

Philosophical Aspects of Managing Environmental Values in Urbanised Areas: Copenhagen, Shenzhen and Kaunas

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This article offers a philosophical and ontological analysis of how environmental values are embodied in urban governance practices, using the examples of Copenhagen, Shenzhen and Kaunas. The initial hypothesis holds that sustainable development requires not only regulatory instruments but also the deep cultural integration of values. The study applies qualitative comparative analysis, hermeneutic examination of strategic documents, and phenomenological reduction. The findings show that in Copenhagen, values are integrated into everyday practices; in Shenzhen, they are reduced to digital metrics; in Kaunas, they are enacted through local initiatives. The conclusions highlight the importance of ethical infrastructures and cultural sensitivity in managing sustainable urban development.

Keywords: environmental values, urban ontology, open government, Copenhagen, Shenzhen, Kaunas

INTRODUCTION

The foundation of urban life lies not only in technical governance mechanisms but also in the deep environmental values that shape the very being of urban space (Bai et al. 2016). Understanding these values as the ontological grounds of the 'city' requires abandoning a purely instrumental approach and turning to a phenomenological analysis of existential structures (Heidegger 1971; Merleau-Ponty 1962). At the same time, the ethical-normative perspective

of responsibility highlights the need to consider the consequences of our actions for future generations (Jonas 1979), while deep ecology emphasises the intrinsic worth of every form of life as an equal element of the ecosystem (Naess 1973). Critical theory demonstrates how technocratic models of 'green urbanism' can marginalise local practices and obscure underlying value horizons (Latour 1991; Dobson 2007).

Recent research emphasises that sustainable urban governance must integrate ethical frameworks and adaptive approaches to manage the complexities of the net-zero transition and digital transformations in cities (Meadowcroft, Rosenbloom 2023; Scherer, Voegtlind 2020). These perspectives enrich the philosophical understanding of environmental values by addressing emerging challenges of technological mediation and governance pluralism.

To uncover configurations of environmental practices across different politico-cultural contexts, this study employs Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) as interpreted by Ragin (2008) and George, Bennett (2005), supplemented by a hermeneutic examination of normative and strategic texts. The phenomenological reduction enables the stripping away of theoretical preconceptions to illuminate the direct experience of the 'ecological city', while the normative-analytical method aids in deconstructing the key concepts of 'responsibility' and 'sustainability'. This combination of methods provides a robust methodological foundation for investigating how environmental values are embodied in Copenhagen, Shenzhen and Kaunas.

ONTOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE ECOLOGICAL CITY

This chapter situates the study within the field of environmental philosophy, an interdisciplinary domain drawing on ecological ethics, political ecology, phenomenology of place, justice theory, and elements of critical theory and pragmatism. These traditions provide tools to understand how values shape human–nature relations, particularly in urban settings where institutional practices and ethical worldviews intersect.

From the history of philosophy, core concepts such as nature, agency and responsibility are derived from Aristotle's physics of being (Aristotle 1984), Spinoza's monistic ontology (Spinoza 1992), Kant's teleological judgment (Kant 1987) and Hegel's dialectics of nature and spirit (Hegel 1970). These provide a metaphysical foundation for later environmental frameworks.

In modern thought, Leopold's land ethic introduced the moral status of ecosystems (Leopold 1949). Naess's deep ecology affirmed the intrinsic value in all life, critiquing anthropocentrism (Naess 1973), while Callicott clarified types of natural value – intrinsic, aesthetic and spiritual (Callicott 1987).

The Gaia hypothesis by Lovelock and Margulis presents Earth as a self-regulating organism (Lovelock 1972; Margulis, Lovelock 1974). Critics such as Schneider and Kirchner questioned its scientific validity, framing it as metaphor or epistemic challenge (Schneider 1991; Kirchner 2002).

In political ecology, Beck's 'risk society' theory interprets environmental degradation as a side effect of modernisation (Beck 1992). Giddens emphasises reflexivity in governance (Giddens 1990), and Jonas formulates a future-oriented ethic of technological restraint (Jonas 1979).

Phenomenology of place adds an experiential depth. Heidegger's concept of dwelling links ethical care with spatial rootedness (Heidegger 1971), while Merleau-Ponty highlights embodied perception of landscapes (Merleau-Ponty 1962). Kačerauskas extends this to the urban scale, showing how cultural narratives shape ecological imagination (Kačerauskas 2017).

Environmental justice theory emphasises ethical equity. Sen's capability approach reveals how ecological harm affects the vulnerable (Sen 2009), and Nussbaum calls for expanding justice to non-human life (Nussbaum 2011). In the post-Soviet context, Jakutis examines value negotiation in Kaunas through local community engagement (Jakutis 2025).

