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– THE CLIMATE REFUGE CITY: A New Urban Imaginary in Formation

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Abstract

This essay examines the climate refuge city as an emerging yet underdiscussed urban imaginary. Across media, governmental and academic discourse, certain cities are increasingly framed as speculative destinations for 'climigrants', projected to be displaced from regions cast as 'becoming-unlivable' due to floods, extreme heat or wildfires and as a new object of urban planning. This imaginary departs from the resilient city imaginary assembled post-Hurricane Sandy in New York City, which emphasized adaptation-in-place through infrastructural transformation and has shaped urban planning for the past decade. In contrast, the climate refuge city envisions the preemptive abandonment of certain zones, climate migration as an imminent twenty-first-century reality, and the proactive production of safe havens in 'receiver' cities identified as infrastructurally, demographically and ecologically suited to absorb incoming populations. Through analysis of its discursive, visual and epistemological construction, this essay maps the climate refuge city as a problematization-in-formation, clarifying its foundational claims, political stakes and planning implications. By tracing its emergence at an early stage, I argue, researchers and practitioners can better understand and engage the premises and trajectories it is beginning to consolidate.

Introduction

Urban imaginaries shape how cities are conceptualized, governed and materially transformed (Davoudi, 2018; Phelps, 2021), functioning as cognitive mappings that define problems and appropriate solutions (Soja, 2000; Lindner and Meissner, 2019). Far from mere representations, urban imaginaries are kinds of social imaginaries (Castoriadis, 1987; Taylor, 2004)—pictures that make common practices, legitimate institutions and social order possible, and through which societies give form and meaning to their world. Urban theorists use the concept of 'imaginaries' to analyze how city planning, governance and everyday urban life are shaped by shared, taken-for-granted visions of what a city is and how it should function (Wakefield, 2025). These are also 'sociotechnical imaginaries' (Jasanoff and Kim, 2015): shared visions of social life that nations and cities materialize through scientific and technological systems and infrastructures.

In the last decade, climate-resilient urbanism became one of the most powerful imaginaries in urban planning, design and governance (Meerow *et al*., 2016). Rising to prominence after Hurricane Sandy, it coalesced around a vision of cities as adaptive systems capable of surviving climate shocks through smart design and infrastructure (Coaffee, 2008; Meerow *et al*., 2016; Wakefield, 2020). Forged across media, policy and visualizations such as green, wetland-fringed renderings of Manhattan, this imaginary has been translated into material interventions including smart grids, living breakwaters and sea walls: a new critical infrastructural 'stack' aimed at administering environmental change (Wakefield, 2020, 2025).

Urban resilience has been taken up differently across cities globally, shaped by distinct governance histories, infrastructural capacities and environmental conditions. Conceptually, it spans engineering notions of bouncing back to visions of bouncing forward or transformative resilience (Muñoz-Erickson *et al*., 2021). Materially, it manifests

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in large-scale capital projects, experimental infrastructures, risk modeling and everyday adaptive practices (Amegavi *et al*., 2024; Davies and Arrieta, 2025). Across geographies and levels of resourcing, resilience includes formal engineered protections and adaptive, improvised social-infrastructural strategies to manage long-standing stresses and hazards (Simon and Leck, 2015; Rizzo, 2020; Eakin *et al*., 2025). Examples include New York's East Side Coastal Resiliency Project (Wakefield, 2026), Singapore's ABC Waters Programme (Cui *et al*., 2021) and China's nationwide Sponge City initiative (Ma *et al*., 2020). Regardless of form or scale, urban resilience concerns the management of environmental and other crises and, through this, the city's survival. The climate-resilient city is imagined as a city that survives and even thrives through environmental change.

