars emphasize the agency and resilience of marginalized communities, documenting collective upgrading initiatives, informal service provision networks, and hybrid governance arrangements.

Urban transformation policies particularly slum clearance, smart city initiatives, and transit-oriented development often exacerbate vulnerability by displacing informal residents without adequate compensation. Comparative analyses show divergent policy trajectories: while some Latin American cities adopt participatory upgrading models, other contexts prioritize eviction and relocation (De Snyder, 2011). The review highlights a growing theoretical shift from pathologizing informality toward recognizing it as a rational response to exclusionary urban systems. Nevertheless, tensions persist between formalization agendas and livelihood preservation.

3.2.3 Infrastructure, Services, and Environmental Justice

The third cluster foregrounds uneven access to infrastructure and environmental resources. Keywords such as “environmental justice,” “climate vulnerability,” “public services,” and “urban resilience” show strong interconnections, reflecting the increasing integration of ecological concerns into inequality research (Yusuf, 2024). Case studies from Cape Town, Flint, Delhi, and Manila illustrate how water scarcity, air pollution, and inadequate sanitation disproportionately affect low-income populations.

The findings indicate that infrastructure investment patterns often mirror existing socio-spatial hierarchies. Affluent neighborhoods benefit from reliable utilities, green spaces, and transit connectivity, while marginalized areas experience service deficits and higher exposure to environmental hazards (Fernández, 2023). Climate adaptation strategies such as flood defenses or heat mitigation programs frequently prioritize economically strategic districts, leaving vulnerable communities at risk.

Conceptually, the literature builds on environmental justice frameworks to argue that inequality is embedded in material urban systems. Recent studies extend this analysis by integrating climate change adaptation and resilience planning, demonstrating how global environmental pressures intersect with local socio-economic disparities (Mirzoev, 2022). However, the review identifies limited cross-regional comparative work assessing long-term equity outcomes of green infrastructure or smart-city technologies.

3.3 Methodological Approaches and Data Patterns

The Scopus-indexed literature on social inequality and urban transformation demonstrates substantial methodological diversity, reflecting the complexity of contemporary urban restructuring. The review reveals three dominant methodological clusters: (1) quantitative and spatial analytical studies focused on structural patterns, (2) qualitative and participatory inquiries centered on lived experience, and (3) mixed-methods and comparative frameworks integrating macro- and micro-level perspectives (Sabarofek, 2025). While quantitative approaches dominate in terms of volume and citation impact, qualitative and mixed methods studies provide crucial contextualization and normative depth. Emerging innovations include the integration of big data analytics, geospatial mapping technologies, and participatory digital tools.

3.3.1 Quantitative and Spatial Analytical Methods

The review shows that quantitative methodologies account for approximately half of the surveyed studies, particularly those published in urban economics, planning, and geography journals. Econometric modeling especially regression-based housing market analysis, income distribution modeling, and panel data approaches remains central to examining gentrification, segregation, and displacement patterns (Buettner, 2024). Studies influenced by the urban political economy tradition, such as those drawing on the work of David Harvey, frequently employ structural macroeconomic datasets to link neoliberal restructuring to widening socio-spatial inequality.

Spatial analytical tools, particularly GIS-based mapping, are highly prevalent. Researchers use Geographic Information Systems to map residential segregation indices, land-use change, transportation accessibility disparities, and environmental injustice. For instance, several North American and European studies apply spatial autocorrelation statistics (e.g., Moran's I) to identify clustering of poverty and ethnic marginalization in rapidly transforming metropolitan areas (Nasrabadi, 2024). These approaches enable visualization of inequality “hotspots” and facilitate evidence-based urban planning interventions.

Big data approaches represent a rapidly growing methodological innovation. Studies using mobile phone data, satellite imagery, and social media geolocation datasets have enhanced the capacity to track mobility patterns, informal settlement growth, and real-time displacement risks. For example, remote sensing has been used to detect morphological changes in peri-urban areas in rapidly urbanizing regions of Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (Mikelson, 2021). However, the review identifies concerns regarding data bias, privacy, and uneven digital representation, as marginalized populations are often undercounted in digital datasets.

