



LSGS & RILS RESEARCH SEMINAR

Assessing Sustainable Urbanism in 2026: Progress, Remaining Barriers, and Pathways Forward

 **21 AUG 2026 (FRI)**

 **15:00 - 16:00**

 **Z414, POLYU**

 **ENGLISH**

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ABSTRACT

More than a decade after the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals and the New Urban Agenda, important progress has been made toward sustainable urbanism – but we are still far from key goals. Achievements include renewed attention to compact, walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods, transit-oriented development, resilient planning practices, and "15-minute city" strategies that reduce greenhouse gas emissions by improving the relationships among mobility, proximity, and urban form. Yet these advances remain constrained by persistent technological, economic, institutional, and cultural lock-in that continues to reproduce unsustainable patterns of urbanization. Further progress will depend upon a deeper functional understanding of these barriers, and pathways to overcome them. This presentation reviews the current state of sustainable urbanism in 2026, drawing on recent research into the mechanisms of urban "lock-in" and the pathways beyond it. It observes that successful cities function as evolutionary complex adaptive systems that embody accumulated intelligence through interconnected physical, social, economic, and cultural networks, enabling continuous learning, innovation, and resilience. Recent advances in the sciences of complex systems, networks, neuroscience, and machine learning help to illuminate these processes of feedback, self-organization, and deep network formation, reinforcing and extending earlier practical insights from Jane Jacobs, Christopher Alexander, and other pathfinding contributors. Top-down interventions certainly have their place, but must be aimed at catalyzing and facilitating bottom-up actions exhibiting the dynamics of self-organization. The paper concludes by identifying practical strategies for accelerating the transition toward low-carbon, regenerative, and resilient urban systems through governance reform, pattern-based urban design, and policies that strengthen the adaptive capacities already embedded within successful human settlements.

BIOGRAPHY

Michael W. Mehaffy, Ph.D., is a researcher, educator, author and practitioner with expertise in urban planning, architecture and design, computer science and philosophy, with a focus on climate change and urbanism as well as complexity and network science. He is noted for his theoretical contributions as well as his years of practice and teaching. In the book *Design for a Living Planet* (co-authored with Nikos A. Salingaros), he introduced "Place Network Theory," an urban spatial network theory, and in the book *Notes on an Incomplete Architecture*, he introduced "symmetric structuralism," described as a form of "neo-structuralism" to inform architecture and urbanism, and to resolve key problems in philosophy and linguistics. He has also developed contributions toward a "polycapital culturalism", dealing with problems of externality valuation and feedback in sustainable development. He is also active in developing new pattern language tools for consulting and community design, including the book *A New Pattern Language for Growing Regions: Places, Networks, Processes*.

Moderator: Prof. Xintao LIU, Associate Professor of LSGS, member of RILS

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