Today, however, a new imaginary is gaining traction in the United States: the climate refuge city (Milman, 2018a; Pierre-Louis, 2019). In planning and policy discourse, this is increasingly articulated through the language of 'receiver cities/places' (PLACE Initiative, 2023; Infield *et al*., 2024). Circulating across discourse and visualization in prominent media outlets, academic discourse, and planning and policy proposals, the assembling of this new imaginary is reminiscent of resilience's own construction post-Sandy. Conceptually and practically, however, the climate refuge city departs significantly from the resilience imaginary. Whereas resilience foregrounded the ability of cities to adapt to shocks and stresses (Coaffee, 2008; Meerow *et al*., 2016), the climate refuge vision declares that certain cities—particularly coastal ones in the American South—will become unlivable due to climate change and that populations must be proactively relocated to designated Northern 'havens' like Buffalo and Duluth.

This imaginary is not simply a policy proposal or speculative scenario but is taking shape through an ad hoc network of concepts, narratives, maps and planning frameworks (Braun, 2014), producing a new vision with significant political and territorial implications. Central to this imaginary is the problematization of urban resilience itself as well as a set of adjacent conceptual and discursive moves: the designating of cities like Buffalo, Duluth and Cincinnati as future destinations for climate migrants; the reframing of demographic decline, infrastructural excess and mass migration as assets in a warming world; and the identifying of climate migration as a planning opportunity.

By examining its articulation across media, academic and planning discourses, in what follows, I highlight the climate refuge city imaginary's conceptual underpinnings, political-epistemological differences from resilience and pose questions regarding this nascent imaginary. Each section that follows analyses a key component of the climate refuge city imaginary. First, I demonstrate how this imaginary is premised on a problematization (Foucault, 1980) of urban resilience. Then, I analyse the articulation of mass climate migration as imminent and inevitable, indeed as a defining crisis of the century, and show how 'climigration' (Bronen, 2022: 574) functions as a key 'urgency' in the climate refuge city imaginary. Then, I analyse how the climate refuge city imaginary is being constructed through visual and discursive narratives in media, academia, and urban planning and policy. Finally, I explore how the climate refuge city is portrayed as an imperative and opportunity by urban planners and policymakers. I conclude with a brief discussion of alternative imaginaries and further questions for consideration.

My discussion focuses primarily on the emergence of the climate refuge city imaginary in the US and North American urban and planning discourse. While related dynamics are observable in other world regions, where they are being shaped by distinct political, institutional, historical and environmental contexts, a comparative global analysis lies beyond this article's scope.

Problematization of urban resilience

The climate refuge city imaginary begins by questioning the viability of urban resilience. Over the past decade, resilience gained dominance as a way to frame urban futures, both positing climate change risks as priority considerations for urban

decision-makers while aiming to secure cities against climate shocks through complex systems-based, adaptive planning. Conceptually, resilience is indebted to 1970s-era innovations in environmental management, ecology and systems thinking and, drawing on these roots, seeks to enable cities to survive and even 'thrive' amidst disturbance (Holling, 1973). Since its rise to dominance post-Sandy, resilience has generated a significant body of literature in which it has been described critically from many angles, including as a form of neoliberalism (Joseph, 2013) and as a multimodal governance assemblage (Anderson, 2015; Grove, 2018; Tozzi, 2021). In this vein, David Chandler (2014) argues that resilience shifts governance away from solving problems towards managing uncertainty by making individuals and communities responsible for adapting to conditions that states and institutions no longer claim they can control. Resonantly, Evans and Reid (2014) argue that resilience naturalizes vulnerability and produces subjects that are insecure by design, who must adapt and even embrace, rather than confront or overcome, vulnerability itself, reinforcing Chandler's point that resilience shifts governance from addressing structural causes to managing perpetual uncertainty.