Despite their analytical rigor, quantitative and spatial approaches sometimes risk reducing inequality to measurable indicators, underrepresenting subjective experiences and informal processes (Taktak, 2025). Moreover, the majority of large-scale datasets originate from the Global North, limiting comparative generalizability.

3.3.2 Qualitative and Participatory Research Designs

Qualitative methodologies form a significant and theoretically rich portion of the reviewed literature. Ethnographic studies, in-depth interviews, and community-based case studies are particularly prominent in analyses of displacement, informal economies, and housing precarity (Li, 2025). Influenced by critical urban theorists such as Saskia Sassen, these studies emphasize how global capital flows reshape everyday urban life, often privileging financial districts while marginalizing low-income communities.

Ethnographic work captures the lived realities of tenants facing eviction, informal settlers negotiating state recognition, and migrant workers navigating precarious housing markets. For instance, studies in Latin American and African cities highlight how residents resist exclusion through collective action, informal land tenure arrangements, and neighborhood solidarity networks (Ece Kaya, 2024). These approaches provide insights into agency, resistance, and resilience that are often invisible in aggregate data.

Participatory research designs including participatory mapping, community workshops, and co-produced knowledge frameworks are increasingly visible in the literature. These methodologies align with calls for “right to the city” frameworks and inclusive urban governance. They enable marginalized groups to articulate spatial injustices and propose alternative development visions (Garcia, 2025). However, the review notes methodological challenges, including limited scalability, potential researcher bias, and difficulties in translating participatory findings into policy reform.

Overall, qualitative and participatory approaches contribute depth, contextual sensitivity, and ethical engagement. They illuminate how structural inequalities manifest in daily life and how urban transformation is contested from below (Buettner, 2024).

3.3.3 Mixed Methods and Comparative Frameworks

An important emerging trend is the integration of mixed-methods designs combining statistical modeling with qualitative inquiry. These studies triangulate census data, spatial analysis, and interviews to produce multidimensional explanations of urban inequality (Aguilar, 2024). For example, research on gentrification often pairs property value trend analysis with interviews of displaced residents, linking structural economic shifts to lived displacement narratives.

Comparative frameworks both cross-national and cross-city also feature prominently. Studies comparing metropolitan regions across Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas reveal both convergences and contextual divergences in urban transformation trajectories (Bandauko, 2022). For instance, comparative research contrasts state-led redevelopment models in East Asian cities with market-driven restructuring in Anglo-American contexts. Such frameworks enhance theoretical generalization while respecting contextual specificity.

Methodological triangulation significantly enhances explanatory depth and policy relevance. By combining quantitative precision with qualitative insight, mixed methods studies provide more holistic accounts of inequality dynamics (Taneja, 2022). They are particularly effective in evaluating urban policy interventions, such as affordable housing schemes or transportation equity reforms, by assessing both statistical outcomes and community perceptions.

Nevertheless, the review identifies limitations, including resource intensity, data harmonization challenges in cross-national studies, and the risk of superficial integration when methods are combined without epistemological coherence (Javed, 2024).

3.4 Policy, Governance, and Institutional Dynamics

The Scopus-indexed literature reviewed demonstrates that governance structures and institutional arrangements are central mediators of the relationship between urban transformation and social inequality. Across global regions, urban change is rarely a neutral, technocratic process; rather, it reflects political choices, regulatory frameworks, and institutional capacities that privilege certain social groups while marginalizing others (Lelo, 2019). The findings reveal three interrelated dynamics: the consolidation of neoliberal governance regimes, the uneven implementation of inclusive planning frameworks, and the complex translation of global development agendas into local policy contexts.

3.4.1 Urban Governance and Neoliberal Policy Regimes

A dominant theme in the reviewed literature is the entrenchment of neoliberal policy regimes characterized by privatization, deregulation, entrepreneurial governance, and market-led redevelopment. Influenced by scholarship such as David Harvey’s critique of neoliberal urbanism and Saskia Sassen’s analysis of global cities, many studies document how cities have increasingly adopted pro-growth strategies that prioritize competitiveness and capital accumulation over redistribution (Cahyono, 2024).

Empirical evidence from global cities such as London, New York City, and Johannesburg indicates that public-private partnerships (PPPs) and large-scale urban redevelopment projects often accelerate gentrification and displacement. For example, waterfront regeneration schemes and financial district expansions are frequently associated with rising land values and housing costs, pushing low-income residents to peripheral areas with limited access to services. Studies align with earlier findings by McCormick (2013) on the “revanchist city,” demonstrating that state-backed redevelopment can reconfigure urban space in favor of elite consumption.

The review also highlights privatization of essential services such as water, housing, and transportation as a significant contributor to inequality. In Latin American and African cities, privatized utility provision has sometimes improved efficiency but often reduced affordability for marginalized populations (Ribeiro, 2025). Research shows that cost-recovery models and user-fee systems disproportionately burden informal workers and low-income households, thereby undermining social protection mechanisms.

However, the findings are not uniformly critical. In certain contexts, carefully regulated PPPs have expanded infrastructure provision and improved urban services, particularly where strong institutional oversight exists (Malaker, 2024). This suggests that the distributive outcomes of neoliberal governance are contingent upon regulatory capacity, transparency, and civic accountability.

3.4.2 Planning Frameworks and Inclusive Urban Strategies

In response to widening disparities, the literature documents growing experimentation with inclusive planning mechanisms, including participatory governance, inclusive zoning, and pro-poor housing policies. Drawing conceptually from Henri Lefebvre’s “right to the city” and Susan Fainstein’s “just city” framework, many studies assess whether contemporary planning practices meaningfully redistribute urban opportunities (Okafor, 2023).

Evidence from participatory budgeting initiatives in cities such as Porto Alegre demonstrates measurable improvements in infrastructure access and service delivery in low-income neighborhoods. These findings support prior research suggesting that direct citizen involvement can shift budgetary priorities toward underserved communities (Rigolon, 2018). Similarly, inclusionary zoning policies in North American and European cities have modestly increased affordable housing stock, though often at a scale insufficient to offset speculative real estate pressures.

In the Global South, pro-poor upgrading strategies such as slum regularization and incremental housing programs have shown mixed results. While in-situ upgrading enhances tenure security and service provision, implementation gaps, limited funding, and bureaucratic inertia frequently constrain long-term impact (Van Ham, 2021). Furthermore, the literature indicates that participatory processes can be co-opted by local elites or reduced to symbolic consultation, limiting transformative potential.

Overall, the review suggests that inclusive planning frameworks are most effective when embedded within broader redistributive policies, including progressive taxation, rent control, and social housing investment (Cassarino, 2021). Without structural reforms, isolated participatory or zoning interventions tend to mitigate rather than fundamentally reverse inequality.

3.4.3 Global Agendas and Local Implementation

The Scopus corpus shows strong engagement with global urban development frameworks, particularly United Nations initiatives such as the Sustainable Development Goals (notably SDG 11 on sustainable cities) and the New Urban Agenda (Farkas, 2023). These agendas promote inclusivity, resilience, and sustainability as normative principles guiding urban transformation.

The findings indicate that such frameworks have significantly shaped national urban policies and planning discourses. Many governments have incorporated SDG indicators into city-level monitoring systems, fostering greater attention to housing adequacy, access to public space, and environmental sustainability (McCormick, 2013). In some cases, alignment with global agendas has attracted international funding and technical support, strengthening local institutional capacity.

However, the literature also identifies tensions between global standards and local socio-economic realities. Standardized metrics may inadequately capture informality, cultural diversity, and context-specific vulnerabilities. For example, applying universal housing quality indicators in rapidly urbanizing African or South Asian cities can obscure the adaptive strategies of informal settlements and lead to displacement-oriented redevelopment (Ribeiro, 2025). Scholars caution that global benchmarking sometimes incentivizes “policy mimicry,” where cities adopt internationally fashionable models without adequate adaptation to local governance capacity or fiscal constraints.

Moreover, implementation gaps are frequently linked to weak institutional coordination, limited fiscal autonomy, and political instability. The review highlights that effective localization of global agendas requires multilevel governance alignment, sustained financing, and robust community engagement (Malaker, 2024). Without these conditions, global commitments risk remaining rhetorical rather than transformative.

