15 Summary of the Webinar Presentation

Martina Juvara

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Hosted by: Spatial Analysis and Simulation Lab/Community (SASL)
Title: **Our Future in (Climate) Action—Architecture for "more"**

Introduction

The Spatial Analysis and Simulation Lab (SASL) recently hosted Martina Juvara. The session drew participants from around the world to reconsider architecture and planning's remit under climate emergency conditions. The central provocation was that the discipline should aim for "more"—more health, equity, resilience, and planetary well-being—rather than "more of the same" growth-led development. The talk framed climate action as a professional duty and a civic partnership rather than a technological add-on.

Speaker Profile

Martina Juvara is Director of URBAN Silence (London), a strategic planning practice working at the intersection of investment, infrastructure, and social well-being; she has served in leadership capacities within ISOCARP (International Society of City and Regional Planners) and acted as delegation lead at COP26 and COP28. She has provided technical assistance with UNDP and municipal agencies in the MENA region and the UK.

Presentation Insights: Key Themes and Analysis

Martina Juvara's presentation centered on the fundamental reasons and responsibilities behind climate action, rather than specific technological tools. She structured her argument around three primary messages: the necessity of taking responsibility, the role of people as catalysts for change, and the imperative for large-scale, systemic transformation in our cities.

a. Taking Responsibility Amidst a Global Polycrisis

Juvara began by framing the current era as one of overlapping existential crises. She argued that societies are simultaneously facing geopolitical instability, rising costs of living, the need for massive infrastructure upgrades, and the escalating impacts of climate change. This complex environment puts immense pressure on political leaders, who may be tempted to prioritize national interests and delay climate action.

Despite the existence of international cooperation frameworks like the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the COP climate negotiations, she asserted that these processes are too slow and insufficient to address the speed and scale of the crisis. She provided specific financial data to illustrate this gap:

- Climate Finance Shortfall: Although a new commitment was made to provide $300 billion annually by 2035 for climate action in developing countries, this amount represents only a fraction of the trillions needed, and major contributors are already hesitant.
- Rising Damage Costs: The European Union alone suffered $77 billion in climate-related damages in 2023. The cost of climate action and damages could soon consume as much as 7% of a developed country's GDP.

Juvara warned that delaying action is financially and environmentally catastrophic, quoting climate expert Deborah Roberts: "While we waste time deciding and discussing, nature will continue to send us bigger and bigger invoices." She presented two plausible future scenarios: a temporary overshoot of the 1.5°C warming target followed by a return to a more stable climate, or a permanent state of instability at around 3°C of warming. Both scenarios, she stressed, involve irreversible changes to biodiversity and our way of life.

b. People as "Rainmakers" and the Need for a New Worldview

The second core theme positioned people as the primary agents of change, or "rainmakers"—a term for individuals who create opportunities and make things happen. Juvara argued that effective climate response depends on citizen involvement at every stage:

- Mitigation: People must support national policies aimed at reducing emissions. If citizens resist these policies, they will not happen fast enough.
- Adaptation: This involves local action, changes in neighborhoods, and shifts in personal lifestyles that require direct public participation.
- Risk Management: Citizens need to understand and prepare for inevitable climate events, including through insurance and having personal emergency plans.
- Emergency Response: When disasters strike, communities are often the first responders and must be prepared to help themselves and their neighbors, as official help may be delayed.

This people-centric approach requires a fundamental reimagining of our world. Juvara referenced author Vaclav Smil's work, which explains how the modern world has been built entirely around cheap, fossil-fuel-based energy for the past 200 years. Undoing this dependency means changing everything: the food we eat, the materials we use, our clothes, and our lifestyles. This necessitates a new economic worldview that moves beyond the pursuit of growth at any cost. She highlighted two alternative frameworks:

- Donut Economics: Proposed by Kate Raworth, this model seeks to meet the social foundations for all people (the 17 SDGs) without overshooting the Earth's ecological ceiling.
- The Rights of Nature: This movement advocates for granting legal rights to nature itself, allowing ecosystems to be protected and restored. It also embraces principles like the "seven generations" view, where actions today are considered for their impact on people 200 years from now.

c. The Imperative for Systemic Change in Cities

The final theme focused on the critical role of cities. Since urban systems are responsible for approximately 70% of global emissions, Juvara stated that urban professionals have an unavoidable duty to act. The "easy wins," like closing coal power plants, are largely complete; the harder, more crucial work lies in transforming buildings, transportation, and urban spaces.