Yet recent discourse increasingly asserts the limits of resilience, particularly for cities in the American South. Instead of adaptation, the past several years have seen a growing number of voices calling for disinvestment and retreat. For instance, Parag Khanna (2021a)—a global strategy advisor and one of *Esquire*'s '75 Most Influential People of the 21st Century'—has argued that while some cities can be resilient, others should be abandoned: cities like New York can afford resilience measures, he suggests, but others, like New Orleans, are 'going the way of Venice' due to repeated hurricanes and rebuilding costs and should have their populations preemptively relocated to gentrify designated 'havens' (npn). Media outlets like the *New York Times* and *The Guardian* have echoed these claims, framing parts of America as increasingly uninhabitable due to climate change. *The New York Times* (Pierre-Louis, 2019) argues that as 'the West burns, the South swelters and the East floods', some Americans are reconsidering where to live. Similarly, *The Guardian* (Milman, 2018a)—which, like the *Times*, has been a vocal and influential generator of apocalyptic imaginaries of climate crisis and urban resilience this past decade—now claims that 'scientists, and some members of the public are starting to question where in the US will remain comfortable to call home' (npn).

Unlike earlier resilience narratives, which followed apocalyptic forecasts with visions of adaptation—thereby producing a resilient subject (Evans and Reid, 2014), which endures in these conditions of never-ending adaptation to equally endless crises—the climate refuge imaginary frames climate change projections as provoking migration and retreat. This discourse of 'anticipatory ruination' (Paprocki, 2022) contrasts with resilience's vision of cities thriving amidst environmental change. While resilience imagines adaptation through infrastructure, the refuge imaginary identifies resilience itself as a limit—perhaps a 'field of adversity' (Collier, 2009)—framing climate change as an existential crisis necessitating mass relocation. This shift marks a post-resilience urban planning paradigm, where projected future disasters (e.g. sea level rise and floods) are seen as rendering adaptation impossible in certain places and relocation necessary. The anticipation of a post-resilience paradigm also has structural implications, insofar as it reframes coastal crisis less as a problem of defending cities through adaptation and more as a problem of managing their partial unmaking and the spatial redistribution of populations, infrastructure and long-term investment.

Projections of 'climigration'

Central to the climate refuge city imaginary is the portrayal of large-scale climate migration—or 'climigration' (Bronen, 2022: 574)—as imminent and inevitable, indeed as a defining aspect of the century (Ghosh and Orchiston, 2022). Drawing on projections from the United Nations, the World Bank and academic articles, many media pieces on the climate refuge city frame climate migration not as hypothetical but as inevitable.

The figure of the climate refugee, or 'climigrant', has become a prominent discursive and imaginal symbol, as media, governmental, non-profit and academic narratives frequently cite projections like Matt Hauer's (2017) estimate that 13 million Americans will be displaced by sea level rise and envision an imminent wave of mass migration caused by the 'climate emergency' (Milman, 2018a, 2018b; Earle, 2022).

In this vein, *The Guardian*'s 2018 series 'Americans: The Next Climate Migrants' declared that 'America's era of climate mass migration is here' (Milman, 2018b: npn). Popular books like Khanna's *Move* (2021b) and Pilkey and Pilkey's *Sea Level Rise: A Slow Tsunami on America's Shores* (2019) also envision massive migrations, including large-scale displacement from Florida's coasts. The *New York Times Magazine's* (2020) 'The Great Climate Migration' project predicts 'hundreds of millions' forced to choose between 'flight or death' and imagines climate change as producing the largest migration in North American history. Visualizations, like maps showing the northward shift of the US's 'human climate niche' and photographs of poor urban residents against blazing wildfire backdrops (e.g. Lustgarten, 2020), reinforce these narratives, linking migration to depictions of climate change-instigated uninhabitability. Equally, these portrayals draw connections to events like the US Department of Housing and Urban Development's USD 48 million 2016 relocation of the Biloxi–Chitimacha–Choctaw and United Houma Nation from Isle de Jean Charles, a coastal Louisiana community portrayed as inundated by sea level rise, who the *Times* and other media labeled 'America's first climate refugees' (Davenport and Robertson, 2016: npn).

