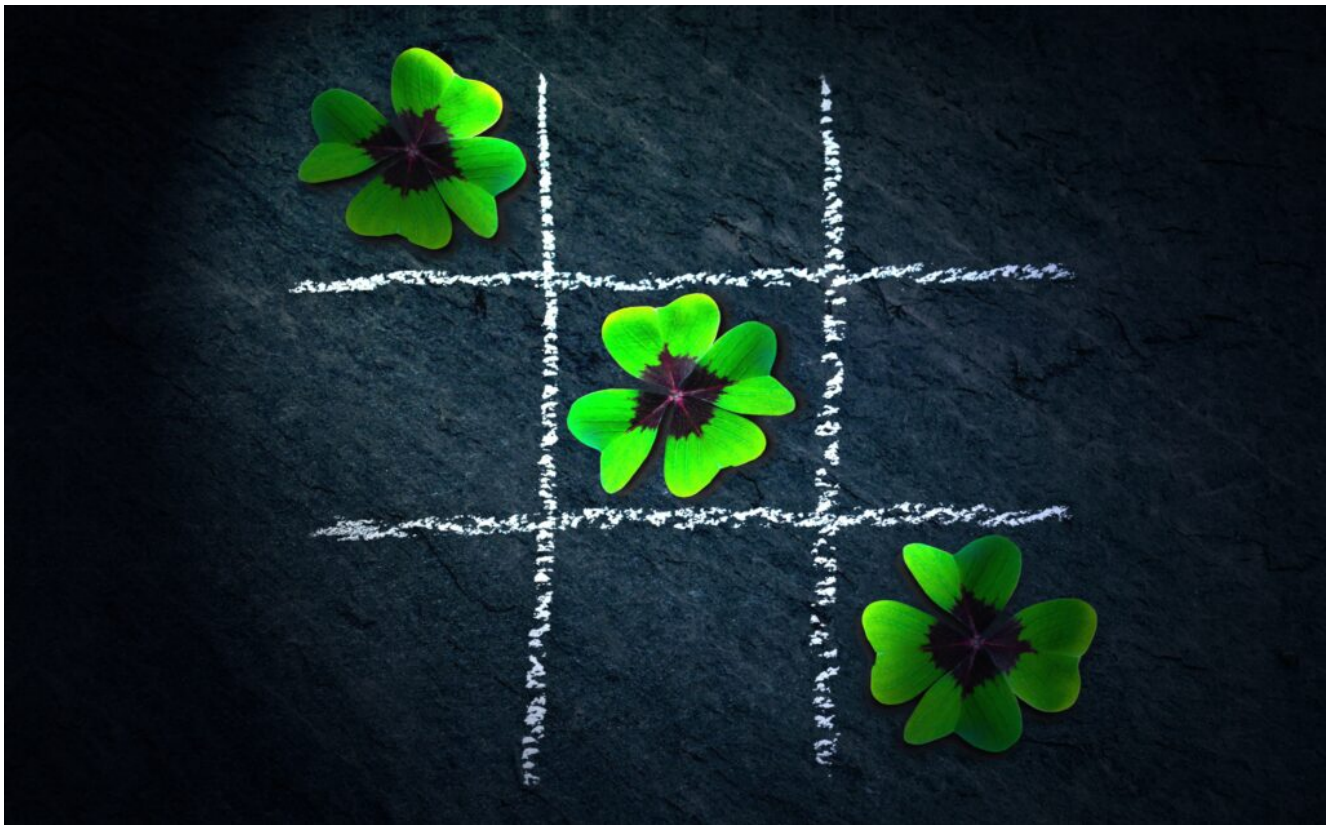


RSA Events - Event Report - “Thematic Workshop | Spatialising Alternative Imaginaries of Planning and Development for Prosperity Beyond Growth” (ESPPRIT)



Event Report “ESPPRIT - Eco-Social Policy and Practice for Innovation and Transformation” workshop RSA Research Network

RSA’s Research Network on Eco-Social Policy and PPractice for Innovation and Transformation (ESPPRIT)



18-19 June 2025, University of Oxford, UK

Report by Astrid Krisch (email), Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Global Centre on Healthcare and Urbanisation, University of Oxford; Lucas Barning, Postdoctoral Researcher, University of Vienna; and Sarah Ware, Research Fellow, Central European University Vienna.