Taken together, these strands – from classical metaphysics to contemporary phenomenology and critical ethics – form a comprehensive interpretive framework. This philosophical base supports the comparative analysis that follows, revealing how environmental values are embedded across spatial, institutional and cultural dimensions in Copenhagen, Shenzhen and Kaunas.

METHODOLOGICAL TOOLS FOR CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

The nature of this research – examining how environmental values are managed in urban contexts – calls for an interdisciplinary, interpretive methodology grounded in a value-sensitive epistemology. Governance is approached not merely as a set of instruments but as a cultural and ethical process through which societies express their relationship to nature (Whatmore 2013; Bennett 2010; Coeckelbergh 2020). Environmental values are treated not as policy outputs or regulatory tools, but as ontological foundations of sustainable urban development, requiring analytical frameworks that integrate moral, spatial and institutional dimensions.

This study adopts a qualitative logic that prioritises interpretation of governance models over statistical comparison. The primary method is Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), which is widely applied to complex socio-institutional formations (George, Bennett 2005; Ragin 2008). This is complemented by insights from interpretive institutionalism and normative urban theory, particularly useful in culturally diverse settings with a limited comparability and standardised data. The research focuses on three deliberately selected cases – Copenhagen, Shenzhen and Kaunas – which represent contrasting configurations of political structure, institutional legacy and environmental value orientation. Copenhagen exemplifies a participatory, decentralised model in which environmental values are enacted through everyday rituals and embedded in civic institutions. Shenzhen illustrates a centralised, technocratic regime that relies on smart planning tools and data-driven regulation. Kaunas serves as a transitional case where EU-level frameworks intersect with local identity, symbolic memory and cultural expressions of environmental concern. Those cases were chosen based on the presence of formal sustainability strategies, governance diversity, data availability and regional-philosophical contrast.

The analytical design follows three axes: territorial context, governance practices and institutional logic, with attention to spatial structures, policy instruments and value integration, respectively (Barca et al. 2012; Healey 2007). Empirical work is supplemented by content analysis of strategic documents and ESG reports (Global ESG Benchmark 2023), urban development plans and sustainability policy frameworks. Key references include the Green City Accord (European Commission 2019), the SDG Urban Index (United Nations 2020) and China's national Five-year Plans (State Council of the PRC 2016, 2021). The comparative inquiry highlights that managing environmental values is not reducible to administrative design or metric performance. Rather, it demands sensitivity to local cultural contexts and the capacity to embed shared ethical frameworks in spatial and institutional configurations. Sustainability thus becomes meaningful when it is rooted in lived experience, supported by community practices and sustained through place-based visions of moral and ecological belonging (Gabrys 2016).

COMPARATIVE CONFIGURATIONS OF ECOLOGICAL VALUES IN URBAN SETTINGS

A comparative analysis of Copenhagen, Shenzhen and Kaunas reveals how each city's political system, spatial design and cultural context shape the institutionalisation of environmental values (Bennett 2010; Whatmore 2013). In Copenhagen, the Finger Plan (City of Copenhagen 1947) integrates green corridors into the urban grid, embedding ecological connectivity into everyday life. Shenzhen's industrial rise produced fragmented green zones, later retrofitted through the Smart Ecological Shenzhen Strategy (Shenzhen Municipal Government 2018), treating environmental quality as technical performance managed via ESG platforms (Global ESG Benchmark 2023). Kaunas's 2030 Strategy (Municipality of Kaunas 2019) reclaims rivers, slopes and forests through restoration projects that fuse an urban form with collective memory.

These spatial configurations reflect divergent governance approaches. Copenhagen's Climate Plan 2025 (City of Copenhagen 2020) promotes sustainability via green roofs, bike lanes and circular economy principles, fostering practices that internalise values through routine. Shenzhen's centralised, sensor-driven model emphasises efficiency via real-time monitoring and algorithmic control, yet often reduces citizen participation to passive data compliance (Gabrys 2016). Kaunas employs a hybrid, project-based logic. Programs like the Green Court-yard (Gineitienė 2018) and Eco-Schools (Eco-Schools International 2019) build the civic momentum but lack continuity without stable funding.

Institutionally, Copenhagen achieves a deep integration of environmental values through citizen councils and ESG-linked budgets – signs of systemic co-governance. Shenzhen enforces ESG largely in corporate spheres under the 'ecological civilisation' model, but lacks participatory mechanisms (Tao et al. 2023; Zhang, Wen 2020). Kaunas sits between: local sustainability draws on EU frameworks and cross-sector partnerships, though implementation remains uneven and fragmented.