Construction of the climate refuge city

The climate refuge city concept emerges out of these dual narratives (the end of resilience and the inevitability of climate migration). Discussion of climate migration and the relationship between mobility, retreat and policy has been ongoing for some time (Ajibade *et al*., 2020). But what is novel in the current climate refuge imaginary is the parallel call by media, planners and urban decision-makers for targeted, proactive relocation to specific cities and the identification of the latter as climate refuge places, that is, urban centres designated to receive outmigration from areas deemed increasingly unlivable. Here, the climate refuge narrative builds on prior discourses of climate migration and managed retreat but pushes further by advocating for proactive and preemptive relocation to these designated zones.

Planners, media outlets and city officials have embraced this vision, framing cities like Buffalo, Duluth and Cincinnati as havens, ideal destinations for climate migrants and safe harbors due to their cooler climates, freshwater access and excess infrastructure. These framings are reinforced by governmental, philanthropic and academic actors who use climate migration data to position cities as 'receivers'. Policy briefs and documents from the World Bank, APA and National League of Cities now classify cities as either vulnerable or destination zones, which deepens this imaginary. This rebranding is both discursive and visual. *The Guardian* (Milman, 2018a) named Buffalo, Duluth and Cincinnati as prime refuges, while in his 2019 State of the City address, Buffalo's Mayor Byron Brown (2019) proclaimed climate refuge status. 'Buffalo is stepping up and preparing to welcome this new type of refugee. We believe that we can accommodate people who have experienced displacement due to harsh weather and natural disaster' (Deaton, 2019: npn; see also City of Buffalo, 2019).

Buffalo is one of the few cities whose officials have explicitly embraced the 'climate refuge/haven' label. In 2021, Brown publicly said Buffalo could become 'a climate refuge city for centuries to come', and regional economic development officials have used the same term, describing Buffalo as 'a potential climate haven' in discussions about population growth strategy (Swai and Drumm, 2025). Media narratives positioning Buffalo as a climate refuge often cite the 2017 post-Hurricane Maria arrival of Puerto Rican migrants as proof-of-concept for the city's future role. City officials estimate that

approximately 10,000 people moved from Puerto Rico to Buffalo in the weeks and months after the storms (Starr, 2025), and an *Inside Climate News* essay on Buffalo as a refuge notes that the city gained approximately 6,000 Puerto Rican residents between 2015 and 2019, who now constitute roughly three-quarters of Buffalo's Latino and Hispanic population (Swai and Drumm, 2025). Similarly, Cleveland's Director of Sustainability has also stated that the city's lakeside location positions it as a potential haven for climate refugees and predicted that 'climate refugee crisis is bound to catalyze further growth' (Schuler, 2024). The *New York Times* (Pierre-Louis, 2019) also highlighted Duluth's potential. This discourse was propelled by Jesse Keenan's work with Duluth, which branded the city as a haven through slogans like 'climate proof Duluth'. Central Appalachia has also been highlighted as a climate haven (Safransky, 2024).

As was the case with 'resilience' previously (Evans and Reid, 2014), the climate refuge imaginary draws on biological concepts—in this case, 'refuge' and 'refugium', terms historically used to describe habitats where species retreat to survive environmental shifts (Keppel *et al*., 2012). Reimagined for the Anthropocene, these terms are now being applied to cities as socioecological refuges (Berger *et al*., 2024), in a discursive move that both naturalizes migration and casts the refuge city in a protective, salvational role. In this vein, Keenan (Dagenais, 2019) has likened climate migration to northern range shifts of flora and fauna. Here we might also draw a parallel to Donna Haraway's (2015) call for actively constituting Anthropocene refuges to 'mourn irreversible losses' and foster 'recuperation' (p. 160).