Report Thematic Workshop | Spatialising Alternative Imaginaries of Planning and Development for Prosperity Beyond Growth

ORGANISERS: *Dr Astrid Krisch (University of Oxford), Sarah Ware (Central European University, Vienna), Dr Lucas Barning (University of Vienna)*

Introduction

As social and ecological crises continue to deepen, developing pathways that resist extractive logics and embrace justice, care, and ecological limits becomes ever more urgent. Yet, the translation of post-growth and eco-social imaginaries into meaningful policy and practice remains fraught, particularly as viable solutions are usually strongly context dependent and thus need to be spatialised (Xue and Kębłowski 2022). The second RSA Research Network on Eco-Social Policy and Practice for Innovation and Transformation (ESPPRIT) workshop, held in Oxford from 18-19 June 2025, convened researchers, practitioners, and public officials to reflect on one of the core challenges in sustainability transitions: spatial dimensions of prosperity beyond growth.

Rather than promoting a unified vision of post-growth transformation, the workshop aimed at creating space to explore its multiple meanings, materialisations, and contestations, placing emphasis on the situatedness of transition strategies and the diversity of tools required to enact them. With 23 researchers, 7 of which were early-career researchers, from 7 countries attending the event, discussions ranged from foundational infrastructure and water justice to methods like thick mapping, political ecology, and university engagement, to critically engage with the role of spatial tools, governance systems, contestations, and cultural politics in shaping transitions beyond growth.

A detailed outline of the workshop programme can be found on the [ESPPRIT resources page](#). The event opened with a Lightning Round, in which the participants shared their current research focus via 3-minute presentations. After this introduction, **Julie Froud** (University of Manchester) gave the first keynote on “Rethinking Infrastructure for People and Places: The Tricky Case of Water in England and Wales” (recording can be found [here](#)). Both the inputs from participants and keynote fed into in-depth discussions around four thematic tables developed from the participants’ abstract submissions: 1) spatialising post-growth approaches, 2) tools for spatial practices and design, 3) contestation, cultural politics, and transition imaginaries, and 4) governance contexts and institutional capabilities. Day 1 ended with a Public Seminar, held at Kellogg College, with invited speakers from research, policy, and practice to reflect on a key question: Can communities prosper under Net Zero? **Siobhann Mansel-Pleydell** from Oxford Doughnut Economics Coalition, **Imandeep Kaur** from Civic Square in Birmingham, **Amy Burnett** from Middlesex University, and **Emily Green** from Oxford City Council gave 5-minute pitches to frame their ideas and spark debate with the audience. On the second day, the workshop picked up on these conversations and questions around responsibility in transition in the keynote given by **John Tomaney** (University College London) on “Global Universities and Left-Behind Places: UCL’s Emerging Regional Communities Agenda” (recording can be found [here](#)). In his keynote, John raised the question of the role of universities and educational institutions in driving transformation and in countering problems of epistemic privilege and ‘extractive’ research, particularly in vulnerable communities. These important questions were carried through to the thematic discussions in a world cafe format. The workshop ended with a site visit to **Makespace**, **Tap Social**, and **Common Ground**, three social enterprises in Oxford, to connect theory with place-based activism .

Throughout the two-day workshop, the group discussions evolved around the thematic clusters, providing space for exploring common research interests and enabling collective discussion on important questions, which are outlined in the following section. Hosted in the welcoming atmosphere of Kellogg College (and assisted by ideal sunny weather), the workshop provided an important space for informal exchange during coffee and lunch breaks in the garden and over a formal dinner provided at Kellogg College.