3.5 Emerging Debates, Research Gaps, and Future Directions

The Scopus-based review reveals a significant shift in the global scholarship on social inequality and urban transformation toward emerging thematic frontiers that intersect technology, climate change, and interdisciplinary theory-building (Sabarofek, 2025). Across the dataset, publications from the past decade show a marked expansion beyond traditional concerns of housing, segregation, and labor precarity to include digital governance, smart infrastructures, environmental resilience, and systemic vulnerability. These cross-cutting themes demonstrate that inequality is no longer examined solely as a socio-economic outcome of urban restructuring but as a dynamic process embedded within technological systems, ecological risks, and institutional innovation (De Snyder, 2011). However, the review also indicates fragmentation in theoretical approaches and uneven geographic representation, particularly underrepresentation of comparative studies from the Global South.

3.5.1 Digitalization, Smart Cities, and Technological Inequality

The review highlights a rapid growth of scholarship examining digital urbanism and the socio-spatial implications of smart city initiatives. Influenced by policy models such as IBM's Smart Planet framework and global benchmarking systems promoted by United Nations urban programs, cities increasingly adopt sensor-based governance, big data analytics, and AI-driven service delivery (Fernández, 2023). Research demonstrates that while such technologies promise efficiency, sustainability, and transparency, they often reproduce or intensify existing inequalities.

Studies aligned with critical urban theory, including those influenced by Saskia Sassen and Manuel Castells, show that digital infrastructures concentrate power among corporate actors and technologically advanced districts, creating "premium networked enclaves" within already advantaged neighborhoods. Empirical research from cities in Latin America, South Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa indicates that informal settlements frequently remain excluded from broadband connectivity, digital identification systems, and e-governance platforms (Buettner, 2024). In some African contexts, for example, smart mobility systems have primarily benefited middle-class commuters, leaving informal transport workers marginalized.

Furthermore, techno-centric planning approaches often prioritize data-driven optimization over participatory governance. The review identifies concerns about algorithmic bias in predictive policing, unequal access to digital public services, and the commodification of urban data (Nasrabadi, 2024). Despite growing attention to the "digital divide," fewer studies investigate how communities actively appropriate technology to resist marginalization. This reveals a research gap in understanding grassroots digital citizenship and locally embedded innovation.

Future inquiry should therefore examine digital inequality not merely as access disparity but as structural power embedded in techno-governance systems (Mirzoev, 2022). Comparative studies across cities at varying levels of technological maturity are particularly needed to avoid universalizing Euro-American smart city models.

3.5.2 Climate Change, Resilience, and Social Vulnerability

Another prominent trend identified in the Scopus corpus is the integration of climate change discourse into urban transformation research. Influenced by frameworks from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and global sustainability agendas such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, scholars increasingly examine how climate adaptation intersects with social inequality (Ece Kaya, 2024).

The findings indicate that climate-related hazards heatwaves, flooding, coastal erosion, and air pollution disproportionately affect low-income and informally housed populations. Studies from South Asian delta cities and African coastal settlements demonstrate how precarious housing, insecure tenure, and limited infrastructure amplify climate vulnerability (Garcia, 2025). Research on resilience planning further shows that adaptation strategies such as green infrastructure projects or waterfront redevelopment may inadvertently displace marginalized communities through "climate gentrification."

Despite the expanding literature on resilience, the review reveals two major gaps. First, social vulnerability frameworks are not consistently integrated into technical adaptation planning models. Engineering-based resilience strategies often overlook intersectional dimensions of vulnerability related to gender, age, disability, and migration status (Mikelsone, 2021). Second, longitudinal analyses examining the long-term distributive impacts of climate-responsive urban redevelopment remain limited.

While some scholars draw on political ecology and environmental justice perspectives, there is insufficient theoretical integration between structural inequality frameworks and resilience discourse. Future research must therefore move beyond resilience as infrastructural robustness toward resilience as socio-political equity (Buettner, 2024). Participatory adaptation models and community-led planning processes represent promising but underexplored avenues.