Visualizations reinforce this imaginary. As a counterpoint to the sea level rise and heat vulnerability maps that helped shape urban resilience discourse over the past decade (Wakefield, 2020; 2025), a new set of images and maps highlights places of relative security. Part of a broader effort to apply New Urbanist principles to climate migration planning, the PLACE Initiative's 'Climate Receiver Places' map identifies areas with the 'least future risk' in cool shades of blue and green, labeled 'future opportunity zones', and identifies the lowest risk areas around the Great Lakes. Meanwhile, media features emphasize Duluth's climatic and economic advantages and showcase the city's self-described climate-motivated new residents engaged in winter recreation: a California transplant surfing on a frozen Lake Superior in a wetsuit; a couple who moved from Colorado due to wildfire smoke, mountain biking through the snow; and images of children playing ice hockey and romantic lakefront sunsets.

Great Lakes cities, with histories of deindustrialization-induced population loss, are framed as having excess infrastructural and housing capacity to absorb migrants, who are themselves framed as promising to revive their economies and cultures. Campaigns like regional non-profit economic development organization Invest Buffalo Niagara's 'Be in Buffalo' visually and textually promote these cities as future-safe zones, with a website featuring video and visual graphics highlighting the region's favorable attributes: the Great Lakes account for 20% of Earth's fresh water; the average July temperature is 71°F; and Buffalo is ranked the fourth safest US city from natural disasters. Proclaims the website, 'the weather that so often places Buffalo in the b-block of national news broadcasts may soon be its strongest advantage. And already now, Buffalo is welcoming those displaced by climate change' (npn) (Figure 1).

Drawing on such projections and narratives, climate refuge city discourse supports the repositioning of Rust Belt cities as sites of opportunity. Climate migration becomes not just a humanitarian emergency but a strategy for urban revitalization. Cities once marked by decline are recast as reservoirs of infrastructural capacity, labour potential and climate security. The same mechanisms that once drove urban disinvestment are now reimagined as the seeds of climate refuge. Comparing this to the Great Migration, the Lincoln Institute's 2022 *Exploratory Scenario Planning for Climate In-Migration: A Guide for Cities in the Great Lakes Region* envisions this resulting in a renaissance for Great Lakes cities like Detroit and Milwaukee:

