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Article

# How Does the New Urban Agenda Align with Comprehensive Planning in U.S. Cities? A Case Study of Asheville, North Carolina

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**Abstract:** Despite growing interests in sustainable urban development, planning lacks unifying themes or directives for achieving sustainability in cities. While professional rating systems provide some guidance, they can be context-specific by country and may at best target weak sustainability as their intended outcome. The United Nations' New Urban Agenda attempts to offer a singular vision for urban sustainability, and its language appears flexible enough to apply across contexts. In this research, we explore the extent that emergent themes from the New Urban Agenda can guide urban planning for sustainability, specifically in the United States (U.S.). We develop inductive codes from the New Urban Agenda and compare these emergent themes to the content of Asheville, North Carolina's (U.S.) comprehensive plan, Living Asheville as well as to the STAR Community rating system (Sustainability Tools for Assessing and Rating Communities). We ask how well the New Urban Agenda can align with conventional U.S. planning processes and whether it offers value beyond the contributions of industry-standard practices like STAR Communities. We find that the New Urban Agenda voices common urban sustainability goals while making some new contributions, particularly in areas such as equity and governance. We conclude that in contexts like the U.S., the New Urban Agenda might be best carried out by integrating it into already existing frameworks like STAR, which have already been widely implemented. These conclusions are based on a reading of one case study city, and future research should analyze and compare themes of the New Urban Agenda and STAR and analyze case studies of multiple certified cities.

**Keywords:** sustainable urban development; urban sustainability assessment; sustainability science; sustainability rating systems

## 1. Introduction

A rapidly urbanizing global population necessitates sustainable urban development. The world population reached 55% urban in 2018, and it is expected to be 68% by 2050 [1]. Cities occupy 3% of land, but urban populations consume 60% to 80% of the world's energy, thus accounting for 75% of global carbon emissions [2]. Despite these concentrated levels of consumption, access to resources and wellbeing is not equally distributed, and cities are home to glaring economic disparities [3,4]. As such, "planning for the future of our cities can no longer ignore growing social, economic and environmental issues. And these are all exacerbated by wealth and income inequalities. The task of reframing governance across bureaucracy, business and civil society must recognize the uneven resources across the city, and reconcile the interests around the table" [5].

Research and practice in sustainable urban development strive to address the sustainability problems that stem from these challenges, and as such there has been in recent years a proliferation of

conceptualizations of urban sustainability and assessment frameworks for tracking progress towards sustainability outcomes in cities [6]. Despite the growing interest in framing, defining, and striving for sustainable urban development, urban visioning and planning misses an adequate roadmap to sustainable outcomes in cities. Recent research has shown that urban vision documents often lack sustainability substance [7]. Furthermore, the literature around assessing urban sustainability lacks clear standardization with no agreement on what researchers should evaluate to deem whether or not cities are transitioning towards sustainability outcomes [6].

In professional practice, sustainability rating systems offer some guidance at the neighborhood and city scales, with common protocols including BREEAM Communities (United Kingdom) [8], CASBEE for Cities (Japan) [9], LEED-ND (United States) [10] and STAR Communities (United States) [11] among others. These tools provide varying clarity of guidance on implementable strategies, and they earn many critiques. As a place-based endeavor, sustainable urban development can be context-specific, creating challenges in applying a generic assessment framework [12]. Furthermore, meeting the expectations of individual rating systems does not guarantee true sustainability outcomes, and some systems provide stronger guidelines to sustainability than others [13–16]. As such, concerns exist regarding the efficacy of applying global sustainability standards to neighborhoods across contexts [17].

Given the shortcomings of professional rating systems to provide the sustainability content of urban visioning and planning processes, we ask what resources might provide a general framing of urban sustainability that can guide planners across settings. The New Urban Agenda (NUA), arising from the United Nations (U.N.) Habitat III conference, may provide one such example. Some believe that the launch of the New Urban Agenda suggests that “we are moving into a period that values local over global, the specific over the general” [18] in a way that empowers cities to take positive action with respect to sustainability.

The NUA addresses Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11 (Make Cities Inclusive, Safe, Resilient and Sustainable) and has been said to be intended to guide sustainable urban development across the other SDGs [19–21]. This lofty vision articulates sustainability for all of the world’s cities, and the NUA strives for relevancy across multiple urban contexts. Though SDG 11 provides targets and indicators, the NUA provides limited specificity, as it must also provide malleability to establish universal goals for cities of all sizes across the Global North and South [21–23]. Given this dynamic, one might ask how to standardize an understanding of sustainability in cities, or if such a task should even be done [24].

Given the broad framings of urban sustainability planning and assessment, we explore and assess the contribution made by the New Urban Agenda to determine whether it offers a comprehensive view of requisite sustainability outcomes for urban planning processes in the United States (U.S.) context. Satterthwaite [25] asserts that the NUA must exhibit relevancy to cities rather than just a sweeping proclamation, and we seek to understand if this relevance can be nurtured in U.S. cities. In this paper we identify the sustainability content of the NUA and apply our interpretation of the document to an analysis of a case study of Asheville, North Carolina, U.S. as well as to the STAR Community Rating System. We ask the following questions:

1. What are the main sustainability themes within the New Urban Agenda?
2. How well do sustainability themes of the New Urban Agenda align with the content of a case study U.S. city’s comprehensive plan?
3. What does the New Urban Agenda offer to sustainability planning in the U.S., and what might be the most strategic way to leverage the New Urban Agenda in the U.S.?

By identifying themes of the NUA, areas it overlaps with comprehensive planning content in the U.S., and challenges to integrating NUA expectations into urban governance, we seek to better understand how the New Urban Agenda might guide sustainable urban development in the United States. The remainder of this paper presents the framing of sustainability through U.N. and U.S. contexts, organizes methods around analyzing and comparing the content of the NUA and U.S.

planning documents, discusses overlaps and gaps between these resources, and concludes with recommendations for planning practices in the United States.

