



“We are the Green Capital”: Navigating the political and sustainability fix narratives of urban greening

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ABSTRACT

With increasing attention on green(ing) cities, urban nature is used to increase liveability, to create new sectors such as tourism, and to boost international investment. What counts as desirable green intervention generally follows internationally accepted practices as cities aim for international recognition. Here, we examine the historic production of a green identity and the ways in which urban leaders have navigated local politics to enact greening. We focus on the mid-sized city Vitoria-Gasteiz (Basque Country, Spain), the 2012 European Green Capital. Based on a critical discourse analysis of archival data and in-depth interviews, we explore the production of a green city-identity over a period of forty years and determine four key processes: (i) early good leadership with a social city being core objective of urban planning, (ii) the need for building shared goals in a context of a violent political conflict in the Basque Country, (iii) policy mobilities and thriving for becoming a green pioneer internationally, and (iv) de-politization of green and sustainability discourses. We argue that the initially perceived social green amenity - an outcome of early progressive urban democratic experimentation - that served as a unifying project across polarized political fractions turned into an economic cultural asset for economic growth, shifting from a political to a sustainability fix.

1. Introduction

“Somos la Capital Verde”, we are the Green Capital – a huge billboard welcomes visitors entering the city of Vitoria-Gasteiz. This slogan appears on nearly every advertising sign, from bus stops to building walls, highlighting the city's intent to raise awareness and remind residents of the commitment to prioritize nature in local planning. Vitoria-Gasteiz, a mid-sized 250.000-resident city and the administrative capital of the autonomous region of the Basque Country was awarded as 2012 European Green Capital. This prize is part of a campaign created by the European Union to annually acknowledge and promote urban green and sustainability policies based on the assumption that cities, while high contributors to environmental challenges, may also hold the potential to enact innovative and smart solutions (European Commission, 2022). Since then, Vitoria-Gasteiz has become an international reference on

environmental policies, green infrastructure, and sustainable mobility planning.

While the cityscape of Vitoria-Gasteiz is marked by visual reminders about its projected green identity, residents have not all positively embraced the political green discourse. Walking from the historic city center towards the peri-urban green belt, it is easy to eavesdrop on conversations between residents ranging from “[this is] luxury living in a green capital with nature everywhere” to “In a green capital, this should not happen”. These remarks reflect that while residents seem to have internalized Vitoria-Gasteiz’ green place branding, municipal policy making does also encounter some pushback. That is, despite Vitoria-Gasteiz being a green forerunner in Europe, this identity is not exempt of tensions and contradictions about the politics and practice of green city planning.

Research in critical urban planning, urban political ecology, and

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urban geography has already identified how the rhetoric of “cities saving the planet common sense” travels around the world (Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2020; Kaika, 2017; Keil, 2020a) and is associated with the building of an urban green brand (Garcia-Lamarca et al., 2022). This rhetoric is sustained by environmental technological ‘smart’ innovations that may foster national or global urban competition and economic growth under the tenet of counteracting diverse environmental challenges – a dynamic often described as a techno-fix (Connolly, 2019; Martin et al., 2019; Swyngedouw & Kaika, 2014). It is also further pushed through international recognition and awards beyond municipal borders (Affolderbach et al., 2019; McCann, 2011, 2013). Put differently, debates about how to build cities with a deep sustainability development ethos risk getting replaced by shallower consensual, yet reformist solutions (Grossmann et al., 2021). Cities’ technocratic approaches to solve wicked socio-ecological challenges may lead to what some see as a depoliticization of the green discourse (Rosol et al., 2017; Swyngedouw, 2013).

Here, we examine a rather unexplored dynamic in the anchoring of a green rhetoric in urban planning: The historic production of a green identity and the ways in which urban leaders have navigated local politics to enact and brand greening. We focus on the historic evolution of the greening discourse for two reasons. First, we aim to understand how urban “smart” sustainability and “green growth”-oriented narratives are largely determined in a path-dependent way. Second, we interrogate how society-policy relations under an increasingly felt global environmental crisis have helped (re-)shape urban green visions.

This focus responds to Long’s (2016) and Angelo’s (2019) call for deep analyses of the production of local narratives in green planning. The choice of Vitoria-Gasteiz as empirical case study allows us to bring a focus on small to medium-sized cities in the Global North, moving away from much existing scholarly attention on larger urban metropolises (Garcia-Lamarca et al., 2021). We ask: How do green and related sustainability policies become grounded in municipal efforts to create urban branding? What underlying processes do facilitate and condition the landing of greening as an urban development strategy?

We first begin with laying out the theoretical framework applied in this paper. We draw on the idea of “sustainability fix” (henceforth SF) (e. g., Long, 2016; Temenos & McCann, 2012; While et al., 2004). This concept is particularly useful to depict how the selective integration of environmental goals in urban planning tends to follow the rationale of neoliberal city-making. We then present an in-depth historic analysis of environmental policies in Vitoria-Gasteiz which has favored long-term urban development around an early notion of sustainability since the first democratic municipal elections in 1979 after the Francoist dictatorship. We argue that progressive and ambitious greening discourses and interventions served first as a political fix in a polarized social context amid the Basque conflict and in a broader context of democratic experimentation. With the international diffusion of sustainability as concept and increasing interurban competition illustrated by the growth of award schemes, local economic agendas became intertwined with selective environmental goals, paving the way for a de-politized and uncontested meaning of green, environment or nature. We discuss our findings in relation to the shifting of the green discourse from a political fix to a SF, the pressures for small and mid-sized cities to participate in interurban competition and import policies from other places, the complex structure of involved actors and networks that shift with increasing influence of the international scale, and the resulting depolitized local understanding of green. We further call for research on citizen participation to recentre greening as an area of political contestation and democratic participation.

2. The sustainability fix in the urban greening narrative

With the global unfolding of the climate change crisis, there is an increasing turn to cities to look for adequate solutions and policies (Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2020; Anguelovski et al., 2020; Miller &

Mössner, 2020). Often following an eco-modernist approach (Hagbert et al., 2020), green infrastructure development has become a clear anchor of planning solutions to mitigate and adapt to climate change while also pushing for a renewed urban economic agenda (Keil, 2020a; Tzaminis et al., 2020). Greening, associated with technological interventions and sustainability indicators, has helped create a branding strategy for achieving greater international visibility and investment. Yet, this dominant practice in much of the Global North may also contribute to an increasingly depoliticized narrative of sustainability as it turns into an “empty signifier” (Rosol et al., 2017). Sustainability serves as a vague umbrella concept for diverse or even contradictory (urban) interventions by private or international actors (Hodson & Marvin, 2010; Rosol et al., 2017).

These tensions have been described as a “Sustainability Fix”. The concept depicts the selective integration of sustainability goals into local planning schemes wherein decisionmakers focus on only those environmental goals that are compatible with entrepreneurial and economic growth strategies (While et al., 2004). Instead of implementing reformist, more radical policies favoring the early transformist claims of the sustainability concept, planners and elected officials present urban sustainability-driven programs as a win-win panacea for the economy and the environment. Policies implemented under a SF may lead to changes both in discourses related to environmental planning as well as in the spatial and material structure of the city; yet they contribute to the depoliticization of environmental discourses with nature being removed from the arena of political contestation and negotiation (Long, 2016; Martin et al., 2019).