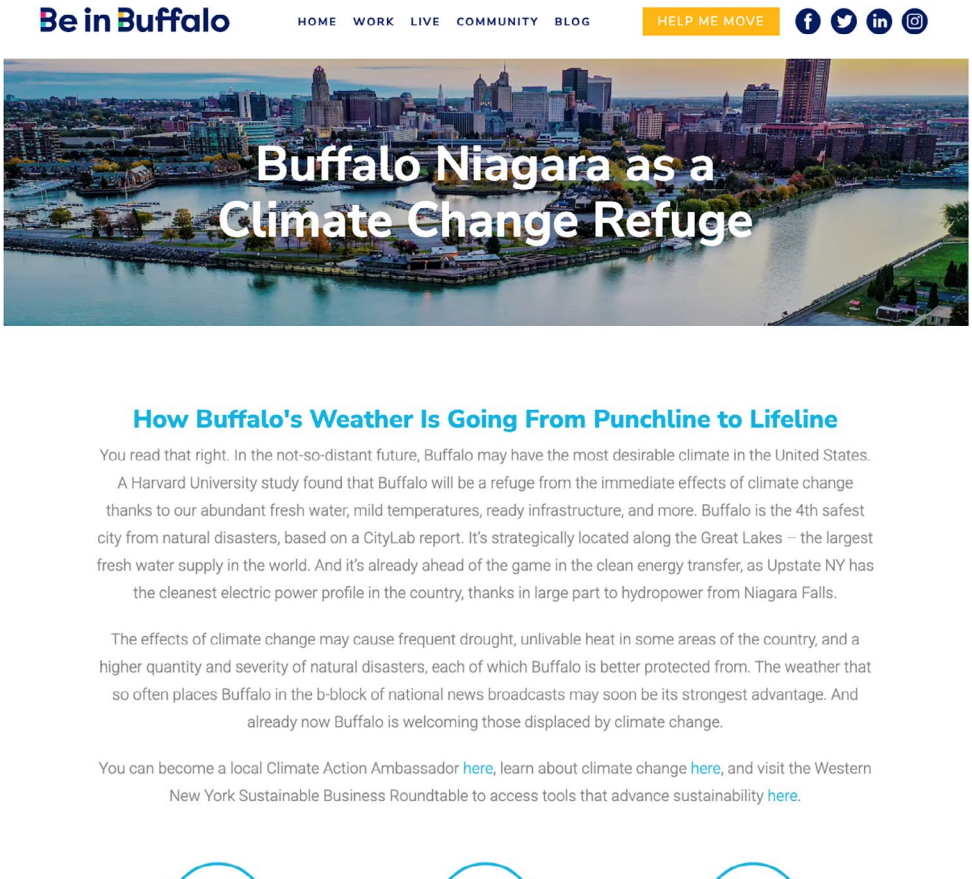

FIGURE 1 Screenshot of Invest Buffalo Niagara's 'Be in Buffalo' website promoting Buffalo's climate, water proximity and risk-profile advantages (*source*: Be in Buffalo, n.d.)

> Despite decades of population loss and disinvestment, people will someday rediscover the value of these places. When cities in the Southwest run out of water, as coastal communities are threatened with sea level rise and more frequent hurricanes, and as wildfires become more widespread and severe, at some point, people will return to the more stable and affordable cities of the Great Lakes region (p. 1)

Planning the climate refuge city

In addition to media and urbanist organizations, some city governments and officials have begun to mobilize the language of the 'climate refuge city' as a growth strategy, explicitly positioning themselves as future receivers of climate migrants.

In Ann Arbor, Sustainability and Innovations Director Missy Stults has stated that climate migration to the region is already underway and that recent updates to the city's land-use plan focused on preparing housing and infrastructure for incoming residents (Ryan, 2024). Similarly, in Buffalo, officials and planners have framed the city's access to freshwater and its comparatively cooler climate as long-term assets in a warming world and connected climate refuge claims with broader agendas of population growth and economic revitalization (Starr, 2025). The City of Duluth's Climate Action Work Plan explicitly identifies the need to 'plan and prepare to grow the city equitably and sustainably in consideration of future climate migration' as a goal, and frames the attraction of new workers to Duluth in terms of the cultivation of 'a climate-resilient home' (City of Duluth, 2022: 10). Across these cases, climate refuge discourse functions as a strategic idiom operationalized to support capacity-building and reposition cities within interurban competition in the twenty-first century.

In this way, the climate refuge city is framed, finally, as a planning imperative and opportunity. Just as planners and designers seized upon Hurricane Sandy as an opportunity to replace outdated modernist planning approaches with new, systems-based frameworks—now ubiquitous under the heading of urban resilience—many professionals and academics are now framing climate migration as a chance to address historical urban planning failures and rethink the humanitarian reception of migrants.

From C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group to the Lincoln Institute, planning institutions are producing guides and frameworks for designing inclusive receiver cities. Professional planning organizations offer best practices, and scholars propose frameworks for inclusive planning and engagement (Van Berkel *et al*., 2022; Morris *et al*., 2023). While some emphasize infrastructure and social services, others focus on urban form and economic integration. The Lincoln Institute (Rajkovich *et al*., 2022), for example, offers scenario-planning models for preparing for in-migration; C40 Cities (2022) urges proactive planning for inclusivity; and the Congress for the New Urbanism suggests 'Eight Ways for "Receiver Cities" to Prepare' (Steuteville, 2021). These efforts echo the post-Sandy design turn towards resilience, in which planners and academics forwarded design and planning recommendations emphasizing complex city–nature systems thinking, justice, inclusivity and diversity, though in this case the emphasis is on the infrastructure, planning approaches and social services needed to welcome newcomers.