Figure 1: ESPPRIT Oxford Workshop participants

Key insights from the workshop

The various formats facilitated during the workshop aimed at stimulating conversations along four initial topics that emerged from the participant's abstract submissions: 1) spatialising post-growth approaches, 2) tools for spatial practices and design, 3) contestation, cultural politics, and transition imaginaries, and 4) governance contests and institutional capabilities. Participants were self-organised into their respective themes on day 1 and at the end of day 2 all participants built upon each theme and shared their insights through the world cafe. We have summarised the key aspects emerging from these thematic discussions below.

Spatialising post-growth approaches: from abstract models to situated realities

The first line of discussion revolved around the spatial turn in post-growth discourse that has brought alternative economic models including Doughnut Economics, Community Wealth Building, and the Foundational Economy into sharper focus. While conceptually rich, these models often remain abstract and disconnected from the material, historical, and political geographies they seek to transform (Hansen 2022). Workshop discussions emphasised that grounding such frameworks requires more than localisation. It involves historicising entrenched inequalities, politicising economic alternatives, and addressing the need for reparative planning. Illustrative cases like the Amsterdam Doughnut and Oxford's Covered Market revitalisation reveal potential for spatial translation, but also underscore the dominance of Eurocentric narratives, which obscure the experiences of marginalised or "left-behind" regions in both the Global North and South (Tomaney et al. 2024, Tups et al. 2023). A post-growth approach, therefore, must move beyond universalist applications and account for the situated knowledge and ecological specificities of diverse places.

Despite the proliferation of post-growth concepts, there remains little clarity on how these frameworks interrelate or how they can be systematically embedded in local contexts or planning debates (Romero-Mertinez et al. 2025). Horizontal exchanges, such as regional knowledge sharing, suggest promising pathways, yet vertical disconnections between local, national, and global governance structures hinder integrated approaches. Moreover, academic and institutional actors often operate through exclusionary knowledge regimes, complicating meaningful community engagement and raising urgent questions of positionality, methodology, and ethical responsibility. This point was particularly emphasised in John Tomaney's keynote for the case of regional research at universities. Post-growth interventions thus need to critically assess their legitimacy, especially in communities with limited capacity or desire for externally-driven change. Where resistance emerges, the imperative may not be to persist but to re-evaluate one's role and the very assumptions underpinning transformative change. This aligns with research into spatial justice in regional development, uncovering how regional policy frameworks can both enable and exclude local voices in development debates (Weck et al. 2022).

The discussions around spatialising post-growth also highlighted the intensification of challenges due to broader geopolitical currents, notably militarisation and increasing resource competition, which divert attention and resources away from just transitions. This may affect marginalised rural areas and polarised urban settings alike, where post-growth ambitions often struggle to gain traction due to infrastructural, political, or epistemic constraints. Models like Community Wealth Building, which tap into endogenous capacities, may prove more adaptable than those like Doughnut Economics, which rely on comprehensive institutional support. A critical mapping of where and how these models take root is thus essential to understand their different uptake. Ultimately, spatialising post-growth is not about scaling abstract models, but about layering them critically and contextually over existing realities through embracing complexity, addressing inequality, and engaging communities.

Contestation and agonistic pluralism

The political and cultural contestation of eco-social transformation emerged as a central concern. Drawing on case studies, participants discussed the need to approach transition not as a technical or managerial process, but as a deeply contested cultural and political terrain. Empirical work from cities like London and Barcelona revealed how narratives around urban mobility, green gentrification, and the erosion of local autonomy generate significant backlash against sustainability reforms. Similarly, long-standing struggles in left-behind regions demonstrate how historical attachments to place and collective memory shape the social imaginary of transition (Gulbrandsen 2025). These contestations are not peripheral obstacles to be overcome, but are constitutive of how transition imaginaries are formed, negotiated, and transformed. Far from being neutral tools, imaginaries carry political weight and are reshaped through conflict, resistance, and storytelling.