## 2. Framing: The New Urban Agenda and Planning for Sustainability in the United States

To answer the above research questions, we frame the understanding of urban sustainability in this paper through two lenses: (1) As it is defined by the United Nations and (2) how it is conceptualized in practice in the United States. Here, we provide first a discussion of the evolution of sustainable urban development practice through the U.N., leading to the New Urban agenda. We then overview sustainable urban development in the U.S. and the way it is tracked through professional rating systems.

### 2.1. United Nations Agendas and Sustainable Urban Development

Over the past four decades, the United Nations has evolved its view on the marriage between human settlements, sustainable development, and the role of cities in achieving global solutions. The NUA, the most recent articulation of urban sustainability, arose from the Habitat III conference in Quito, Ecuador in October 2016. Driven by the U.N. Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development, the NUA is the culmination of decades of international cooperation.

The first iteration of this movement came through Habitat I in Vancouver, Canada in 1976. Here, the global community initiated calls for sustainable human settlements. The conference revolved largely around settlements, land management, shelter, human services, and public participation. Habitat I produced the Vancouver Declaration and Vancouver Action Plan, which outlined objectives in these areas, though it did not establish formal mechanisms for implementation or reporting [26]. Indeed, the conference produced no clear policy outcome. However, the conference did accomplish a few items, such as establishing the U.N. Centre for Human Settlements and highlighting the role of civil society in addressing urban issues [27].

Twenty years later, the U.N. organized Habitat II in Istanbul, Turkey in 1996. The conference emphasized shelter for all and the right to housing. Within this vision, Habitat II also more clearly defined the concept of sustainable human settlements [26]. The conference published the Istanbul Declaration and Habitat Agenda, which makes commitments to shelter for all, sustainable human settlements, public participation, gender equality, financing these goals, and international cooperation. Here, the U.N. defines sustainable human settlements through themes of land use, poverty eradication, employment, population, environmental and public health, energy use, transport and communication systems, historic preservation, urban-rural integration, and natural disaster preparedness [28].

Though stronger in terms of outcomes than Habitat I, Habitat II did not set strong priorities, and reflected weakness in monitoring, reporting, and follow through. As such, like its predecessor, Habitat II generated little meaningful and actionable policy changes [26,27].

The 20 years between Habitat II and Habitat III witnessed a continually urbanizing world in which cities, urban inequality, and environmental impacts grew and spread [27]. At this same time, the U.N. and global community developed and pursued the Millennium Development Goals to eradicate extreme poverty and its associated issues by 2015 [29]. During the wind-down of this agenda, the U.N. transitioned to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), recognizing the inextricable links between poverty and environmental degradation [30]. Published in 2015, the SDGs set an agenda for achieving sustainable development by 2030. This product of the U.N. Sustainable Development Summit sets 17 goals spanning and integrating social and ecological concerns [19]. A case could claim that every single goal relates to cities or nonlinear impacts from urban life, however, one goal specifically highlights cities by name.

Goal 11: Make Cities and Human Settlements Inclusive, Safe, Resilient and Sustainable defines sustainable urban development for the SDGs. It outlines this goal through 10 targets that are tracked by 15 indicators. These targets span issues from the provision of housing to transportation to public health to environmental impacts and social equity, among others [31].

Although the New Urban Agenda and the SDGs are independent efforts, the Habitat III conference and the New Urban Agenda were inspired by the goal to develop an urban agenda to empower cities

to accomplish the SDGs, with an emphasis on Goal 11 [26]. It is potentially powerful, as this intention recognizes what past U.N. agendas have not: The shortcoming of strictly pursuing global agendas through top-down implementation and the potential of engaging and collaborating across diverse groups of actors across scale. Indeed, much attention focuses on the role of cities, mayors, and diverse stakeholders across spatial scales for achieving the SDGs [32].

In this vein, the NUA integrates urban policy making from local to national governance levels to drive urban planning for sustainability outcomes [26,27]. The NUA frames a much larger array of planning mechanisms, urban goals, and sustainability outcomes than the past Habitat initiatives, and we identify these themes in the results of this paper. Though the NUA represents a more robust product, it still includes shortcomings. It is stronger than past documents, but its follow-up and review are still weak. Therefore, concerns remain regarding the feasibility of implementing the NUA just like its predecessors [27].

## 2.2. Standard Approach to Sustainable Urban Development in the United States

The NUA is intended to guide sustainable urban development throughout the world, and we ask how it might apply in the U.S. Eighty percent of the U.S. population lives in cities [33], and U.S. cities contain high levels of consumption and social inequities. While concerns in U.S. cities (as well as urban areas throughout the Global North) may look very different from those in the Global South, thematic overlap of issues exists across these contexts. For instance, the housing needs of slum dwellers may differ from low-income households seeking affordable housing in the U.S., but both of these areas of concern may fall under housing. Furthermore, reducing asthma rates in the U.S. may not equate to the eradication of HIV/AIDS or malaria, but both initiatives may fit broadly as public health [6]. For these reasons, we seek to determine the extent that a global, principled agenda for urban sustainability like the New Urban Agenda could contribute to sustainable urban development in the U.S. beyond industry standard practices already in place.

Sustainability is not necessarily a central consideration in American urban planning. When it is pursued it is often done so through piecemeal initiatives rather than a holistic mission to achieve a clear vision grounded in strong sustainability. Furthermore, city sustainability efforts often focus on environmental issues and do not necessarily make connections to justice outcomes. [34]. The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine conducted a meta-review of urban sustainability indicators and organized them around the three pillars: Environmental, economic, and social indicators. Reviewing sustainability case studies in U.S. cities, they also recommend a fourth pillar to track urban governance. Overall, they find that there is no common sustainability standard across U.S. cities [35].