Perhaps the most fleshed-out version of this comes from the PLACE Initiative ('Proactive Leadership Advocating for Climate Equity & Equity'), an urbanist organization with connections to the Congress for the New Urbanism and DPZ CoDesign that describes itself as 'a policy platform that operates in the intersection between climate change, social justice, and urbanism' (PLACE Initiative, 2023: 3). Its 2023 'Community Principles Guide' for climate receiver places outlines how cities and regions should plan, govern and invest in expectation of the arrival of climate migrants. The PLACE Initiative's 'Receiving Geography Guide' establishes a climate receiver places conceptual lexicon, lists over 600 cities and towns marked as 'receiver places' and offers policy recommendations emphasizing equity and accessibility in housing, infrastructure and services (PLACE Initiative, 2023).

These efforts largely take for granted the premises on which the climate refuge city imaginary is based, including the limits of resilience and the inevitability of climate migration. As a result, planning responses often reproduce the imaginary's underlying assumptions rather than critically analysing or countering them. They assume climate migration will occur and that receiver cities must prepare. The same is true for critiques of the concept, which largely concern the potential exacerbation of existing inequalities (Marandi and Main, 2021), 'thermal insecurities' (Hamstead, 2023) and existing 'problems at home' as well as questions about whether totally safe havens even exist at all (Flisram, 2025). These critiques are often framed in the language of environmental and climate justice (Schlosberg and Collins, 2014).

Like planning, critiques typically remain internal to the receiver-city discourse, proposing what are seen as superior ways of planning rather than questioning the necessity of the vision itself or the premises on which it rests. They rarely reject the imaginary outright, instead functioning to refine it. Amorim-Maia *et al*. (2023), for example, highlight 'intersectional inequalities' and 'unequal experiences of thermal discomfort' (p. 1) and conclude that 'critical urban infrastructures must address immediate risks and historic inequalities' and that 'refuge spaces must be gender responsive, culturally inclusive, and easily accessible' (*ibid*: 1). As Teicher and Marchman (2023) observe, a feedback loop has formed between media and academic literature, in which scholars interviewed in media both shape and are shaped by public narratives. Critical scholarship and practical advice are incorporated into climate refuge discourse as caveats and disclaimers, while cities use research to justify policies, and researchers draw on media to frame their questions. This recursive dynamic mirrors what occurred with urban resilience, where early critiques were absorbed into the framework and functioned to recalibrate and refine it, producing an increasingly robust and ubiquitous planning paradigm (Anderson, 2015; Grove, 2018; Wakefield, 2020; Davies and Arrieta, 2025).

On the other hand, some local actors have rejected the terms of the climate refuge imaginary. For example, as governments respond to the real and imagined reshaping of their regions under the climate migration imaginary, some have moved to restrict movement rather than accommodate it. In 2017, Mongolia introduced measures to curb internal migration into its major cities. After decades of climate- and livelihood-driven rural-to-urban migration into the capital city Ulaanbaatar, the government imposed a registration ban that effectively restricted internal migration by denying new arrivals legal residency status and access to most public services (Schoening, 2020). Residents and representatives of low-lying Pacific Islands have, themselves, also explicitly rejected the idea of becoming 'climate refugees', arguing that the term frames their lives through displacement and undermines their right to remain in place (McNamara and Gibson, 2009). In the United States, while climate refuge discourse often frames receiving cities as future destinations, some local commentary in Great Lakes cities has pushed back against the 'refuge' label as overly simple and boosterist, emphasizing constraints including housing shortages and uneven infrastructure capacity that undermine refuge narratives (Flisram, 2025).