She warned against superficial or isolated projects, using Milan's famous Bosco Verticale (Vertical Forest) as an example of a solution that is beautiful but not systemic or scalable due to its extreme cost and high-maintenance needs (e.g., requiring "flying gardeners" and cranes to replace trees). Instead, she advocated for integrated changes on a vast scale, providing several detailed examples:

- Green Riyadh (Afforestation): A massive, state-funded initiative to re-green the city, driven with the same energy as supporting a national sports team. The project involves large-scale land acquisition, dedicated tree nurseries, and the goal of reducing city temperatures by 5°C.
- Ghent Traffic Plan (Sustainable Mobility): This plan restructured the city into neighborhood zones. While walking, cycling, and public transport allow for direct travel between zones, cars are forced to exit to a ring road and re-enter, making driving the least convenient option. Despite initial public resistance, the plan dramatically reduced car use from 55% to 27% and is now widely supported.
- Toronto Waterfront (Equity): During a large-scale gentrification project, local charities negotiated with developers to train and certify local residents. These residents then formed their own subcontracting companies to help build the new development and establish new businesses, ensuring they shared in the economic benefits and could afford to stay in their neighborhood.
- UK Housing Models (Grassroots Action): She highlighted two UK examples: cooperative housing, where residents come together to design and build their own low-consumption, car-free communities, and a financial model for retrofitting existing homes. This model allows neighborhoods to borrow against their future energy savings to fund energy-efficiency upgrades, making the improvements financially viable without upfront government spending.

Juvara's ultimate point was that all these types of interventions—greening, mobility, equity, and housing—must be implemented everywhere and all at once to be effective.

Interactive Session (Q&A): The interactive session featured several insightful questions from the audience:

Key discussion points included:

- Question: Why is there a lack of meaningful climate action, and are sustainability efforts in regions like the Middle East genuine or just for political image?

  Answer: There's a concerning global shift from collective responsibility to a more nationalistic "we'll solve our own problems first" attitude, which is a major mistake that must be resisted. Official claims of progress often don't match the reality on the ground, and citizens must demand more from their leaders.

- Question: What new skills do architects and planners need for the climate crisis, and do they risk overstepping into roles that should belong to policymakers?

  Answer: The most crucial skill is awareness—understanding that the old economic and lifestyle models are no longer valid. There's no risk of overstepping, as technical work and policy are intertwined. Professionals should implement necessary climate solutions (like "flood prevention" as a proxy for climate adaptation) even if explicit policy isn't yet in place.

- Question: Is the concept of "net zero" a meaningful target, or is it a distraction that allows polluters to avoid real change by using carbon offsets?

  Answer: "Net zero" can be a "very convenient shortcut." While offsets might serve as a temporary tool to accelerate change, the ultimate goal must be to phase them out and achieve genuine, direct emission reductions over time.

- Question: How can cities with limited budgets, particularly in housing, implement effective carbon-reduction strategies?

  Answer: A financial model can be used where private investors fund neighborhood-wide energy-efficiency upgrades. This investment is then repaid over a set period from the residents' future energy savings, creating a system that doesn't require direct government capital.

Key Takeaways

- **Shared Responsibility is Non-Negotiable:** Climate action is an urgent and collective responsibility for everyone, not just governments. Professionals in the built environment have a particular duty to contribute.

- **People are the "rainmakers":** The public are the essential driver of change. Lasting transformation will not happen without people being on board to change their lifestyles and support new policies.

- **Change Must Be Systemic and Scalable:** The focus must be on integrated, large-scale transformations across entire cities, not on isolated, expensive "poster child" projects that are not scalable. All necessary changes in mobility, housing, and greening need to happen everywhere, all at once.

- **A New Worldview is Required:** The modern world was built on 200 years of cheap fossil fuels, and that entire system must now be undone. This requires adopting new economic models that respect planetary boundaries, such as Donut Economics.

- **Cities are the core of the solution:** Urban systems are responsible for approximately 70% of global emissions, making transforming cities into the most critical part of the climate challenge.

- **Act Now:** Delay is no longer an option. The time to act is now, and it is up to all of us to do it.

Conclusion

The webinar is an urgent call for architects, planners, and citizens to accept their shared responsibility in the climate crisis and act now. Martina Juvara argues that effective change must be systemic, scalable, and implemented on a vast scale within cities, which are the primary source of emissions. This requires a shift away from isolated, symbolic projects towards a people-powered approach, recognizing that ordinary citizens are the essential "rainmakers" who must collectively drive the transformation to a sustainable future.

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