For cities that do commit staffing resources to sustainability offices, professional rating systems, like STAR Communities (Sustainability Tools for Assessing and Rating Communities), provide a common framework for defining and tracking sustainability progress, and STAR represents one of the most widely adopted frameworks for practitioners working in sustainable urban development. Founded by Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit STAR Communities, it released the first STAR Community Rating System in October 2012, followed by three subsequent revisions over a five-year period. The most recent version (Version 2.0) appeared in October 2016 [11]. This sustainability rating system recently integrated into the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) family of checklists, and we assume that its popularity in the U.S. will therefore continue to grow.

STAR provides an interesting comparison with the New Urban Agenda. While STAR predates the SDGs, recent efforts connect the STAR rating system to the SDG framework. A 2018 white paper published by STAR Communities identifies every objective that aligns with each SDG [36]. For instance, they tie three STAR objectives to Goal 1: No Poverty, seven STAR objectives to Goal 2: Zero Hunger, and 12 STAR objectives to Goal 3: Good Health and Well-Being. On average, each SDG aligns with between 8 and 9 STAR objectives. Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities contains the most overlap, aligning with 26 STAR objectives [36]. This emphasized alignment proves particularly interesting as

the NUA was itself created with the purpose of furthering SDG 11. This comparison rings particularly suitable, as both STAR Communities and the New Urban Agenda focus on the city-scale, whereas many other sustainability rating systems orient around the community level.

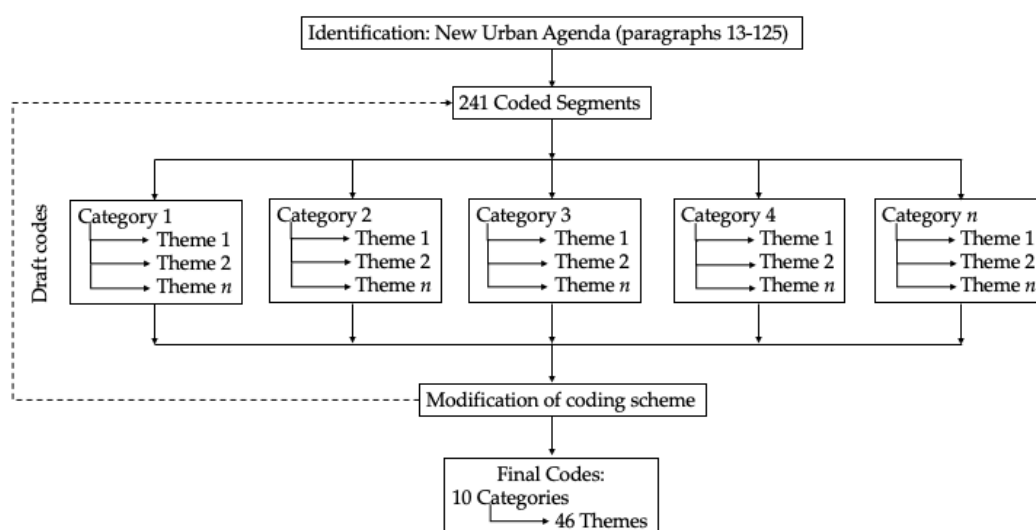
Beyond the ties to the SDGs, the STAR rating system represents more sophistication than other indicator-based frameworks. It draws input from broad stakeholder-driven processes, giving the system credibility in the U.S. leading more than 80 U.S. communities to join [37]. Given the spreading acceptance of STAR Communities in the U.S., its potential alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals, and in light of the new international commitment to the New Urban Agenda, we consider if or how the NUA offers anything of value to U.S. planning efforts not already available through participation in a rating system like STAR Communities.

### 3. Methods

To answer the research questions, we analyze three documents: (1) The New Urban Agenda, (2) the 2018 comprehensive plan from the city of Asheville, NC (Living Asheville), and (3) the STAR Communities Rating System (version 2). The NUA is a broad document, and as such, required development of a content analysis of the text to identify emergent themes (discussed below in Section 3.1). Living Asheville and STAR Communities already contain well-developed specified themes, and we thus use those themes for the analysis (discussed in Sections 3.2 and 3.3, respectively).

#### 3.1. Research Question 1: What Are the Main Sustainability Themes within the New Urban Agenda

We analyzed the New Urban Agenda through inductive coding of the document's themes. Using MAXQDA12 qualitative analysis software program, we coded emergent themes from the NUA's paragraphs 13–125. After creating an initial set of draft codes, we refined each code, tracked the number of instances that each appeared in the text, and organized the thematic codes under broader categories. Figure 1 overviews the methodological framework for this analysis.



**Figure 1.** Methodological framework of the content analysis of the New Urban Agenda.

For instance, during initial coding, we tagged the segment beginning

“ ... recognize the leading role of national governments, as appropriate, in the definition and implementation of inclusive and effective urban policies and legislation for sustainable urban development, and the equally important contributions of subnational and local governments ... ” [20]

as ‘Governance’. After coding the entire document, we reviewed each coded segment. Upon the first modification of the coding scheme, we re-coded this segment as ‘Multi-Layered and Poly-Centric

Governance’. During a final review of the coding scheme, we realized there were a large number of segments relating to governance, and furthermore there was a clear division between segments pertaining to regional governance and segments speaking to the role of national sovereignty and local decision making nested within a vertical hierarchy of policy-making institutions. Thus, we assigned this example segment with the final code of ‘Multi-Layered Governance.’ We followed this process for every segment that we coded.

### 3.2. Research Question 2: How Well Do Sustainability Themes of the New Urban Agenda Align with the Content of a Case Study U.S. City’s Comprehensive Plan?

To determine how well the NUA’s thematic areas aligned with planning efforts in the U.S., we then compared these initial results to the themes of Living Asheville, the recently completed comprehensive plan for the City of Asheville, North Carolina, United States. As the NUA recently emerged, it has not yet explicitly directed comprehensive planning efforts in any U.S. cities. As such, we selected a case study city that might provide a more natural fit with the NUA’s goals and objectives to consider its efficacy. This analysis intends to highlight the application of the NUA for guiding and/or assessing urban planning projects in the United States towards sustainability outcomes.