Central to the discussion was revisiting the concept of agonistic pluralism, rooted in the political theory of Chantal Mouffe (e.g. Mouffe 1999) and taken up in governance and planning theory (e.g. Pløger 2004): the view that embracing political conflict can revitalise democratic processes rather than hinder them. Participants critically engaged with both the risk of instrumentalising contestation for political gain and romanticising localism, which can obscure the reproduction of exclusionary practices and the depoliticisation of structural

issues. While municipal or community-led transitions are often celebrated as inherently democratic or progressive, they may in practice exclude marginalised groups and sideline broader systemic critiques if not contextualised within wider structures of power. Discussions emphasised the importance of situating contestation within multi-scalar arenas, recognising which disputes are locally rooted and which are imported or displaced from other socio-political fields.

In light of these dynamics, a key challenge becomes how to build coalitions that can navigate, rather than erase, plural and often conflicting visions of change (e.g. Ciplet 2022). This entails expanding notions of creativity and participation to include dissent and resistance, acknowledging that cultural politics (expressed as both different standpoints through artistic interventions, heritage narratives etc, and cultural politics of representation, space-making, and recognition and redistribution) are not only expressions of difference but also sites for negotiating shared futures. Distinctions between agonism and antagonism become especially important here: while some conflicts can be generative, fostering democratic engagement and innovation, others may be destructive, undermining trust or reinforcing entrenched divisions. Thus, understanding transition pathways requires attention to contestation, recognising that this process is always negotiated, often messy, and deeply political.

Governance capacities

Building on the contested nature of transition imaginaries, the third line of discussion focussed on embedding governance in institutional constraints, spatial dynamics and politics. Participants brought in cases from regional development, research-action partnerships, and the evolving roles of local authorities, which highlighted that governance is not a neutral backdrop but a site where transition pathways are actively shaped and often constrained. The phenomenon of “projectification”, for instance, exemplifies how governance structures impose bounded temporal and epistemic frameworks, limiting both the scope of action and the possibilities for alternative futures. In the context of transformation processes, such “projectification” (Torrens & von Wirth 2021; Krisch et al. 2025) risks instrumentalising participatory practices for short-term outputs, undermining their relational and long-term potential for deepening democracy. The same bounded logics often extend into the use of decision-support tools, while intended to manage complexity, they can inadvertently depoliticise choices as

neutral technical decisions that are fundamentally political.

This underscored the need to move beyond technocratic understandings of governance and instead develop multi-scalar, inclusive approaches that align socioecological ambitions with real institutional capacities, particularly of public sector organisations (e.g. Borrás et al. 2024). In this context, “best practice” models may offer cohesion, but also risk blueprinting, neglecting local complexity and reproducing dominant knowledge systems. The discussions highlighted the potential of incorporating decolonial perspectives and diverse community epistemologies to challenge this by opening space for alternative governance imaginaries grounded in lived experience.

Tools for practices of care and representation

Extending the concern with governance and contestation, the role of spatial tools and design practices in eco-social transformation emerged as a fourth key focus, foregrounding how material and symbolic dimensions of space can shape transition processes. Rather than serving solely technical or representational functions, tools such as thick mapping, multi-sensory enquiry, and storytelling were discussed as methods that mobilise new imaginaries, deepen participatory engagement, connect users with physical space, and cultivate the relational capacities necessary for just transitions. This relates to debates around social innovations and how they contribute to growth independent territorial development through fostering collective agency (Mayer et al. 2021). These practices make visible suppressed histories, contested spatialities, and more-than-human entanglements, re-enchanting landscapes and challenging growth-oriented planning paradigms. Participants also highlighted rural and land-based initiatives, including communal infrastructure and alternative ownership models as spaces of experimentation, where spatial practice becomes an act of care. This expands the terrain of legitimate knowledge production, where spatial tools become sites of epistemic pluralism, capable of supporting more inclusive and transformative engagement.

However, critical concerns were also raised about the extractive tendencies embedded in academic and project-based uses of spatial tools. Barriers within academic institutions, including rigid timelines, restrictive funding rules, or narrow metrics of success, often prevent sustained, reciprocal engagement with communities and contested spaces as both physical representations and spaces

for challenging imaginaries. The challenge lies in resisting the reduction of spatial tools to technical interventions and instead recognising their political and affective dimensions. Suppose tools are to support transformative spatial engagement. In that case, they must make their normative underlying assumptions explicit, accommodate diverse ways of knowing and being, hold space for human and more-than-human relations, and remain attuned to the ethical stakes of how and why they are used.