Under the banner of a SF, greening as a process of integrating nature into its antagonistic human-made city is often presented as inherently good and apolitical, legitimizing decision-making without public debate. Green may help enhance interurban competition (Walker, 2016), including award-seeking best-case practices (Gulsrud et al., 2017; McCann, 2013), public-private partnerships (Bulkeley & Castan Broto, 2012; Viitanen & Kingston, 2014;), or real-estate developments (Garcia-Lamarca et al., 2022). Yet, as greening becomes integrated into urban neoliberal agendas underpinned by economic growth, it risks undermining the social dimensions of sustainability from the point of view of equity and inclusivity (Affolderbach & Schulz, 2017; Agyeman, 2013; Kotsila et al., 2021; Steele et al., 2020).

Studies across Northern America and Europe – from the large metropolis to medium-sized or even declining cities – show the many ways in which the SF has taken ground. Vancouver, with the implementation of the Greenest City Action Plan in 2011, became a pioneer in green leadership, learning and competing with international vanguard cities, such as Copenhagen or Oslo (McCann, 2013). Based on a deliberative and participatory involvement of citizens and a strong marketing campaign, Vancouver successfully branded itself into a livable and sustainable global place-to-be (Affolderbach & Schulz, 2017).

Other SF have been identified in diverse cultural, geographic, and economic contexts like Portland, Oregon (Mahmoudi et al., 2020), Nottingham, UK (Winter & Le, 2019), Manchester and Leeds, UK (While et al., 2004), Whistler, British Columbia (Temenos & McCann, 2012), or Tampere, Finland (Jokinen et al., 2018). In these examples, interventions on the ground include the provision of urban green infrastructure (Walker, 2016), long-term city development and revival strategies (Long, 2016), (peri)-urban agricultural practices (Pirro & Anguelovski, 2017), or carbon-neutrality strategies (Kenis & Lievens, 2017). Most projects involve, next to political and technical decision-makers, experts or pioneers in their fields, entrepreneurs in form of public-private partnerships, or the academic sector (Montgomery, 2015).

2.1. The multi-scalar process of grounding the local sustainability fix

We identify in the literature three processes across scales which condition the grounding of a SF as dominant narrative of urban

environmental discourses. First, local governments build on the trans-local diffusion and importation of tools already successfully implemented elsewhere and seen as universal best-practices (Freytag et al., 2014; Temenos & McCann, 2012). With policies being scaled up and transferred across places, they become de-localized from their original context. This process, described as ‘policy mobilities’, has been critically examined as the travelling of specific policies contains a power-loaden process wherein dominant ideologies determine the new “universal” framing of imported policies (Kennedy, 2016; McCann, 2011; McCann, 2013). What counts as desirable outcome of greening practices is thereby not decided by local communities, but tends to follow criteria set by high-level networks, semi-public agencies, and urban elites (Affolderbach et al., 2019; Gulsrud et al., 2017). It is thus driven by international awards and rankings such as the Covenant of Mayors, the European Green Capital Award, or The Economist’s selection of the “Most Livable City” (Affolderbach & Schulz, 2016).

Second, a SF builds upon local alliances with support of multiple stakeholders, such as decisionmakers, the business sector, media, or even the broader local citizenry (Long, 2016), yet (elite) private and institutional actors are often dominating the chosen green strategy (Wijaya, 2021). With the implementation of policies framed around the SF, alternative and more transformative proposals of local, yet less powerful actors become undermined by an entrepreneurial business-oriented strategy (Nciri & Levenda, 2020). Here, decision-making becomes detached from processes of political contestation and struggle hindering the overcoming of structural injustices resulting from growth-oriented perspectives. Instead, it tends to be driven by eco-technological and managerial approaches with weak democratic legitimization (Rosol et al., 2017).

Third, narratives and storylines – locally created and accepted by seemingly diverse actors – allow the SF to be anchored in local ideologies surrounding sustainability and greening (Temenos & McCann, 2012). Those narratives may change over time as interventions under the SF get implemented and the material fabric of the city changes. As greening gains acceptance from diverse political fractions, it reaches a status of becoming “common sense” (Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2020) and “naturalized” for its positive contribution to the local economy (e.g., jobs and investments) and the broader range of social benefits associated with it. Thus, greening develops into a planning paradigm applied in distinct social, geographic, and cultural contexts (Scanu et al., 2021).

The “naturalizing” of environmental planning has allowed for two understandings of the urban environment to become dominant globally: Green and gray urban nature (Wachsmuth & Angelo, 2018). The former describes the representation of nature in the form of trees, plants, gardens; the latter refers to urban space as technological and social that ultimately and inherently is part of urban sustainability. Two contradictory ideologies thus become two strings of contemporary green planning. First, green and gray urban natures lead to the belief that the greener a city (i.e., the more trees, plants, birds, and gardens), the better; Second, urban greening requires technological interventions and technocratic processes (Wachsmuth & Angelo, 2018).

2.2. The sustainability fix and shifting socio-environmental burdens

This critique of a de-politized and universalized notion of urban nature does not mean that greening and urban re-renaturing programs are undesirable, as multiple studies across the globe demonstrate the many environmental and health merits, including improved air and water quality (Baró et al., 2014; Lovell & Taylor, 2013), recreational use, and social cohesion (Gilmore, 2017; Peters, 2010), or higher physical and mental well-being (Ribeiro et al., 2021; Triguero-Mas et al., 2015). But, if not carefully designed and implemented, urban greening projects in the context of SF may exacerbate inequalities and socio-environmental injustices (Connolly & Anguelovski, 2021), through (green) gentrification and green privilege (Anguelovski et al., 2022; Dooling, 2009; Immergluck & Balan, 2018;) and through real estate

speculation and urban green grabbing (Anguelovski et al., 2021; Garcia-Lamarca et al., 2022).

Few cities place equity at the center of green planning and are able to prioritize social inclusion and justice when implementing green projects (Anguelovski & Connolly, 2021). Even if planners and decisionmakers consider equity and justice in planning processes, their strategies often prove to be insufficient. Recent studies on local climate change adaptation have found that urban greening fails to reduce socio-ecological vulnerabilities and increase resilience towards climate-induced threats (Olazabal & Ruiz de Gopegui, 2021; Shokry et al., 2022). Exceptions include equity-centered municipalities such as Nantes or Vienna which have an ambitious green and sustainability agenda underpinned by the provision of secure affordable housing and by strict social housing regulations imposed to real estate developers (Anguelovski & Connolly, 2021).

In the following, we examine how these multi-scalar dynamics of a SF unfold through different relationships and influences taking ground and shifting over time. In asking how green and related sustainability policies became grounded in municipal efforts in Vitoria-Gasteiz, we show that the creation of a green urban identity is not a unidirectional process, and that understandings and forms of urban green shift as socio-environmental and economic challenges expand over time.

3. Methods

3.1. Data collection and analysis

We selected Vitoria-Gasteiz (henceforth VG) as a critical single case study of a city with a long-term recognized trajectory of sustainability policies in Europe. Given its early commitment to greening in the mid-1980s and the later broad international recognition for its environmental policymaking, VG allows us to understand how and why the narrative of urban greening evolved and further became a core component of urban identity making over nearly four decades. To analyse the greening trajectory of VG, we initially conducted a review of archival data published since 1980, i.e., planning documents, media articles and city hall publications (Table 1), following an analytical grounded theory approach using the software Nvivo. This initial analysis allowed us to disentangle changes and meanings of the discourses surrounding greening and sustainability in the context of VG.

Following this first stage, we created an interview guide to further explore ideas around framings of green and sustainability, the role of

Table 1
Key planning documents.