Living Asheville, the recent comprehensive plan of Asheville, North Carolina, is organized around guiding themes (presented in Section 4.2). We compared these themes that were explicitly defined by the plan’s authors to the emergent categories and themes that we coded in the New Urban Agenda, identifying areas of overlap and misalignment.

### 3.3. Research Question 3: What Does the New Urban Agenda Offer to Sustainability Planning in the U.S., and What Might Be the Most Strategic Way to Leverage the New Urban Agenda in the U.S.?

To consider the New Urban Agenda’s further application to the U.S. context, we compare it not only to the comprehensive plan of a case study U.S. city, but we also seek to better understand how it relates to a broadly adopted tracking and assessment tool. Therefore, we also compared the content of the NUA to that of the STAR Community rating system, which has been broadly applied in more than 80 cities across the country.

As with Living Asheville, we identify goals and objectives explicitly stated by the rating system, and we compared them to the emergent categories and themes that we coded in the New Urban Agenda.

## 4. Results

Here we present the results, organized around the three research questions and the methods we employed to answer them.

### 4.1. Research Question (1) What Are the Main Sustainability Themes within the New Urban Agenda

The initial analysis of the NUA sought to identify the common themes from the NUA to define the areas within urban planning and development that the document might guide towards sustainability. Table 1 presents the thematic codes that emerged from the content analysis. The table organizes 46 themes under 10 broader categories, and it identifies the frequency with which each code appears in the document.

**Table 1.** Thematic codes from New Urban Agenda.

Category	Theme	Frequency
Built Environment	Buildings	1
	Disaster risk and resilience	12
	Housing	18
	Infrastructure	6
	Mobility	9
	Urban renewal	1

Table 1. Cont.

Category	Theme	Frequency
Economy	Consumption and production	3
	Livelihoods	14
	Local economy	13
Equity and Justice	Children and youth	2
	Education	4
	Equal opportunity	2
	Equal rights	9
	Gender equality	4
Health	Food security	6
	Health care	2
	Nutrition	4
	Public health	6
	Sanitation	2
Inclusive communities	Accessibility-age	4
	Accessibility-disabilities	1
	Culture	7
	Diversity	4
	Immigration	1
Land Use	Green spaces	4
	Public spaces	5
	Property rights	2
	Urban form	5
Natural Environment	Air quality	4
	Climate change	8
	Natural systems and conservation	9
	Urban environmental quality	3
	Waste	5
Natural Resources	Energy	7
	Food systems	3
	Water resources	4
	Water-drinking	2
Policy and Decision Making	Finance	2
	Good governance	8
	Multi-layered governance	13
	National sovereignty	2
	Peace, safety, and security	6
	Polycentric governance	7
Poverty	Homelessness	1
	Poverty eradication	3
	Public/social services	3

#### 4.2. Research Question (2) How Well Do Sustainability Themes of the New Urban Agenda Align with the Content of a Case Study U.S. City's Comprehensive Plan?

The City of Asheville, North Carolina (pop. 91,907) [38] frequently receives recognition as a progressive, environmentally conscious city that has adopted the moniker of 'Climate City' [39,40] since it hosts a number of climate-focused federal, academic and private institutions and organizations (National Centers for Environmental Information; National Environmental Modeling and Analysis Center, University of North Carolina at Asheville; The Collider, respectively). It steadily appears on a growing list of best urban places to live, recreate or visit due to its location nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains in western North Carolina [41]. The city lies within a sixty-minute drive to natural amenities such as the Blue Ridge Parkway, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the Appalachian Trail, Cherokee National Forest and Nantahala National Forest among several other areas. Rapid spatial and economic growth, a growing outdoors, beer, and food tourism industry that has led to a boom in hotel construction and rapid and steady housing price increases, have led to conflict and strain [42–44] especially regarding uneven development and impacts on the African-American community. Asheville



integrated sustainability outcomes into public planning with a 2009 sustainability management plan [45]. With those considerations, Asheville adopted a new comprehensive plan, Living Asheville, in July 2018 after 18 months of development [46].

The Asheville Comprehensive plan contains six existing themes established through an 18-month municipal process: Responsible Regionalism, Harmony with the Environment, Interwoven Equity, Livable Built Environment, Healthy Community, and Resilient Economy. This provides a salient and recent opportunity to assess the extent that this new plan aligns with the NUA. All six themes align with the major emergent themes of the NUA (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Comparison of New Urban Agenda categories with Asheville comprehensive plan themes.

Living Asheville [46]	New Urban Agenda
Livable Built Environment	Built Environment
Resilient Economy	Economy
Interwoven Equity	Equity and Justice Inclusive Communities Poverty
Harmony with the Environment	Land Use Natural Environment Natural Resources
Healthy Community	Health
Responsible Regionalism	Policy and Decision Making

Both initiatives share strong overlaps across most categories with environmental considerations serving as the hallmark along with issues of equity and social justice since both Asheville themes intersect with three NUA themes. Given the strong overlap, the remaining analysis focuses on the two themes of Harmony with the Natural Environment, and Interwoven Equity. Each theme within the Asheville Comprehensive Plan includes relevant goals. Therefore, the analysis first compares all of the previously identified goals of the Harmony with the Natural Environment theme with the New Urban Agenda (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Comparison of Asheville Harmony with the Natural Environment theme goals and New Urban Agenda (Italics identifies Category; text below italics notes related Theme).

Harmony with the Natural Environment Goals [46]	New Urban Agenda
Implement Green Infrastructure and Enhance the Urban Tree Canopy	<i>Land Use</i> Green Spaces <i>Natural Environment</i> Natural systems and conservation <i>Built Environment</i> Infrastructure
Promote Access to Well-Maintained Parks and Open Space for All	<i>Land Use</i> Public spaces Green Spaces <i>Inclusive communities</i> <i>Equity and Justice</i> Equal opportunity
Mitigate Flooding and Erosion	<i>Natural Environment</i> Natural systems and conservation <i>Natural Resources</i> Water resources
Protect Land and Water Assets	<i>Natural Environment</i> Natural systems and conservation <i>Natural Resources</i> Water resources

Table 3. Cont.