Conclusion

While still nascent, the climate refuge city imaginary has the potential to become as influential within urban thought and practice as urban resilience has been. Urban imaginaries operate across multiple scales and, importantly, connect them, aligning diverse elements and actors into a coherent horizon of action. Kian Goh's (2020) work shows this in the context of climate-resilient urbanism, which she argues is constituted through multiscalar networks in which resilience circulates as a mobile planning rationality linking global climate governance, state infrastructural priorities, municipal strategy and local adaptation. Although climate refuge city discourse initially emerged largely from media and academia, it is now also shaping how some cities describe, plan, invest in and visualize their futures. The climate refuge city imaginary is thus both produced through these interconnected scales and functions as the mesh that brings them into alignment. To date, however, academic- and practice-based engagement has tended to refine the concept through familiar planning vocabularies—'just', 'inclusive' and 'orderly'—rather than to analyse it as an urban imaginary.

Although often presented as neutral or scientific, urban imaginaries and the scientific statements they are based on are not merely descriptive but also prescriptive: cognitive mappings (Rahmawan-Huizenga and Ivanova, 2022) mobilized for certain ends and interests, productive of new spatial and planning priorities and shaping

governance and design. This was the case with resilience, which over the past decade produced significant political, subjective, philosophical and spatial transformations and ultimately diffused into nearly all aspects of urban life.

Unlike resilience, the climate refuge city imaginary begins from an assumption of failure: that some cities are beyond saving, and others must take their place; and that some populations must migrate, and other cities prepare to become refuges. The analysis advanced here is grounded in North American cases and debates, but the broader questions it raises about post-resilience urban futures and the production of new spatial imaginaries may resonate in a wider range of geopolitical contexts. In this regard, Goh (2026) argues that planetary conditions expose the limits of inherited ways of thinking about the city–planet relation. The climate refuge city can thus be understood as one emergent imaginary through which these limits are rendered legible, and futures are reorganized around retreat, reception and differential urban viability. This shift has profound implications. It is evident in the way the climate refuge discourse reframes 'climigration' as inevitable, imminent and a positive planning opportunity.

Yet the climate refuge city imaginary is not a reality but a constructed assemblage of assumptions, statements of fact and policy and planning notions (Nicholson, 2014). Migration, also, is not necessarily the inevitable destiny of the twenty-first century but, like so many aspects of climate change, an imaginary which may or may not come to fruition. Still, as Paprocki (2022) shows, if taken as fact, anticipatory imaginaries of climate-induced ruination can produce the very futures they predict, including 'climigration' and climate refuge cities themselves.

By briefly mapping the climate refuge city imaginary while it remains in a nascent and experimental stage (Callon, 2009), my aim has been to bring the concept—and its foundational premises of inevitable 'climigration', urban unviability and relocation as a planning horizon—into view before it becomes taken for granted. While reflecting on it now, planners and scholars can also consider other urban futures beyond the seemingly determined ones imagined in climate refuge discourse and visualization. As Dobraszczyk (2017) argues, 'an emphasis on multiple imaginaries of climate change is critical to expanding the narrow range of possibilities that currently characterize the literature on cities and climate change' (p. 868). In this vein, urban scholarship and practice should remain cognizant of the operations of urban thought and imagination, and in particular, how climate change projections are mobilized towards specific political or ethical ends. There is a need to break from the assumed crisis modalities that undergird and dominate climate change-related urban thought and practice. With regard to the climate refuge city, questions that might support such a bifurcation include: What futures are foreclosed by prioritizing refuges? Can cities like Duluth or Buffalo define their own terms, or must they be reshaped by external pressures and imaginaries? Is climate change migration truly inevitable? Are there hard limits to human adaptation to environmental change, or might limits themselves be a problem of imagination rather than nature or design? What futures does the climate refuge imaginary foreclose? Who and what does it serve? What else might urban thinkers and practitioners imagine?

Regarding the last question, another approach would be to explore alternative imaginaries. Climate refuge discourse treats large-scale migration as the inevitable adaptation pathway. Yet, empirical work suggests that, even under chronic and worsening flood conditions, some communities prefer local measures to relocation. