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SESSION DESCRIPTION

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Innovations in Urban Planning for Nature- and People-Positive Cities

Hosts:

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Abstract:

Contemporary cities now hold an unprecedented wealth of spatial data on biodiversity, ecosystem services (ES), climate risks, and social conditions. Nevertheless, urban planning practice remains largely anchored in outdated paradigms. Despite clear evidence of where ecological functions are strongest or most threatened, and a growing understanding of how nature-based solutions (NbS) can deliver multiple co-benefits, this knowledge rarely informs planning and policy decisions. The gap between evidence and action is most visible in cities, where priorities of short-term economic growth and infrastructure expansion still outweigh ecological integrity and long- term resilience.

ES science demonstrates where nature reduces risk, supports livelihoods, and enhances well-being, but such insights remain largely confined to preservation policies rather than driving the creation of adaptive and socially just cities. How much of this knowledge is truly reflected in urban strategies, and in the location and form of city functions? And how can planning evolve from a reactive, sectoral tool into a systemic framework that that mainstreams ecological and social values into housing, transport, energy, and industry?

Addressing these questions demands a radical shift. The European Nature Restoration Law and the Green Deal demand for more than protection: they call for net-gain. Cities must therefore move beyond safeguarding the existing by actively implement new NbS that expand ecological capacity, build resilience, and equitably deliver benefits across society. This requires robust spatial assessments, innovative planning instruments, and governance frameworks capable to embedding ecological goals at the heart of decision-making. Yet, approaches that systematically integrate ES assessment and NbS into the core strategies, instruments, and tools of urban planning remain scarce, fragmented, and often experimental, leaving a critical gap between scientific knowledge and planning practice.

This session will explore how such a shift can be translated into practice through real-world cases, organised around three complementary perspectives. The first focuses on analysis, evidencing how mapping, assessments, and decision-support tools can reveal where net-gain is most achievable. The second highlights strategic design, presenting co-design and participatory approaches that empower diverse actors to shape and implement new NbS. The third examines policy integration, demonstrating how planning standards, governance models, and performance-based frameworks can incorporate the net-gain principle as a structural aim of urban policy.

Through concise impulse talks and guided discussion, contributors and participants will jointly examine how these innovations can close the persistent evidence-action gap. The outcomes will be synthesised into a positioning paper offering clear recommendations for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, demonstrating how urban planning can mainstream ES and NbS and become a true driver of nature- and people-positive cities.

Goals and objectives of the session:

- Demonstrate how ES science can be operationalised in urban planning by showcasing cases that translate mapping, assessment, and modelling into concrete decisions.
- Explore approaches for strategic creation of new urban nature, highlighting how co-design and participatory processes can deliver socially just and ecologically ambitious outcomes.
- Identify innovations in policy and governance that make net gain of ES a structural principle of urban development.
- Bridge the evidence-action gap by critically examining why ES and NbS knowledge is still rarely embedded in planning instruments, and by discussing ways to overcome these barriers.
- Co-develop recommendations for European, national, and local actors on how urban planning can drive the transition towards genuinely nature- and people-positive cities.

Planned output / Deliverables:

The main output of this session will be a positioning paper that synthesises insights from the three perspectives — analysis, strategic design, and policy integration — and translates them into clear recommendations. The paper will set out how ES assessments and NbS can be mainstreamed in urban planning instruments to deliver net gain, resilience, and social justice.

Session format:

The session will run for 90 minutes and combine concise inputs with interactive dialogue. It will open with a series of impulse talks (3-5 minutes each), in which contributors present case-based examples of tools, approaches, or policy innovations. Each input will end with one or two key insights to frame the subsequent discussions.

Participants will then divide into three thematic groups, each reflecting one of the session's core perspectives: analysis, strategic creation, and policy integration. In these groups, contributors will facilitate discussions that bring participants into the co-creation of ideas, exploring challenges, opportunities, and recommendations for mainstreaming ES and NbS into urban planning practice. If participation is limited, groups may be merged to ensure a dynamic exchange.

The session will close with a plenary synthesis, where each group reports back three key messages. These messages will be clustered into a set of shared priorities, which will form the basis of the main session output: a positioning paper that distils actionable recommendations for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers.

Voluntary contributions accepted:

Yes, I allow any abstract to be submitted to my session for review

Related to ESP Working Group:

TWG 14 - Application of ES in Planning & Management