Harmony with the Natural Environment Goals [46]	New Urban Agenda
Reduce Waste Production, Energy Use, Water Use and Light Pollution	Natural Environment Waste Natural Resources Energy Water resources
Encourage Naturalized Stormwater Management Techniques	Natural Environment Natural systems and conservation Natural Resources Water resources
Implement Green Building Programs	Built Environment Buildings
Encourage the Use of Alternative and Clean Energy Systems	Natural Resources Energy

Further, the comprehensive plan outlines a set of potential performance indicators for each goal. The Harmony with the Natural Environment Theme contains a total of 28 potential performance indicators for the eight goals leading to an average of 3.5 indicators per goal (Table 4).

Table 4. Harmony with the Natural Environment theme goals and performance indicators [46].

Goal	Potential Performance Indicators
Promote Access to Well-Maintained Parks and Open Space for All	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintain 27.5 acres of parks</li> <li>• Annual funding for park maintenance</li> <li>• All parks accessible by a sidewalk, bike lane or greenway</li> <li>• Increase in the percentage of households located within a half mile distance of a park</li> <li>• Increase in number of citizens participating in programs.</li> </ul>
Mitigate Flooding and Erosion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Percentage of streets with green infrastructure</li> <li>• Reduction in dollar loss from natural hazards</li> <li>• Regulations in place to protect sensitive areas</li> <li>• Linear feet of streams listed on the 303(d) Impaired Waters Integrated Report</li> </ul>
Protect Land and Water Assets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regulations in place to protect open space and sensitive areas</li> <li>• Linear feet of streams listed on the 303(d) Impaired Waters Integrated Report</li> <li>• Number of new street trees planted</li> <li>• Area of canopy cover</li> <li>• Percentage of streets with green infrastructure</li> <li>• Reduction in dollar loss from natural hazards</li> </ul>
Reduce Waste Production, Energy Use, Water Use and Light Pollution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Percent of energy use reduction</li> <li>• Percent of waste reduction</li> <li>• Percent reduction in water usage</li> <li>• Decrease in light meter readings (Sky Quality Meter)</li> <li>• Certification as an International Dark Sky Community</li> </ul>
Encourage Naturalized Stormwater Management Techniques	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Percentage of streets with green infrastructure</li> <li>• Percentage of impervious land cover</li> <li>• Enforcement of regulations</li> </ul>
Implement Green Building Programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Percentage of new construction that meet US Green Building Council Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) or Energy Star or other adopted green building requirements and standards</li> <li>• Percentage of existing buildings that are re-adaptive to new uses</li> </ul>
Encourage the Use of Alternative and Clean Energy Systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Target 80% carbon reduction by 2050</li> <li>• Target 50% renewable energy generation citywide</li> <li>• Target 1.07 number of public EV stations per 10,000 residents</li> </ul>

Next, the Interwoven Equity theme contains four total goals with 16 performance indicators (Table 5), which results in an average of four indicators for each goal.

**Table 5.** Interwoven Equity theme goals and performance indicators [46].

Goal	Performance Indicators
Improve Community Involvement in Decision-Making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A greater number of underrepresented citizens involved in planning processes</li> <li>• Creation of a dashboard(s) that monitors and communicates progress toward City Council strategic priorities, bond and capital improvement initiatives and other programs</li> <li>• Number of training opportunities regarding citizen advisory boards</li> </ul>
Prioritize Investments Equitably and Fairly Across Neighborhoods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase in per capita spending by neighborhood based on needs as identified through a lens of equity</li> <li>• Increase in per capita spending by neighborhood based on age and condition of existing infrastructure</li> <li>• Distribution of public art funding across neighborhood</li> <li>• Incorporate universal design concepts into design</li> <li>• Involve the community in the design process</li> </ul>
Create a More Formal Neighborhood Planning Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of small area plans, corridor studies and form-based codes completed for growth areas and surrounding neighborhoods</li> <li>• Percentage of neighborhoods that participate in small area planning for transit-supportive corridors</li> <li>• Percentage of neighborhoods that have a Plan on a Page</li> <li>• Involve the community in the design process</li> </ul>
Increase Access to Opportunities for All	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of programs designed to advance civic opportunities for members of disadvantaged communities and minority populations</li> <li>• Demographic representation on boards and commissions</li> <li>• Hours of operation for Asheville Redefines Transit (ART) service</li> <li>• Percentage of city sidewalks that are compliant with the principles of ADA and universal design</li> </ul>

#### 4.3. Research Question (3) What Does the New Urban Agenda Offer to Sustainability Planning in the U.S., and What Might Be the Most Strategic Way to Leverage the New Urban Agenda in the U.S.?

The STAR framework revolves around a series of explicitly defined overarching goals that integrate environmental, social, and economic concerns of cities. Each goal includes a small set of objectives possibly implemented through identified local actions. Table 6 provides the overview of STAR-defined goals and the distribution of STAR-defined Objectives and Local Actions that relate to each goal. Local actions articulate tasks for pursuing each objective and are organized around nine content areas: Education and Outreach; Plan Development; Policy and Code Adjustment; Partnerships and Collaboration; Practice Improvements; Inventory, Assessment, or Survey; Enforcement and Incentive; Programs and Services; and Facility and Infrastructure Improvements. Each objective includes weighting with a point total based on its impact, with cities awarded points for achieving these objectives [11].

**Table 6.** STAR's goal areas [11].

Goals	Number of Objectives	Number of Local Actions
Built environment	7	68
Climate and energy	7	68
Economy and jobs	6	53
Education, arts and community	6	59
Equity and empowerment	6	56
Health and safety	7	81
Natural systems	6	53
Innovation and processes	4	16 (Evaluation criteria)

Reading across the emergent categories of the New Urban Agenda as well as the externally defined themes of Living Asheville and the Goals of STAR, we identify the big-picture alignment between the three documents in Table 7.

**Table 7.** Correlation between the New Urban Agenda, Living Asheville, and STAR Community.

Emergent Category from the New Urban Agenda	Aligning Theme in Living Asheville [46]	Aligning Goal in STAR Community [11]
Built environment	Livable built environment	Built environment
Economy	Resilient economy	Economy and jobs
Equity and justice	Interwoven equity	Education, arts, and community Equity and empowerment
Health	Healthy community	Health and safety
Inclusive communities	Interwoven equity	Education, arts and community
Land Use	Harmony with the environment	Built environment Natural systems
Natural environment	Harmony with the environment	Natural systems
Natural resources	Harmony with the environment	Climate and energy Natural systems
Policy and decision making	Responsible regionalism	Innovation and process
Poverty	Interwoven equity	Equity and empowerment

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Research Question 1: What Are the Main Sustainability Themes within the New Urban Agenda

Through thematic coding of the New Urban Agenda, we identified 10 broad categories under which we organized 46 themes. Many categories/themes are integrative, and some categories like Equity and Justice, Inclusion, and Poverty could potentially merge, but their constituent themes broke along clear lines for us. For this reason, when reviewing Table 1, it is important to note that the NUA does not de-emphasize poverty (only seven instances), whereas poverty alleviation is a key focus of sustainable development. Instead, many poverty-related initiatives fall under other categories/themes, like Housing under Build Environment and Food Security under Health. The same can be said of the frequency of the appearance of numerous themes that emerged from the analysis.

The categories and themes that we identified reflect common issues relating to urban planning and sustainable urban development. They align well with assumptions of sustainable cities, and overlay fairly cleanly with the content of urban sustainability assessment literature, as identified by Cohen [6].

Governance represents one area on which the NUA focuses more than many frameworks. The Habitat III conference featured broad participation across civil society and governmental stakeholders [26,27], and the resulting agenda provided ample directive for good urban governance for sustainability, broad public participation and civic engagement. One interesting finding is that within Policy and Decision Making, the NUA heavily weights the role of multi-layered governance, ensuring that local level decisions are integrated into and observant of laws, policies and legal frameworks of higher governance scales. We attribute this to the U.N.'s caution to recognize and not undermine national sovereignty. From a U.S. perspective, this may prove strategic where anti-Agenda 21 sentiments concerned with compromised sovereignty have impeded sustainability planning in certain cities and regions [47]. On the other hand, multi-layered governance can also present challenges in states that limit city decision making power, which we discuss in further detail below.

As noted above, the NUA categories and themes generally align with expectations of sustainable urban development literature. The NUA categories and themes also overlap with the content of the STAR Communities framework. Just as the NUA provides more depth on governance than many

other approaches, the same also applies for its comparison to STAR, which does not devote many points to good governance or civic engagement [11]. On the other hand, STAR provides more clear policy directives and articulates clear local actions for achieving every objective and goal that it sets. The NUA reads as broad proclamations, and despite a section titled 'Implementation' readers may leave with little direction of what steps to actually take, policies to pursue, indicators to track, etc.

### *5.2. Research Question 2: How Well Do Sustainability Themes of the New Urban Agenda Align with the Content of a Case Study U.S. City's Comprehensive Plan?*

The analysis focuses on the two themes that overlap most with the New Urban Agenda: Harmony with the Natural Environment, and Interwoven Equity (Table 2). In the Asheville Comprehensive Plan, all eight goals within Harmony with the Natural Environment align with a range of New Urban Agenda themes (Table 3). As expected, most of that overlap occurs with the environment and natural resources themes within New Urban Agenda. However, some overlap occurs with other themes such as built environment and equity and justice.

The strong overlap of Asheville's comprehensive plan with the New Urban Agenda at least in terms of overarching themes (Table 2) reflects the adoption of sustainability themes by municipal planners as suggested by Berke and Conroy [48]. While Berke and Conroy note a wide discrepancy among a range of comprehensive plans in the 1990s regarding inclusion of the sustainability criteria of Harmony with Nature, Livable Built Environment, Place-Based Economy, Equity, Polluters Pay, and Responsible Regionalism, all but the Polluters Pay principle appear prominent in the 2018 Asheville Comprehensive Plan (Table 2) and the New Urban Agenda (Table 1). This reflects more of the growing universality of sustainability concepts, even when not overtly stated as comprising sustainability. However, this analysis reveals the use of key components and concepts of sustainability and the New Urban Agenda without adoption of the holistic concepts. This has led to criticism of sustainability frameworks as overly driven by checklists that lack crosscutting synthesis, integration and wholeness [6,49–51]. As such, even when sustainability appears in comprehensive plans, those plans might more frequently reflect variations of weak sustainability.

In Asheville's case, such a gap includes the lack of implementation of the Interwoven Equity theme across the other themes despite the identification of Interwoven Equity as an independent theme. This reveals itself when reviewing the goals, outcomes and performance measures for Interwoven Equity. These do not refer to the other plan themes (Table 5). Achieving these goals does not necessarily lead to Interwoven Equity as it applies to achieving Harmony with Natural Environment, a Livable Built Environment or a Resilient Economy. In other words, the plan might enable achievement of multiple theme goals without achieving Interwoven Equity because the Interwoven Equity measures do not explicitly appear as domains of the other themes. While Living Asheville clearly acknowledges its past and current problems with equity in terms of race and income, the nascent performance indicators lack explicit connection to Interwoven Equity. The exception lies in the Climate Resilience Assessment that appears as an appendix that clearly contains measures that compare climate risk based on race and income.

Therefore, despite listing Interwoven Equity as a main theme, the document fails to utilize equity as a lens to describe, assess or strategize for equity in the other theme areas. Other times the listed potential metrics fail to align with strategies. For example, within the Harmony with the Natural Environment theme, Goal 21 aims to "Promote Access to Well-Maintained Parks and Open Space for All," yet the metrics and performance measures list funding for park maintenance, percentage of homes located within  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile of a park, and increasing the number of citizens participating in programs (Table 5). These metrics address the quantity of people participating, but not the distribution of access across demographic groups. None of the corresponding goals, outcomes and performance measures address components of equity with respect to race and income. As such, the siloed set of themes in the plan represents "a lack of joined-up thinking" [5]. This runs counter to the joined-up thinking illustrated in the New Urban Agenda's promotion for, "the collection, analysis, standardization and

dissemination of geographically based, community-collected, high-quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migration status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national, subnational and local contexts” [20].

*5.3. Research Question 3: What Does the New Urban Agenda Offer to Sustainability Planning in the U.S., and What Might Be the Most Strategic Way to Leverage the New Urban Agenda in the U.S.?*

Table 7 identifies significant overlap between the New Urban Agenda, Living Asheville, and Star Community. Though these documents are thematically aligned, we highlight below select topics that present opportunities for the frameworks to be integrated to improve each other.

### 5.3.1. Gender

Perhaps the largest difference between the Asheville Comprehensive Plan and the New Urban Agenda lies in the emphasis on gender. Asheville recognizes equity issues related to race and income, however, gender issues rarely appear. For example, only one reference appears using the term gender in the entire 176-page Theme document. Other than in the background section on the historical discrimination in Interwoven Equity, only two strategies address women’s issues: (a) Diversifying city boards and commissions and (b) establishing more stringent women-owned business participation incentives. This lies in contrast to the New Urban Agenda that includes language such as, “We will promote access for all to safe, age- and gender-responsive, affordable, accessible and sustainable urban mobility and land and sea transport systems,” [20] gender-responsive budgeting, achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, gender equity in pay leadership and decision making, workplace harassment and violence, housing, etc. Further, no references to gender appear in supporting documents such as the assessment and benchmarking document that compares Asheville to other U.S. municipalities on a range of issues.

However, the STAR framework equally offers limited approaches to race, gender and equity. In Table 8, we expand on Table 6 to identify the only three STAR categories that address these issues, which are confined to the themes of Economy and Jobs (EJ), Education Arts and Community (EAC), and Equity and Empowerment (EE). As such, STAR too fails to include the kind of cross-cutting approaches to gender discussed in NUA.

**Table 8.** Race, gender, and equity in the STAR Communities rating system [11].

Outcome	Description
EJ Outcome 3: Equitable Workforce Mobility	Demonstrate an increasing percentage of individuals within each racial, ethnic, and gender subgroup have obtained a high-quality post-secondary educational degree or credential over time
EAC Outcome 1: Diverse Local Government Hiring	Part 1: Demonstrate that hiring to local government leadership positions reflects the gender, racial, and ethnic diversity of the community –AND– Part 2: Demonstrate that hiring to local government staff positions reflects the gender, racial, and ethnic diversity of the community
EE Outcome 3: Diverse Community Representation	Option A: Demonstrate that appointments to local advisory boards and commissions reflect the gender, racial, and ethnic diversity of the community –OR– Option B: Demonstrate incremental progress in appointing local advisory boards and commission members that reflect the gender, racial, and ethnic diversity of the community Action 2: Policy and Code Adjustment: Adopt a policy to encourage diversity in local government appointments to advisory boards and commissions

No mention of race, income or gender appears in the STAR themes of Natural Systems, Climate and Energy or Built Environment. However, Environmental Justice does appear within Equity and Empowerment with respect to disproportionate impacts of environmental pollution. The Asheville Plan fails to address even environmental justice.

### 5.3.2. Governance

One of the hallmarks of the New Urban Agenda includes an emphasis on multi-level governance (Table 1) such as the statement that,

“Item 90. We will, in line with countries’ national legislation, support strengthening the capacity of subnational and local governments to implement effective local and metropolitan multi-level governance, across administrative borders, and based on functional territories, ensuring the involvement of subnational and local governments in decision-making and working to provide them with the necessary authority and resources to manage critical urban, metropolitan and territorial concerns.” [19].

The New Urban Agenda’s strong focus on governance and in particular multi-layered governance certainly presents a challenge for U.S. municipal adoption. This rings particularly true for municipalities that reside in states that constrain the ability of municipalities to enact policies within and across jurisdictions that meet the NUA when such policies conflict with state constitutional limitations. A key barrier in the adoption of clear New Urban Agenda policies lies in the discrepancy between political power between the municipality and the state. North Carolina fits within a category of governance that adheres to the Dillon Rule [52]. The Dillon Rule framework indicates that municipalities may not develop policies on issues or topics that the state constitution has not explicitly delegated to municipalities [52–54]. Further, “Dillon’s Rule states that if there is a reasonable doubt whether a power has been conferred to a local government, then the power has not been conferred” [55]. Of the fifty states, 39 follow Dillon’s Rule with 31 applying the principle to all municipalities, while eight states only apply the principle to certain municipalities [56].

Recent examples of this tension include the state legislature overturning local municipalities ban on plastic bags [57], cities seeking to ban plastic straws, limit offshore energy development, enact local development impact fees [58], limit tree removal and tree canopy loss [59], and enable bathroom choice by gender identity and not biological sex [60]. Otherwise, cities cannot require strong green building codes, require minimum wage or local hiring [60], or enact other initiatives that would seek to achieve some of the economic, social, environmental and polycentric governance principles advocated in the New Urban Agenda:

“Item 147. We will promote capacity development as a multifaceted approach that addresses the ability of multiple stakeholders and institutions at all levels of governance and combines the individual, societal and institutional capacity to formulate, implement, enhance, manage, monitor and evaluate public policies for sustainable urban development.” [19].

For example, while Aspen, Colorado established strict energy efficiency requirements for all new construction, in “Dillon’s rule states, local governments cannot adopt similar requirements because they are prohibited by state law from adopting energy efficiency requirements that are stronger than those in their respective state-wide building codes” [53]. These current limitations present a barrier to New Urban Agenda items such as Good Governance, Polycentric Governance, and Multi-Layered Governance. As such, “Dillon’s Rule generally requires that local officials spend a considerable amount of time lobbying the state legislature to approve bills granting local authority and disapprove bills imposing restrictions on them” [55].

STAR also provides no useful governance parameters along the lines of NUA. While STAR contains an entire category of Good Governance within the Innovation and Process theme (Table 6), the evaluation criteria only include municipal bond rating, transparency and open data, and having a

designated sustainability office or officer. Within the Health and Safety theme, one action seeks to: “Establish a governance model between the health department, local healthcare providers, and community health organizations that supports local and regional collaboration for improving community health” [35]. In summary, the tension between multi-layered governance, the Dillon Rule, and urban sustainability outcomes requires exploration in future research because our research findings do not present a clear solution to pursuing NUA goals in the 39 Dillon’s Rule states. As stated by Pritchett [17], “to truly unleash cities would require pre-emptive restrictions on what state governments could do to overrule such experimentation, so that cities could develop a robust agenda without concern that courts or state legislatures could undo their efforts.” Conversely, other tensions emerge regarding multi-layered governance with home-rule states whereby municipalities can act without consultation with adjacent municipalities.

## 6. Conclusions

The analysis reveals a great deal of congruence between the New Urban Agenda and the Asheville Comprehensive Plan especially regarding the themes of natural environments and social equity. However, the Asheville effort lacks the synergistic integration of equity across the other themes that reflect the New Urban Agenda, despite the presence of an entire theme called Interwoven Equity. The lack of attention to gender in the Asheville plan presents a glaring omission. It appears that the STAR framework offers not much more of a visible framework for equity issues than the Asheville plan. Therefore, the Asheville Comprehensive Plan and the STAR framework do not fully address the New Urban Agenda’s focus on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11: Make Cities Inclusive, Safe, Resilient and Sustainable.

While the New Urban Agenda presents a strong focus on multi-level governance, the limitations apparent in North Carolina reflect concerns that the NUA emphasizes city-scale governance, but fails to reconcile a traditional tension of decentralized decision making versus top-down national-level powers [22]. In this case, the role of top-down state level powers reflects Dillon Rule state governance. In the Asheville case, state level governance seemingly constrains city power and governance, even in a global age [54]. However, those governance constraints do not explain the lack of coherent integration of equity, race and income from such a self-declared progressive, sustainable, “Climate City”. As urbanization continues to increase and more cities revise their comprehensive plans, it remains to be seen whether similar patterns will appear in terms of the level of sustainability those plans include, and to what extent the New Urban Agenda receives explicit recognition by urban planners. Despite the constraints, the NUA offers a much more robust approach to governance than the STAR framework. Perhaps as more cities look to the NUA, it might provide impetus for states to reconsider or amend their adoption or implementation of the Dillon Rule to enable the kind of multi-level governance to achieve greater sustainability outcomes in urban planning.

Given these findings and analyses, we offer a small number of recommendations for leveraging the New Urban Agenda to shape practice in the U.S. towards achieving sustainable urban development:

1. *Integrate the New Urban Agenda into existing frameworks.* The NUA makes some contributions unique from STAR, but we question whether it represents enough of a divergence to justify retiring a widely accepted tool. The history of STAR has been marked by a willingness to adapt it to stakeholder input and to align it with the SDGs. As such, we wonder if it would be more practical to revise STAR to embed further contributions of the NUA. Concerns always existed about whether the NUA would be implemented. In this instance, wrapping it into an already implemented framework could provide a strategic path towards implementing the NUA in the U.S. Particularly, given some concern in the literature regarding the strength of some community and city sustainability rating systems (for instance: Reference [16]), revisions guided by the NUA may result in stronger tools for guiding and assessing sustainable urban development.
2. *Infuse race, gender, and equity into urban sustainability goals.* Race, gender, and equity are particular areas that the NUA should inform local planning through STAR Communities or



other frameworks and planning efforts. These concerns are under-developed in STAR, and the Asheville case study did not adequately address these in its comprehensive plan. A recent statement of support for the NUA by the American Institute of Architects (AIA) reflects the hope to better adopt equity components of the NUA: “It [NUA] also speaks to inclusiveness of underrepresented populations in the process of urban development, addressing their “rights to the city” and aligning with issues of housing tenure, health, women’s and children’s rights, diversity, access to services, urban space and cultural amenities, to name but a few. In addition to being inclusive of the spectrum of the populace that will be inhabiting these places, the planning process must also represent diverse constituencies, including economists, financiers, planners, governmental organizations, and architects” [61]. As expressed by the AIA, the “New Urban Agenda, simply stated, is a call to action for all architects” [61].

3. *Reconcile multi-layered governance with local authority and national sovereignty.* Achieving certain NUA goals seems more reasonable in states that devolve decision making to local jurisdictions, or enable multi-jurisdictional regional collaboration, as opposed to Dillon Rule states that do not support certain sustainability principles and norms. As a result, implementing the NUA might require driving sustainable urban development first in empowered cities while working to enact state-level policy changes in non-cooperative states, or articulating sustainability outcomes in ways that best align with individual states’ values and interests.

### Limitations

The intention of this paper was to better understand how the New Urban Agenda might inform sustainability planning in the United States. As such, we conducted an analysis using a single case study U.S. city to pilot this line of inquiry. Future research should incorporate other U.S. cities, particularly as elements of the New Urban Agenda become more pervasive in urban planning. One fruitful direction might be to test the New Urban Agenda’s alignment with a random sample of STAR-certified cities. Furthermore, case studies of cities around the world would shed light on the New Urban Agenda’s applicability to other contexts as well.

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