These contrasts illustrate a continuum of ethical embeddedness. Copenhagen exemplifies value internalisation via everyday practices and democratic participation. Shenzhen reflects technocratic abstraction where values become metrics. Kaunas represents partial localisation, with values translated into a symbolic and selective action. Embedding environmental values in governance demands alignment across spatial planning, institutional systems and culturally grounded ethical imaginaries.

DISCURSIVE DIMENSIONS OF RESPONSIBILITY AND DEEP ECOLOGY

Building on the comparative findings, this section interprets how Copenhagen, Shenzhen and Kaunas operationalise environmental values through distinct ethical infrastructures. Each city reflects a different ontology of governance, shaped by divergent understandings of the human–nature relationship. Copenhagen exemplifies immersive sustainability integrated into daily life; Shenzhen represents technocratic optimisation, abstracting values into data; Kaunas inhabits a transitional space negotiating identity within supranational frames.

In Copenhagen, environmental ethics are enacted via routinised practices institutionalised under the Climate Plan 2025 (City of Copenhagen 2020). Green roofs, extensive cycling infrastructure and participatory climate councils turn normative values into embodied routines. This aligns with theories of ritual internalisation, where ethical commitments gain force through repetition and everyday practice (Plumwood 1993; Coeckelbergh 2020). Here, sustainability is less a policy goal than a cultural disposition enacted across urban life.

Shenzhen's Smart Ecological Shenzhen Strategy (Shenzhen Municipal Government 2018) uses digital tools – sensors, electrified transport and ESG dashboards – to regulate ecological performance. While producing measurable outcomes, this technocratic logic risks narrowing environmental values to metrics, excluding participatory ethics. Critics argue that this depoliticises environmental governance by treating nature as an operational variable, not a shared moral concern (Gabrys 2016; Bennett 2010).

Kaunas embodies a hybrid model. Initiatives like the Green Courtyard (Gineitienė 2018) and Eco-Schools (Eco-Schools International 2019) localise sustainability through education and participatory design. These efforts ground norms in symbolic urban space and civic memory. Yet their reliance on short-term funding and limited institutionalisation exposes the vulnerability of transitional configurations. Nonetheless, Kaunas illustrates how environmental values may be recontextualised through cultural mediation and community engagement.

Collectively, these cases show that managing environmental values is not merely a technical or administrative task. It requires the co-creation of shared ethical imaginaries – locally grounded, symbolically meaningful and institutionally embedded. No single model suffices. Enduring sustainability emerges when institutions and publics collaboratively produce frameworks of responsibility that extend beyond indicators and foster collective ethical belonging.

PHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATIONS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The notion introduced in the Introduction of a 'new AI elite' gains clearer philosophical contours here: algorithmic systems, by concentrating knowledge and governance functions, risk creating a class of 'digital custodians' whose decisions may become detached from local cultural and ecological contexts (Latour 1991). In comparing the regions that spearhead AI development – the European Union, China and the United States – striking differences emerge in the integration of environmental values: the EU emphasises normative frameworks and civic participation (Bai et al. 2016), China relies on centralised management platforms (Latour 1991), and the US privileges market-driven technocratic practices (Jonas 1979). Particular attention must be paid to the epistemological and ideological distortions of algorithmic 'black boxes', which can efface culturally specific meanings and amplify transhumanist narratives (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Dobson 2007).

Such black-box algorithms often operate without transparent epistemic foundations, embedding latent biases shaped by training data and design assumptions. This opacity risks undermining democratic deliberation, marginalising local knowledge systems, and promoting technocratic forms of environmental governance divorced from cultural and ethical pluralism.

Future research should explore the impact of AI tools on the socio-cultural fabric of urban communities and the normative regulation of algorithmic governance, as well as clarify how these 'black boxes' shape or distort environmental discourses.

This final section builds on the comparative findings, reframing them through philosophical reasoning and ethical theory. The management of environmental values in urban contexts cannot be reduced to policy mechanisms or technocratic control; it must address questions of meaning, legitimacy and belonging – core concerns of phenomenology, pragmatism and critical theory.

In the time of ecological crisis and social fragmentation, governance must embed care for the biosphere, intergenerational justice and respect for place into institutions and urban design (Whatmore 2013; Bennett 2010; Gabrys 2016). Values materialise spatially – through

green corridors, cycling infrastructure and deliberative spaces – yet their form and force vary with political agency, cultural memory and power dynamics.

Copenhagen exemplifies phenomenological ethics, where sustainability becomes embodied in everyday rituals. Cycling networks, climate councils and participatory planning transform values into lived practices and civic identity (Plumwood 1993; Coeckelbergh 2020). Shenzhen illustrates the risks of technocratic abstraction. Although digital platforms and ESG metrics deliver measurable outcomes, they risk reducing values to compliance codes, bypassing ethical deliberation (Gabrys 2016; Mamedova et al. 2022). Here, critical theory exposes the limitations of optimisation logics and calls for democratic reflexivity.

Kaunas offers a hybrid model. EU frameworks merge with local initiatives – Eco-Schools, courtyard greening – co-financed through grants and volunteer work. These reflect pragmatic ethics, where moral learning emerges through iterative, context-sensitive action (Gineitiene 2018; Eco-Schools International 2019). Grassroots efforts – community gardens, reuse hubs and school clubs – show how environmental values are enacted through micro-practices. Critical theory highlights how such efforts are enabled or constrained by governance structures, while pragmatism foregrounds their adaptive capacity.

These examples suggest that ethical pluralism – multiple, overlapping value frameworks – is not a weakness but a strength. Deliberative institutions, rotating citizen panels and reflexive ESG models allow governance to mediate differences and foster shared meaning (Sennett 2012; Brenner 2009).

Ultimately, sustainability requires adaptive ethics – rooted in local lifeworlds, enriched through philosophical reflection and institutionalised via inclusive practices. Governance must not merely regulate behaviour but cultivate shared moral purpose in the spaces we inhabit together.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Sustainability in urban governance ultimately hinges on values. Environmental values are not peripheral but constitute the ethical foundation of both institutional design and civic practice. The comparative cases of Copenhagen, Shenzhen and Kaunas demonstrate how such values, when deeply embedded, can reinforce the integrity and adaptability of governance – or, if reduced to metrics, risk undermining civic legitimacy.

Copenhagen illustrates how everyday rituals – such as cycling and climate councils – concretise sustainability as shared experience. Shenzhen reveals the power and limitations of technocratic optimisation, where ecological care is managed through sensors and ESG platforms but risks detachment from public meaning. Kaunas shows the hybrid potential of local adaptation, embedding global norms through grassroots participation and symbolic resonance.

These findings confirm that there is no universal formula. Effective governance requires epistemic humility and cultural sensitivity. Values gain traction only when translated into institutional structures, nurtured through education and enacted in daily life. The concept of value adaptivity is critical: institutions must not only adopt best practices but reinterpret foundational values as contexts shift.

Different regimes call for differentiated strategies. Technocratic systems should prioritise inclusion and transparency. Transitional contexts need stronger institutional mechanisms to sustain moral commitments. At the transnational level, multiscale coordination must respect territorial particularities while articulating shared goals.

In sum, managing environmental values is not merely a technical challenge – it is a philosophical and ethical task. It calls for sustained dialogue between governance systems and moral worlds, and for pluralist imagination capable of integrating local identities into planetary responsibilities. Only such integration can ensure that sustainability remains not an abstract goal but a living, resilient practice in our urban futures.

In conclusion, these findings push environmental values beyond mere political-administrative instruments to reveal their ontological significance for urban being. The principal philosophical insights include recognising the dangers of algorithmic knowledge centralisation – the emergence of an AI ‘new elite’ – regional disparities in value integration models, and the threat of epistemic homogenisation fostered by technological ‘black boxes’ (Ragin 2008; George, Bennett 2005). Practically, these insights call for flexible regulatory mechanisms that preserve the local significance of environmental practices amid AI deployment, while theoretically they expand the scope of environmental philosophy by incorporating analyses of digital forms of power (Jonas 1979; Naess 1973). Further avenues for research include case studies of AI–urban community interactions, evaluations of algorithmic governance frameworks, and examinations of how techno-philosophical paradigms influence the future of sustainable urban development.

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Aplinkosauginių vertybų valdymo urbanizuotose teritorijose filosofiniai aspektai: Kopenhaga, Šendženas, Kaunas

Santrauka

Straipsnyje pateikiama filosofinė ir ontologinė analizė, nagrinėjanti, kaip aplinkosauginių vertybės įkūnijamos miesto valdymo praktikoje, remiantis Kopenhagos, Šendženo ir Kauno pavyzdžiais. Pagrindinė hipotezė: darnus vystymasis reikalauja ne tik reguliavimo priemonių, bet ir gilių kultūrinės vertybų integracijos. Tyime taikoma kokybinė lyginamoji analizė, strateginių dokumentų hermeneutinė analizė ir fenomenologinė redukcija. Rezultatai atskleidžia, kad Kopenhagoje aplinkosauginių vertybės yra įsitvirtinusios kasdienėje praktikoje, Šendžene jos redukuojamos iki skaitmeninių rodiklių, o Kaune įgyvendinamos per vietines iniciatyvas. Išvados paabrėžia etinių infrastruktūrų ir kultūrinio jautrumo svarbą darniai miesto plėtrai valdyti.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: aplinkosauginių vertybės, miesto ontologija, atviras valdymas, Kopenhaga, Šendženas, Kaunas