Year	Archival data
1990	General Urban Development Plan (revision 1990)
1996/97	Strategies and Actions towards Sustainability
1998–2020	Agenda 21 (<i>annual report on Sustainability indicators</i>)
2000	General Urban Development Plan (revision 2000)
2002	First Environmental Action Plan 2002–07
2006	GEO Vitoria-Gasteiz: Diagnostic report on the state of sustainability and the environment in the municipality of Vitoria-Gasteiz
2007	Sustainable Mobility and Public Space Plan
2008	Citizen participation master plan 2008–11
2009	GEO Vitoria-Gasteiz: Environmental and sustainability diagnosis report
2010	Second Local Action Plan of Agenda 21 (2010–14)
2010	Vitoria-Gasteiz Urban Sustainability Indicator Plan 2010
2010	Plan against Climate Change 2010–2020
2010	Vitoria-Gasteiz: Carbon neutral city Scenario 2020–50
2011	Vitoria-Gasteiz 2012 European Green Capital Final Report
2014	The urban green infrastructure of Vitoria-Gasteiz. A proposal document
2018	VITORIA-GASTEIZ + GREEN City-nature living network 2018–2030 Plan
2019	Revision of the Sustainable Mobility and Public Space Plan
2020	Vitoria-Gasteiz Green Capital: A human-scale city
2021	Action Plan: PATEI 2030: Integrated Energy Transition of Vitoria-Gasteiz

city branding, social and power dynamics in the planning process, and changes of the political context during the construction of the city's green identity. We conducted 12 semi-structured in-depth interviews in Spanish with city planners, decision-makers, and local experts of a duration of about 1,5 h, between March and June 2021. Respondents were identified through snowball sampling technique, starting with key planners and political figures mentioned in the archival documents. This interview data was analysed through iterative coding that helped identify emerging patterns regarding the evolution of greening and sustainability narratives in VG. The main codes that emerged and on which we built the following analysis were Green as consensus-making, as rent-seeking, as a technocratic process, as a multi-scalar process and to gain international reputation.

3.2. Context: Vitoria-Gasteiz: from a rural agricultural identity to an industrialized urban center

During the latter part of Francisco Franco's dictatorial regime, VG' urban development can be described as a centralized, planned growth trajectory marked by a shift in the 1950s from a small 40.000 resident town driven by the agricultural sector towards an industrialized city (Fig. 1). Its geostrategic position as transport node connecting Madrid (the centralized political and economic engine of Spain) with France, its geographically easily accessible and flat terrain, and – in contrast to its Basque urban counter-parts Bilbao and San Sebastián – a rather supportive economic and religious elite towards the Franco regime helped the city receive subsidies and tax incentives from the Franco

administration to push an industrial transition forward. By the 1960s this transition became completed as many factories, especially from the automotive sector, had moved their production from other parts of the Basque Country to VG (González de Langarica Mendizábal, 2007). The new economic sector encouraged labor immigration from rural Spain, with primarily rural farmers moving North looking for better living conditions. In only two decades, the city's population nearly quadrupled, and by 1960 almost 60 % of workers were employed in the industries, compared to only a third a decade earlier (Pérez-Álvarez, 2020).

This rapid industrialization demanded a quick top-down planning response to meet new demands for housing, mobility, and social life of the working class. While the wealthy districts in VG' south remained untouched, new districts were rapidly created in the 1960–1970s that connected the city center with industrial polygons in the North. These new residential areas were characterized by high density and relatively affordable but low-quality housing close to the new factories (and polluted areas). This rapid urban and industrial growth favored the encroachment of vacant land, triggered extensive land pollution in peripheral areas, and shifted the focus from an agricultural and nature-connected society towards one driven by its industrial labor force (Ruiz Urrestarazu and Areitio, 2004). By the end of the Francoist dictatorship in the mid-1970s, the city had grown to 190.000 residents. It is in this broader development context that VG undertook its green transformation.

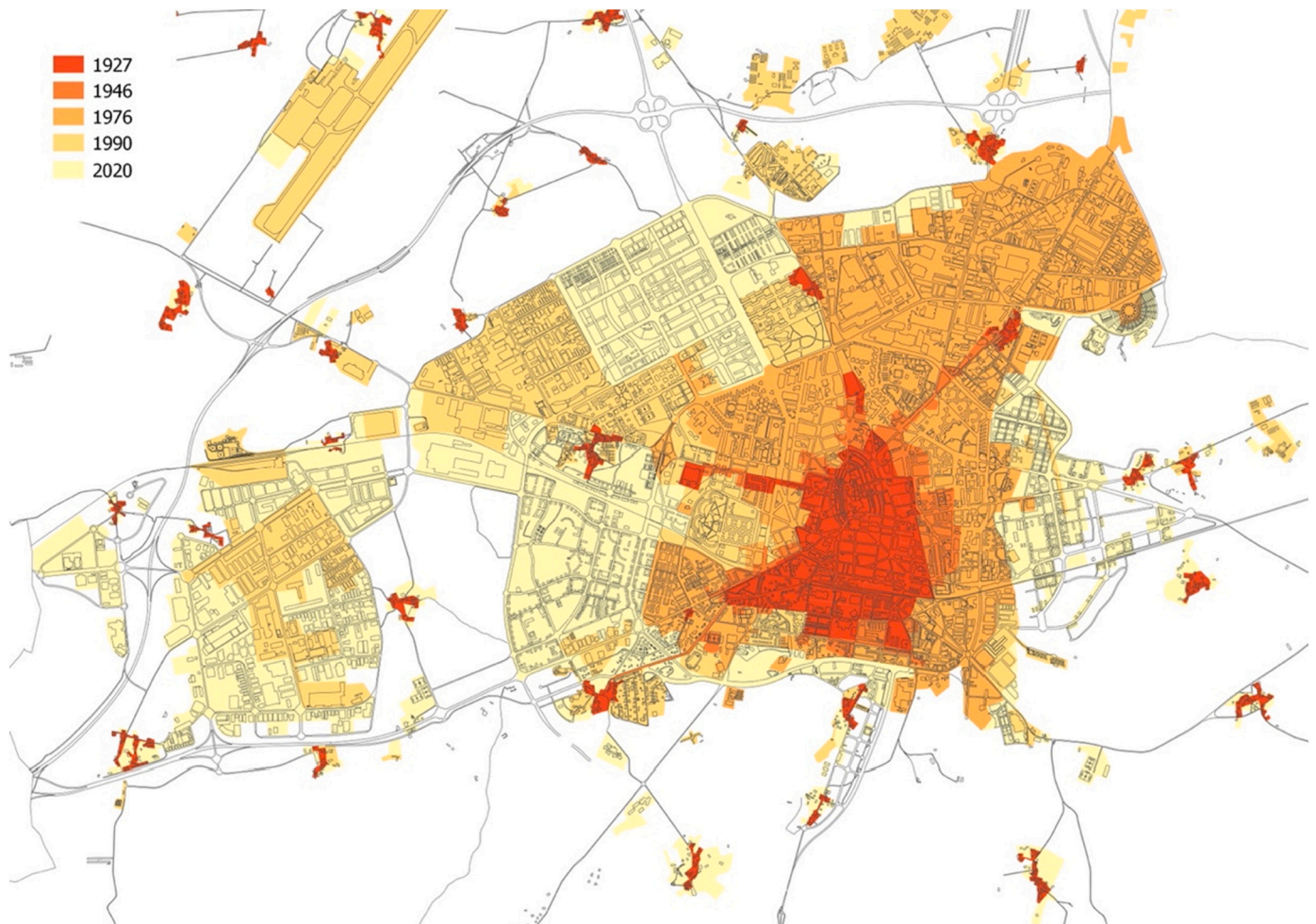


Fig. 1. Spatial growth of Vitoria-Gasteiz from 1927 to 2020, source: CEA.

4. Analysis

We present our analysis of the greening and sustainability trajectory and related shifting narratives in VG. We start by laying out the early beginnings of the greening project in the 1980s – an innovative response from technical and political leaders to local environmental problems. We then examine the first successful greening interventions, which, while providing residents multiple social, ecological, and economic benefits, had a reconciling effect on a polarized and fragmented municipal political structure. Next, we analyse the role of the international sustainability discourse and the pressures arising from interurban competition and broader neoliberal urbanization processes. We show how a deep reformist green thinking has slowly been replaced by shallower meanings of nature, pushed by increasing political fluctuations in the city council and the implementation of contradictory (counter-) sustainable initiatives. Finally, we analyse how the international recognition of the city's sustainability efforts through the European Green Capital Award reinforced the rhetoric of compatible economic and environmental goals in the city's green identity, and thus the SF (Fig. 2).

4.1. Anchoring environment and sustainability in urban planning: the political fix (1979–1999)

4.1.1. Green as a symbol of good leadership: from a material to a discursive change

The city's long-term commitment to greening policies began with its in 1979 first democratically elected mayor José Ángel Cuerda, then a member of the conservative Basque Nationalist Party (PNV). His progressive urban proposal was based on two pillars: first, civic centers were constructed in many neighborhoods in the mid-1980s, offering cultural, educational, sports and other services to citizens and further facilitating cross-neighbourhood democratic participation (Sampedro & Altuna, 1999; Verdaguer Viana-Cárdenas, 2006). Second, Cuerda understood the integration of nature into the urban network as a vital part of the city, both for its environmental and social value. This prioritization of nature led to the creation of the Centre of Environmental Studies (CEA, Spanish acronym) in 1986, at first a training center for unemployed youth that soon turned into an influential municipality-led environmental think tank. As one interviewee states,

“[T]he CEA (...) is a luxury that our Mayor Cuerda chose to afford for this city, because we cities have very tight budgets. (...) He had the vision to say: ‘I want to have a team of people to only think how to incorporate nature in the city’ and so it clearly turned into something that is intrinsic to all his policies (...). He decided to put resources for something that could not be profitable the next day, but instead had to be thought as a long-term commitment.” (Interview 8, 2021, Member of the city council)

The mayoral vision for bringing nature back into the city involved the regeneration of fragile, yet previously industrialized or contaminated land. The urban and industrial expansions from the 1950s onwards were built upon a natural aquifer system which caused several flooding episodes. In the 1980s, the government of the province of Araba proposed a hard infrastructural solution to end flooding through the canalization of the river Zadorra. With the support of Cuerda, the CEA and its director Luis Andres Orive proposed instead a soft solution, including the restoration of the Salburua park, a previously drained wetland in the city's eastern periphery (Orive & Dios Lema, 2012).

These land parcels became part of many debates around the city's urban development, where ideas of urban growth through hard infrastructural interventions clashed with the goals of nature conservation and restoration. Opposing several development proposals, including the construction of a highway, a golf course, and a theme park, in 1992 the CEA received the city council permission to carry out the restoration of the Salburua wetlands.

“This project could not have happened without Cuerda. He was a visionary at the state level, for both environmental and social challenges. In this city, a series of social policies that were very progressive for that time, allowed us to do the things we did. (...) [W]e realized soon that in addition to recovering the ecological processes and natural landscapes, we have a fantastic space for leisure, for recreation.” (Interview 1, 2021, CEA)

By the mid-1990s, the recovery of the Salburua wetlands turned into a success: first, the newly recovered land helped reduce the flooding and therefore guaranteed the political support from the city council towards future soft environmental interventions. Second, given its high ecological value, the wetlands became home to a high diversity of flora and fauna, later recognized as Ramsar and Natura 2000 site. Third, what had previously been used as an illegal landfill with a rather uninviting landscape soon turned into a peri-urban park for social and recreational

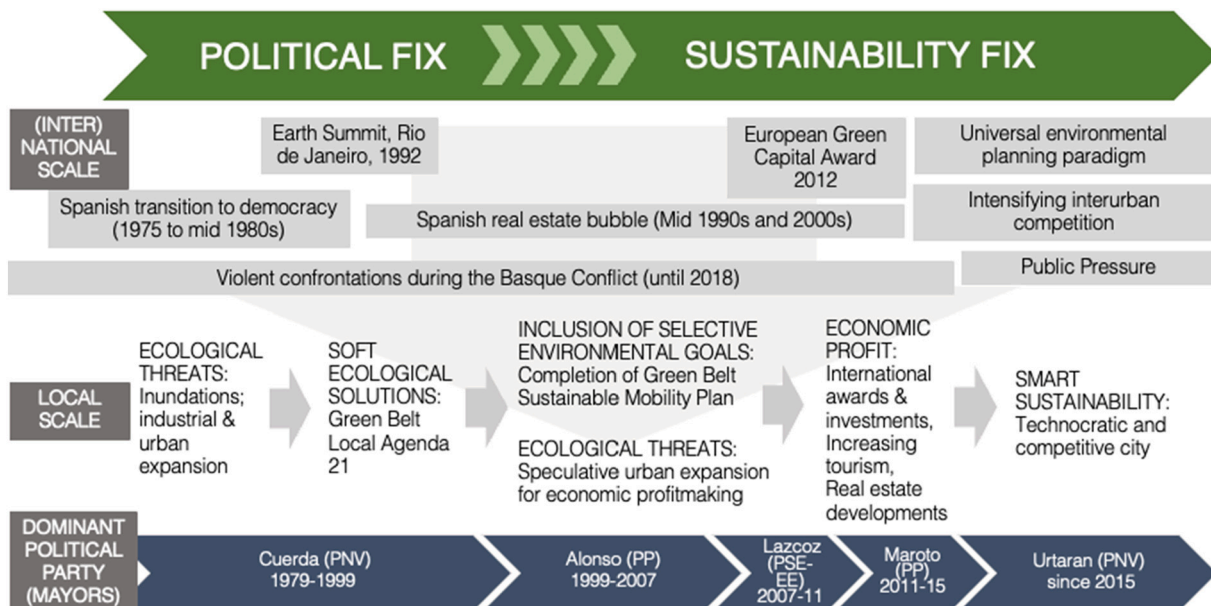


Fig. 2. From the political fix to the sustainability fix (own elaboration).

use enjoyed by citizens (Aguado et al., 2013).

CEA's ecological restoration of different land stretches at the urban fringes soon became a connected network of green spaces and corridors around the city. Over two decades, this project developed into the nearly completed landmark green infrastructure project, a 35 km Green Belt around the city (Fig. 3). The Green Belt further counted as a spatial limit to proposed industrial and urban expansion projects during the Spanish real estate boom in the 1990s and early 2000s that were posing threats to the surrounding agricultural land and the natural mountain system that together make up around 80 % of the municipality's land (Orive & Dios Lema, 2012).

These important changes coincided with the establishment of an environmental discourse around sustainability that gained momentum on a global scale after the 1992 Rio Earth Summit and that also permeated local politics and planning priorities in VG. The CEA, which by then had informally taken over of the responsibilities of a municipal Department of Environment, including the green infrastructure planning, identified sustainability as a priority of urban politics:

“What happened is that in Spain in the 1990s almost no municipality paid attention to all of this. Well, in Vitoria-Gasteiz they did pay attention. (...) VG was one of the very few cities that in those years took seriously what had been done and put it on the table and said, well, we are going to do something.” (Interview 9, 2021, technical adviser city council)

In 1995, VG became the first Spanish city signing on to the Aarlborg

Charter of European Sustainable Cities and Towns. A year later, it drafted a proposal to define sustainability strategies, and in 1998, the CEA started publishing a yearly report around the city's environmental indicators in accordance with the European Agenda 21. This work was further accompanied by broader campaigns to educate the citizens on these new ideas (Ayuntamiento de Vitoria-Gasteiz, 2002).

Cuerda, after being reelected five consecutive times, left office in 1999. As a charismatic leader, he had laid the ground for VG's greening trajectory by embedding this consolidating social and environmental infrastructure in different departments of the city council. In many conversations about expectations towards decision-makers in VG, we came across the term *“el padre ayuntamiento”* (in English: *“the father city council”*), which shows a paternalistic, but still trustworthy relationship between citizens and their formal governance structure. This can be traced back to Cuerda, his policies and commitments to residents, supported by citizens across different ideologies.

4.1.2. Green as consensus-making for wellbeing and social cohesion in conflict times

The material and discursive changes described above were only possible because of the broader local and regional socio-political context. First, the early beginnings of these policies happened during the restructuring of the Spanish political system after Franco's death in 1975, which opened a long transition phase from dictatorship to formal democracy. On the one hand, this transition encouraged democratic participation and urban experimentation on the local scale (Martí-Costa

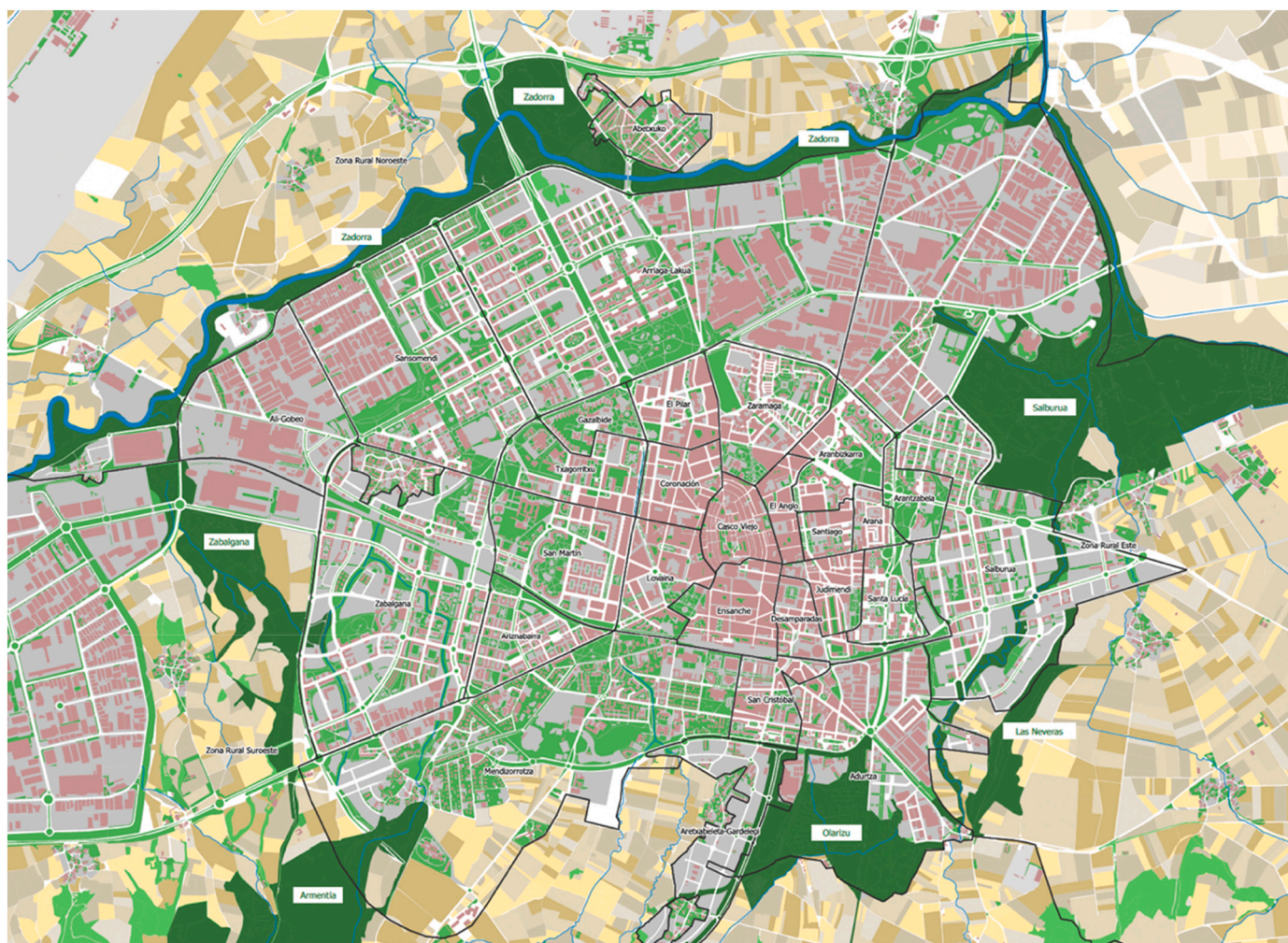


Fig. 3. Green infrastructure network by 2021, Source: CEA. (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

& Tomàs, 2017). On the other hand, many remaining open wounds from the dictatorship in the Basque Country were left unresolved and permeated regional and municipal politics. The political and civil confrontations related to the Basque political movement reached their most violent peak between 1977 and 1981 (Mees, 2001). Identity politics of the so-called “Basque question” determined discourses in every area of the political, cultural, and social life, making it impossible to debate (urban) politics without polarizing the public opinion along a Basque versus Spanish identity controversy (Bollens, 2007; Molina, 2010). Yet, an exception was the municipal environmental domain:

“Instead of a debate about what you really want to do, a polarized debate is generated, like if you support this, you are one of those. And if you support that, you are one of the others, right? And then there is a tremendous polarization. Which is not good, and in the 1990s with the environment there wasn't any [polarization]. There was not. I think that, because it was seen as a soft policy, as more neutral. Everybody agreed on it, everybody was on board.” (Interview 8, 2021, Member of the city council)

Embedded in this conflictual context, urban environmental concerns became one of the centerpieces of urban reconfiguration in VG. Here, we argue that the early progressive urban green interventions served as a political fix as a form of the lowest common denominator and consensus building outcome across the political spectrum of all local parties. Due to its easy implementation with relatively few costs compared to other urban flagship projects, such as Bilbao's post-industrial transformation and its conflicted Guggenheim Museum (Franklin, 2016; Plaza & Haarich, 2015), urban greening allowed parties and politicians of all spectrums to gain broad support, visibility, investment, and network, and it allowed residents to experience “easy” liveability benefits. Our interviewee further continues,

“We were put in the same room with representatives of political parties that defended violence and were debating, reaching consensus with those who were protected by security guards against the friends of the others in the room. (...) In the end, we managed to reach consensus. It was like a place where, well, in the environmental policies, the tension was lowered; the weapons were put down. We talked a little bit in terms of improving spaces, improving the city, improving citizen life and that came very naturally, and we could achieve consensus. But I tell you, everything was approved unanimously, everything.” (Interview 8, 2021, Member of the city council)

Second, contrary to many Basque municipalities and the Basque Autonomous Community with the PNV being in power for decades (Barbera & Barrio, 2017), VG's political structure has generally been very fragmented. Since the first elections in 1979 during the transition period to democracy, nearly all political coalitions had the chance to put a mayor into a minority government. This led to a culture or rather a need of compromise and consensus-finding in urban politics. In the realm of environmental policies, this process was led by the perceived politically impartial and charismatic director of the CEA, Dr. Orive.

“[Orive] has been able to generate agreements, to look for common points, to turn sustainable development into a non-conflict issue. (...) So, this was accepted by all the groups and (...) the environment was not discussed in VG. It was a common point that they had among all of them. It is also true (...) that there was a lot of political fragmentation. If you want to work, if you want to get things done, if you want to move things forward, you have no choice but to reach agreements with the other party. I think that this culture of political agreement has been very good for us.” (Interview 10, 2021, technical staff)

The capacity of the democratically elected leader Cuerda and the technical CEA director Dr. Orive to successfully reach consensus around soft environmental solutions generated trust from decision-makers,

across representative political parties, as well as the public at large. By the late 1990s, green infrastructure planning and the discourse of sustainability turned into an integral part of the narrative of future urban development. The idea of a deeply green and sustainable city had been grounded in the local urban identity as it both helped to lower extremely high political tensions of the “Basque Question” and thus promised increased livability for the citizens through new social, economic, and environmental benefits. After having been divided across different municipal entities with no clearly marked responsibilities, environmental planning became legally embedded into the institutional structure with the creation of an official municipal Department of Environment in 1999. Parts of the CEA staff were relocated to the new department which led to a seamless continuation of projects previously initiated.

4.2. From a social-environmental good to a green asset. Creating a sustainability fix (1999–2007)

4.2.1. The counter-sustainable turn

In 1999, the city council experienced a political shift with Alfonso Alonso, member of the Spanish conservative People's Party (PP), taking over as mayor of VG. With this political change, VG's urban project experienced a turn from social and small-scale interventions to visions of a large metropolis, common with many other Spanish cities during the real estate boom of the early 2000s. Municipal land was offered at very cheap prices to the real estate and construction sector for quick development in line with many of the PP's priorities across Spain (De las Rivas Sanz & Fernández-Maroto, 2019; Esteban & Altuzarra, 2016). As a result, the approval of the new general urban development plan in 2000 allowed for land re-urbanization benefiting real estate development for nearly 100,000 new inhabitants.

Contrary to the city's commitments to a local sustainability agenda, the proposed pace and scale of urban development went far beyond the actual demand. VG, with its 215,000 residents at the time, had a predicted population growth of only 0.5–1 % annually (Verdaguer Viana-Cárdenas, 2006). This newly approved plan conditioned the construction of two large new neighborhoods (Salburua and Zabalzana in the Eastern and Western outskirts, respectively) (Photo 1). Breaking with Cuerda's long-term vision of a city of proximity with strong neighbourhood cohesion and accessible public services, the new developments had very low density and poor transport connection (Alcala Juarez and Vicente, 2016). Blind to previous urbanistic “errors”, the new constructions followed the same design as that of the 1980s new neighbourhood Lakua that proved to be both socially and ecologically unsustainable (Fernández de Betoño, 2011; Marañón, 2020). Despite many critics from the environmental movement, and especially the CEA, the city went along with the new development plans.

4.2.2. Keeping up with selective Green(ing): how the sustainability fix came alive

At the same time as counter-sustainable developments emerged, selective environmental goals were incorporated into urban planning. At first, Alonso continued his predecessor's Green Belt project through the creation of the Botanical Garden. This project was pushed by a citizenry increasingly aware of the ample benefits of the newly created recreational green spaces. In addition, the technical team started reaching out to other cities and interurban networks which built greater legitimacy and broader (inter)national awareness for VG's greening work.

“What we did try to do was to get visibility outside of our own city. (...) We made it known and from time to time you got a prize. Since you did not receive awards, since the citizens were delighted, and since this did not generate great conflicts (...) and the first mayor lasted a lot of years, all this was consolidated. And then the second mayor arrived, Alfonso Alonso, who was from the PP (...). So, he said, let's see, I am not going to touch what works well. Not only did he continue, but he promoted even



Photo 1. Salburua park and neighbourhood. The wetlands of Salburua with a high biodiversity contrasting the cityscape of the Salburua neighbourhood marked by low density and high-rise buildings (Photos by the authors, 2021).

more things. (...) The botanical garden, all this is thanks to the PP. He expropriated all this land to make the park work. It is an intervention that one would expect to be more of a left-wing party. Well, it belonged to the PP." (Interview 10, 2021, technical staff)

The continuation of Cuerda's pro-social green vision became an easy win-win situation for the new municipal government. This meant that supporting green interventions turned into tangible revenues and became a form of local asset, either through votes in future elections or through awards and international funding to carry out further interventions. In addition, the annually released local Agenda 21 reports proved that the city was stagnating in many sustainability indicators except green infrastructure planning (Etxebarria Miguel & Aguado Moralejo, 2002). In response, the CEA started to work on a sustainable mobility strategy, later becoming one of the city's landmark sustainability policies, through importing "successful" practices in form of policy mobilities from other urban forerunners, such as the city of Barcelona. Policies implemented elsewhere where thereby promoted and marketed by local experts and planners (McCann, 2011).

Inspired by Barcelona's superblock model, VG in collaboration with Salvador Rueda, the intellectual thinker behind Barcelona's success story, developed a Sustainable Mobility and Public Space Plan (Rueda, 2019). This plan proposed a holistic city-wide framework of restructuring public space, including a shift from individual automotive use towards the prioritization of bike, pedestrian, and public transport, and recreational space (Rueda Palenzuela, 2021). The plan was approved by the city council in 2006 following a rather comprehensive participatory citizen consultation (Muñoz López & Rondinella, 2017).

This plan was also the beginning of integrating deliberative and participatory forums into the city's policymaking. The different participatory committees, open to the public but organized by the technical personnel of the respective department, are either related to specific neighborhoods or are structured across topics, such as culture, environment, equality, or sustainable development. These sessions initially faced public enthusiasm, yet more recently were criticized, especially by pro-environmental citizen groups, for their lack of impact and transparency and their top-down and technocratic character. Contrary to their initial idea to increase broad citizen participation, they are mostly attended by the same residents, who either have time and resources to get involved or are representative of specific interests. If not explicitly challenging the underlying power dynamics, these sessions risk replicating often invisible power structures and fail to consider and acknowledge the needs of more vulnerable and marginalized groups. These shortcomings have also been confirmed in several of our interviews with the municipal personnel:

"The tools [for participation] are on the table. (...) But those proposed projects will pass through a very strong technical filter. There is a big barrier at the technical level. Then, there is also an important barrier for those who present these projects. (...) [I]migrated people, for example, of low income and so on, no, no, they do not actively participate in these

projects. Those who have the time and dedication to present a participatory project are from middle class." (Interview 9, 2021, technical adviser city council)