Reclaiming the foundations through system renewal and the politics of transformation

The keynotes and Public Seminar framed eco-social transformation not as a question of isolated technologies or policy shifts, but as a fundamentally political project rooted in renewing foundational systems, being the infrastructures and institutions that sustain everyday life. Drawing on the work of Schafran et al. (2020), **Julie Froud** argued the primary purpose of politics must be to repair and democratise systems of provision, including water, energy, housing, and care to enable collective agency and support social reproduction. The case of privatised water systems in England and Wales was emblematic of this challenge: a dysfunctional, regressive management of infrastructure marked by ecological degradation, financial extraction, and political exclusion. Discussions stressed the need to move beyond consumer logics and market solutions, advocating for system renewal in the public interest. This requires tackling not only governance and funding issues, but also reimagining ownership, responsibility, and participation through new spatial contracts as place-based expectations around who provides, who benefits, and who decides.



Figure 2: ESPPRIT Oxford Workshop Keynote Julie Froud

Through the discussions it became clear that addressing foundational systems demands broad cultural and institutional reckoning with how power is exercised, and knowledge is produced. The conversation turned to the role of universities and civic institutions in reproducing or disrupting uneven geographies of power. **John Tomaney's** keynote challenged higher education institutions to redirect their civic missions toward left-behind regions, warning against extractive research practices that reinforce social distance and political mistrust. Instead, universities should act as mobilisers, co-producing knowledge with communities and sustaining long-term partnerships grounded in place and committed to generating meaningful outputs for the participants involved. This corrective bias toward the most disadvantaged is not a philanthropic gesture, but a political necessity in a divided and unequal society. Calls to think systemically and locally at once, to attend to upstream and downstream dependencies, to build place-specific imaginaries of justice and provisioning based on needs, highlighted how infrastructural renewal is inseparable from democratic and institutional renewal.



Figure 3: ESPPRIT Oxford Workshop Keynote John Tomaney

The Public Seminar added another layer of narrative and affective engagement, highlighting the role of storytelling, local governance, and civic imagination in shifting the cultural conditions of transition. **Imandeep Kaur** and **Siobhann Mansel-Pleydell** emphasised that net-zero strategies and green economic models will fail if they reproduce extractive capitalism and global inequalities. Instead, transitions must start from lived realities and shared principles, asking not only how we decarbonise, but how we care, share, and govern differently. However, critical concerns were raised around limited traction of alternative development models without a commitment to sufficiency and redistribution. Across the seminar, a core insight emerged that transformation cannot be imposed from above, nor individualised into behavioural nudges. It must be co-produced in a variety of settings and facilitated through systems that are designed to meet basic needs, foster public agency, and remain accountable to the places and people they serve.



Figure 4: ESPPRIT Oxford Workshop Public Seminar

Conclusion

Rather than converge on a single theory of change, the workshop closed with a deepened awareness of the questions that are relevant for spatialising alternative imaginaries of planning and development. This included first reflecting on our role as researchers with participants collectively calling for greater reflexivity on the purpose of research itself, moving beyond research as a means to academic publication, toward research as a practice of solidarity, care, and contribution to deep-seated change. This entails resisting extractivist models of knowledge production and instead asking what forms of shared and collective knowledge and infrastructures – tools, stories, maps, governance arrangements – should we resist, adapt and create with, for and by communities in pursuit of their future imaginary? This ethos of responsibility extended into discussions of governance: how to negotiate the tension between participatory and representative forms of democracy, how to avoid the trap of responsabilising citizens under austerity, and how to navigate conflict without forcing consensus or collapsing into antagonism. Suppose agonism is embraced as part of a pluralistic democratic project. In that case, it must also be situated: not all topics

are suitable for public debate, not all forums are suited for open-ended deliberation, and some courses of action, particularly those entangled with racism, uneven exchange, extraction, or harm, may need to be more centrally guided along collective, moral principles. Finally, the workshop surfaced profound questions about philosophical coherence across tools and strategies. Can we, in practice, reconcile conflicting ontologies in pursuit of common aims? And if plurality is a strength, where (if anywhere) do we require unity? Rather than signalling an impasse, these questions point to the value of sustained, iterative, and place-based dialogue that the ESPPRIT network has fostered and remains committed to: creating space for dialogue around complex and contested themes of eco-social transformation.

Outlook

Looking ahead, several collaborative actions have been launched to continue the momentum generated by the workshop. A shared document has been circulated among participants interested in future collaboration on collective publication efforts and a shared digital folder set up to support the collaborative development of future research ideas, proposals, and methodological tools. The ESPPRIT network will convene its next in-person workshop in Vienna on 18-19 September 2025, entitled *Spaces of Contestation: Transgressing Policies and Practices of Eco-Social Transformation*, where we will delve deeper into the political, cultural, and institutional dynamics of conflict and negotiation in transformation. To support ongoing engagement, collaboration and writing, a weekly writing sprint has been launched to create structured time for collective and individual outputs. Furthermore, online documentation of ESPPRIT activities, including workshop reports and recorded keynote talks, are available on our website to ensure wider public access and continued engagement with the ideas and debates emerging from our network.

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About the RSA's Research Network on Eco-Social Policy and PRactice for Innovation and Transformation (ESPPRIT)

This RSA Research Network ESPPRIT brings together researchers working in the fields of Regional Studies, Urban and Regional Planning, Economic Geography, and Governance and Policy Studies to engage with eco-social transformations critically. By examining changes "from below" through social innovation and "from above" through social policy, the network aims to contribute conceptual, theoretical, methodological, and empirical approaches to identifying pathways for deep-seated transformations.

ESPPRIT Objectives

The overall aim of the network is to foster interdisciplinary discussions on eco-social transformations, following four objectives:

1. **Understanding the geographical dimensions of eco-social transformations** relating specifically to concepts of the foundational economy, post-growth planning, sustainability transition, sustainable welfare and wellbeing and multi-level governance. We will consider the role of place-based approaches "from the bottom" within local society, "from the top" by national governments or supranational organisations, and "from the middle", by non-state organisations at national, regional or

local levels.

2. **Shaping a just eco-social transformation** by exploring links between left-behind places, uneven regional development, and multi-level governance. In doing so, the network aims at understanding just eco-social transformation in different geographical contexts. This involves analysing the role of place-based social innovations and policies in addressing regional disparities. We aim to scrutinise how social innovations and eco-social policies can contribute to better managing newly emerging eco-social risks, and how political-institutional structures and policies that stabilise unsustainable patterns of modern social life can be changed to shape a just eco-social transformation.
3. **Promote interdisciplinary discussions** by bringing together scholars from Regional Studies, Urban and Regional Planning, Economic Geography, Regional Science, and Policy Studies. As studies on social innovation often operate in isolation from research on social policy and welfare states, bringing these disciplinary perspectives together can aid understanding barriers and levers of change for accelerating eco-social transformations that focus on social and spatial justice on different levels.
4. **Showcase conceptual, methodological, and empirical work** by identifying translation mechanisms between different scales and disciplines. We aim to bring together conceptual thinking with methodological considerations and empirical findings, across different policy domains (e.g., health, urban planning, mobility, or energy) and levels of governance (e.g., local, regional, national, supranational). The objective is to develop interdisciplinary learning to shape academic and policy work for just eco-social futures.

Dr Astrid Krisch, University of Oxford, Global Centre on Healthcare and Urbanisation. Research interests: intersections of regional planning, ecological transformation, and spatial justice, post-growth imaginaries, social innovation.

Dr Lucas Barning, University of Vienna, Department of Geography and Regional Research. Research interests: Energy transitions, infrastructure governance, social theory, justice and power relations.

Sarah Ware, MSc, Central European University. Research Interests: urban

environmental planning, post-growth and degrowth, social ecological transformation, participation, social movements.