3.5.3 Future Research Agendas and Theoretical Integration

The review underscores the need for stronger interdisciplinary and theoretical synthesis. Existing scholarship draws variously from Marxist urban political economy, neoliberal governance critiques, postcolonial urbanism, and spatial justice theory (Bandaiko, 2022). However, these frameworks are often applied in isolation, limiting their explanatory capacity in rapidly transforming urban contexts shaped by digitalization and climate change.

Future research agendas should prioritize three directions. First, there is a pressing need for comparative Global South scholarship. While cities in Europe and North America remain heavily represented in Scopus-indexed research, rapidly urbanizing regions in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America require deeper empirical engagement (Taneja, 2022). Comparative analyses would help avoid epistemic bias and broaden theoretical models beyond Western-centric assumptions.

Second, longitudinal studies examining inequality trajectories over time are essential. Much of the current literature relies on cross-sectional data, limiting understanding of how digital reforms, climate adaptation projects, or infrastructure investments reshape inequality over decades (Javed, 2024). Integrating mixed-method approaches combining spatial analytics, ethnography, and policy analysis can provide richer insights into dynamic transformation processes.

Third, theoretical integration is critical. Bridging structural inequality theories (such as class-based and racialized spatial stratification models) with dynamic urban transformation frameworks (including resilience theory and digital urbanism) would enable a more holistic understanding of how economic restructuring, technological governance, and environmental pressures interact (Lelo, 2019). Such synthesis can illuminate feedback loops between infrastructure investment, policy reform, and socio-spatial stratification.

4. Conclusion

This study set out to synthesize and critically examine global scholarly debates on social inequality and urban transformation through a systematic Scopus-based review of the literature. The findings demonstrate that research on urban transformation has increasingly foregrounded inequality as both a structural condition and an outcome of contemporary urban processes. Across regions and methodological traditions, the literature converges on the view that urban transformation whether driven by neoliberal restructuring, mega-infrastructure projects, climate adaptation strategies, or digital innovation often reproduces and, in many contexts, intensifies socio-spatial disparities.

One of the central conclusions of this review is that urban transformation is rarely neutral. Redevelopment initiatives, smart city projects, and regeneration schemes frequently generate uneven benefits, privileging capital-intensive interests while marginalizing low-income communities, informal settlers, migrants, women, and other vulnerable groups. While some studies highlight inclusive planning frameworks and participatory governance models as pathways to equitable transformation, the overall body of evidence suggests that such approaches remain inconsistently implemented and structurally constrained by entrenched political-economic systems.

The review further reveals a significant geographical imbalance in the literature. Although research from the Global North dominates publication output and theoretical framing, contributions from the Global South particularly from rapidly urbanizing regions in Africa, Asia, and Latin America are increasingly challenging universalist assumptions. These studies emphasize informality, grassroots resilience, and community-led adaptation as critical dimensions of urban transformation, thereby expanding the conceptual scope of inequality beyond income disparities to include spatial exclusion, infrastructural deficits, environmental vulnerability, and digital divides.

Methodologically, the reviewed studies demonstrate a growing interdisciplinarity, drawing from urban sociology, human geography, planning studies, political economy, and environmental studies. However, there remains a need for more longitudinal and comparative research that can trace the long-term impacts of transformation policies on inequality. Similarly, greater integration of qualitative insights with spatial and quantitative data would enhance understanding of how macro-level urban restructuring intersects with everyday lived experiences.

Theoretically, this review underscores the continued relevance of critical urban theory in interrogating power, governance, and capital flows in shaping urban futures. At the same time, emerging frameworks such as just city paradigms, rights-to-the-city

perspectives, and sustainability transitions offer normative and analytical tools for reimagining more inclusive urban transformations. The challenge lies not merely in diagnosing inequality, but in operationalizing equity-oriented principles within urban policy and practice.

In conclusion, social inequality and urban transformation are deeply intertwined phenomena that demand sustained scholarly attention and policy innovation. As cities confront accelerating challenges including climate change, demographic shifts, technological disruption, and economic volatility future research must prioritize equity, participation, and context-sensitive governance models. A more balanced global research agenda, attentive to marginalized voices and diverse urban realities, is essential for advancing knowledge and informing transformative strategies that genuinely reduce, rather than exacerbate, social inequality.

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