4.3. The green capital: creating, furthering, and renewing a green brand (2007–2015)

In 2007, Alonso was followed by mayor Patxi Lazcoz, member of the Basque Country center-left party (PSE-EE, Spanish acronym). Contrary to his predecessors and despite being from a more self-defined environmentally sensitive party, Lazcoz slowed down the initiatives surrounding the newly approved Sustainable Mobility and Public Space Plan and instead supported further development and growth strategies of the new neighborhoods of Zabalgana and Salburua. This discontinuation of environmental policies triggered local governance conflicts and led to the resignation of the CEA and Department of Environment technical directors, who so far had been the driving force behind several key environmental initiatives, including the application for the European Green Capital Award. Yet, this new international attention (and prize) meant that Lazcoz had no choice but to consolidate VG green work:

"The fact is that with Lazcoz the trajectory could have cracked a little. But what happened? In 2011, Vitoria-Gasteiz was declared European Green Capital 2012. Since Lazcoz was in power, he had the ceremony to receive the award. Then, of course, he had no choice but to keep on supporting these things. In the end he received the prize for what all the previous ones had done, as it happens many times in politics, life. But it was useful, the award helped him to focus on these [environmental] issues. (...) And well, he did not come up with anything special, nor did he destroy what has been created before. (Interview 10, 2021, technical staff)

VG was the third city to win the European Green Capital Award in 2012, following Stockholm (2010) and Hamburg (2011). According to the award's selection criteria, the winner must show consistency in achieving past high environmental standards and strong future commitments to sustainable development. The city should further demonstrate a potential for being a role model for other cities and offering support in implementing best-practices (European Commission, 2022). The award does not involve any direct monetary bonus, but benefits are economically rewarding, as stated by the European Commission and previous winners:

"Increase in tourism; Positive international media coverage worth millions of euros; Increase in international profile, networking, and new alliances; New jobs – a Green Capital is more attractive to foreign investors; More emphasis on environmental projects through sponsorship and grants; Pride among citizens; Momentum to continue improving environmental sustainability." (European Commission, 2022).

In VG, the promotion of the award followed the rationale of a SF narrative, as the incorporation of specific environmental goals became presented as an economic motor for local development. After winning

the award, VG's newly elected mayor Javier Maroto (PP), turned sustainability policies into a green branding campaign seeking short-term economic returns. This in turn contributed to a commodification of green where nature became an inherent element of the local economic growth strategy. Green interventions evolved into a “common-sense” planning priority across the whole political spectrum. As their deployment translated into technocratic design and implementation, greening practices became associated with increasingly depoliticized rationales.

“Of course, when Europe puts the stamp on you like that, you already have your brand. (...) [W]ith the PP, when Maroto came in, all the potential that we could have had as Green Capital, was channeled into propaganda, advertising, and marketing. It was a missed opportunity in the sense that all that attention that we had put especially in the environmental community hasn't been used. Lay people who are not involved in green movements didn't even know that the award existed.” (Interview 9, 2021, technical adviser city council)

The post 2012 award period was rather unambitious in terms of new green projects: besides some tactical and small-scale green interventions and the re-designation of Dr. Orive as the CEA's director, strategic green thinking stagnated. Maroto's main greening contribution consisted in the remodeling of the Gasteiz Avenue, one of the city's main transport nodes, through re-naturalization and other nature-based solutions, and the re-structuring of mobility space prioritizing sustainable modes of transport (CEA, 2012a). However, the mayor saw potential in building up the brand around the Green Capital using the slogan of “Somos la Capital Verde” as a visual reminder across the cityscape (Photo 2). Further, the city increased public marketing to boost the presence of tourists attracted by VG's green and sustainability commitment and by other awards such as the 2014 Spanish gastronomic Capital award.

4.4. After the Green Capital: and now what? (2015–2021)

After the 2015 municipal elections, several local parties formed a minority coalition led by Gorka Urtaran (PNV) to prevent the winner, Maroto, from re-entering office as he faced a lawsuit for racist comments. Since the green infrastructure strategy, including the Green Belt, is nearly completed, the city is now defining new areas of work to further its green trajectory. The city is, inter alia, elaborating a Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plan and a Green Deal with a specific focus on energy transition. Both plans are elaborated in collaboration with the broader citizenry. Priority is given to carbon neutrality projects, with planning decisions needing to avoid off-stage-burdens that re-locate urban emissions elsewhere. As of early 2022, the city is planning to



Photo 2. The European Green Capital. The symbol of the European Green Capital in the city centre (Photo by the authors, 2021).

increase local food production, which risks putting increasing pressure on proximate rural hinterlands. Last, new smart-technological projects, such as the controversial and cost-intensive smart electric bus system, are being pushed forward. Those involve the use of material resources and high production-driven emissions often shifted to other places. In short, future visions for the green city follow the narrative of the inclusive, smart, and competitive city:

“An innovative city (...) has to propose transforming projects, we cannot remain stagnant and paralyzed in what we are now. For this we must promote projects such as the electric bus. (...) Moreover, climate neutrality is going to be a competitive factor; the more neutral you are in terms of greenhouse gas emissions, the less you will have to pay and the more competitive you will be.” (Print interview with Gorka Urtaran, 19.09.21, Noticias de Alava)¹

This new planning trajectory is supported by interurban networks, such as the Covenant of Mayors and the European mission of 100 climate-neutral cities by 2030, and by public-private partnerships with the technological sector to further the pioneering role in smart sustainable local innovations. The importance of being acknowledged through international networks and policymakers was mentioned in nearly every interview and is common narrative in the city council publications. This extrospective orientation strengthened the creation and definition of a local place-based identity, centered around a loose idea of urban green and where the own understanding of a rural-oriented character is proudly perceived as an international urban best-case example:

“In 2010, Vitoria-Gasteiz joined the Covenant of Mayors, promoted by the European Commission. This initiative seeks to bring together cities that are committed to achieving emission reductions that are more ambitious than those established by the European Commission itself. (...) It is true that many of these initiatives you are even more forced to join if you are already a Green Capital. Why else would you put yourself to the challenge to show evidence every year in front of the citizens that we are fulfilling – or not – the ambitious objectives? Well, participating in this type of networks and being a Green Capital, it does help to strengthen those levels of commitment. It did help us to achieve greater visibility in the international context, to work in a network with many other cities of the Green Capital family, like Copenhagen, Stockholm, Hamburg, or Lisbon.” (Interview 2, 2021, CEA)

As environmental indicators designed and decided on the international level dictate increasingly local action, greening and its local contestation has been prone to a process of de-politization, leaning now towards a shallow green discourse. Green and gray urban nature, as described by Wachsmuth and Angelo (2018), have become the leading understanding of local sustainability. Campaigns such as the “Roots of tomorrow” initiative in 2012 (CEA, 2012b), involving the participatory planting of 250.000 trees (as many trees as residents), emphasize the role of greening through visible and tangible nature into the urban fabric. With the creation of a (smart) mobility planning, this notion is being accompanied by smart sustainability priorities and technological solutions to environmental challenges, so-called gray urban nature.

“As long as the trees flourish, we are ticking all the green boxes, we are fulfilling all the green indicators. But we are way behind, e.g., in energy planning. We have made almost no progress in the last 10 years. The people in the street do not perceive and know this, because in the end they will always associate green with trees, parks, ducks. (...) But I think we have entered a new phase in which we are not only talking about the tree,

¹ <https://www.noticiasdealava.eus/araba/2021/09/19/ciudad-innovadora-impulsa-proyectos/1127008.html> (last accessed: 10/02/22).

the park, the duck. We are talking about climate change, energy, air pollution. (Interview 9, 2021, technical adviser city council).

The shift to a shallower understanding of sustainability is underlined by an increasing institutionalization of environmental planning through the creation of new departments in the city council. Through decentralization of responsibilities across municipal departments, environmental planning became prone to institutional inertias and increasing bureaucratic processes. As a result, the CEA as the intellectual force has lost some influence as regards planning for green infrastructure, mobility, (green) public space and energy. However, as the long-term green commitment and transitions initiated in the 1980s prove to be economically profitable, the city's changing governments cannot but support these greening initiatives in their own legislatures' periods. With the diffusion of an international green orthodoxy (Connolly, 2019) and its recent 2019 UNESCO Global Green City award, VG is likely to bring new embodiments and (globalizing) dimensions to its green planning agenda.

5. Discussion: the evolution from the political to the sustainability fix

As global discourses shifted the green city imaginary from a local project in the 1980s to an international mainstream orthodoxy pushed by a sustainable or smart growth narrative, they also contributed to the de-politization and post-political practice of urban environmental planning (Béal, 2012; Connolly, 2019; Rosol et al., 2017). Our analysis of the historic production of an urban green identity in the European mid-sized city of Vitoria-Gasteiz shows how greening at first became materialized through an early good leadership with a social city being core objective of urban planning. Over time, environmental goals became increasingly aligned with a consensus-focused political agenda in conflict times and later mediated by an increasingly neoliberal urban development agenda pushed by the vision to become a green pioneer internationally. The evolution of the urban green identity was based on a changing rationale for greening where progressive environmental innovation became embedded in a shift from a political fix to a sustainability fix. We uniquely identify three multiscale processes that enabled this shift.

First, our findings highlight the role of technical and political actors replicating universal "best solutions" on the local ground and facilitating technocratic and expert-driven processes. In Vitoria-Gasteiz, the early greening discourse in the 1980s–90s was initiated by local politicians, planners, and environmental groups as a response to local and regional challenges. Municipal environmental planning at that time turned into an uncontested area of urban politics, detached from the political left versus right and Basque versus Spanish ideologies and identities. Later, the increasingly global and local interwovenness of environmental policymaking, pushed through events such as the Earth Summit 1992, the real estate bubble in the early 2000s, and the 2012 European Green Capital Award, brought global discourses, networks, and financial pressures at the center of greening practice in Vitoria-Gasteiz. This also shifted power in decision-making, as high-level networks, semi-public or private agencies, and urban elites became increasingly influential (Grossmann et al., 2021; Gulrud et al., 2017).

Second, we saw that mid-sized cities such as Vitoria-Gasteiz may be particularly pushed to respond to international pressures as they seek a niche amidst increasing interurban competition. Both the importing of policies and the striving for international recognition may serve as a leverage for increased international visibility and hence attract further investments. While this urban extrospective across the multiple scales of policymaking may bear the potential to put pressure on local politicians to commit to higher environmental standards, it also risks reinforcing shallow framings around sustainability and "urban green". In the case of Vitoria-Gasteiz, the European Green Capital award helped create the "greenest city" brand (Rosol et al., 2017) which has been used as a policy

booster (McCann, 2013; Garcia-Lamarca et al., 2021). Nature turned into an urban flagship project and core component of city branding and identity making with the potential to deliver significant economic returns. This branding approach helped aligning a neoliberal agenda of green profiteering with selective reformist environmental goals while grounding the narrative of the sustainability fix in Vitoria-Gasteiz.

Last, the case of Vitoria-Gasteiz highlights how a sustainability fix is underpinned by a widely accepted understanding of greening, whereby specific narratives become common-sense across diverse social, cultural, and political urban contexts (Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2020). As it reaches this status of unquestioned urban development strategy, contestation of or around greening becomes increasingly challenging, and even perceived as illegitimate. This process may consolidate already existing asymmetric power relations in the governance of urban greening and further comfort the dominant institutional structures surrounding the depoliticized governance of urban nature (Grossmann et al., 2021; Rosol et al., 2017). In Vitoria-Gasteiz, environmental policies in form of a political fix helped anchor an urban green identity shaped by ideologically diverse local politicians and planners who appropriated place-specific dynamics of greening. With the production of the "We are the Green Capital" narrative, the local definition of green underwent a process of de-politization that may endanger democratic participation in decision-making. In consequence, the city's green ambition blunted from an initially deep green rationale into a shallower sustainability discourse which saw greening as an asset.

The most recent local green narrative tends to adopt an eco-modernist discourse. This new narrative does encounter local contestation by residents who question the necessity and legitimacy of new techno-fixes, including expensive projects such as the smart-electric transport system. This indicates a need to re-center green(ing) as a planning strategy in the public debate wherein a specific focus should be put on avoiding the re-location of off-stage environmental burdens and the increasingly growing gap in the global distribution of environmental pollution (Pascual et al., 2017). The transitioning of cities towards a post-industrial urban society may increase pressure on both peri-urban fringes and rural hinterlands, e.g., through local energy and agricultural production projects (Bartels et al., 2020; Jonas et al., 2011), and on more distant places as cities need extract valuable resources for smart-technological developments while moving heavily polluting industrial activity outside their own spatial boundaries (Kenis & Lievens, 2017). Sustainability narratives further these spatially shifting environmental burdens as they help complete a SF by achieving higher scores on locally measurable indicators focused on inner-urban boundaries, such as carbon emissions, or air and water quality, yet externalize environmental pollution (Rice, 2014).

Although greening in Vitoria-Gasteiz has been practiced from the very beginning as a top-down, rather technocratic process, the city created a comprehensive framework for citizen participation that includes deliberative and participatory processes led by technical experts. Today, however, participatory processes often miss the capacity to propel transformative change as they tend to overlook social dynamics and power imbalances among relevant local actors. Previous studies identified shortcomings in those processes, such as a lack of transparency, a bias towards supportive opinions of the urban elite, a blindness to the needs of the more vulnerable and marginalized groups (Garcia-Lamarca et al., 2022; Anguelovski et al., 2021; Kehler & Birchall, 2021), and poorly deliberative and participatory processes (Béal, 2012; Kenis et al., 2016; Montgomery, 2015).

6. Concluding remarks

In this paper, we examine the multi-scalar and entwined nature of the sustainability fix. With a shifting green narrative in Vitoria-Gasteiz, environmental planning evolved from a social-environmental good into a commodified green asset resulting from increasing dependencies and pressures from the international arena that challenge and commodify

localized meanings of green. Through our analysis, we contribute to the critical urban greening and sustainability literature by offering an original historic analysis of how and by whom multiple meanings of green are produced and (re)shaped as a political fix evolves into a sustainability fix. Such a perspective is necessary to better understand and counteract the weak and depoliticized discourses of green cities that serve as best-cases and pioneers in new (global) urban developments (Angelo, 2019; Long, 2016).

Even though Vitoria-Gasteiz is a medium-size city compared to many global(izing) cities, its long-term commitment to environmental planning and the production of a green urban identity propelled its efforts on the international policy stage. Its green infrastructure planning around the Green Belt and the early integration of sustainability in urban development help reveal how global green practices and discourse become adopted at the local level and are influenced by non-environmental political dynamics, how green identities are made and shift over time, and what meanings of nature become embedded in municipal policies. To conclude, if “Nature is the city. Nature is the urban” (Keil, 2020b, p.2360), Vitoria Gasteiz’ green trajectory shows that it must be a collaborative and inclusive process of deciding the narrative and future vision of what it means to be a *Green Capital*.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Julia Neidig: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft. **Isabelle Anguelovski:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. **Aitor Albaina:** Resources, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. **Unai Pascual:** Conceptualization, Project administration, Funding acquisition, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

Declarations of interest

None.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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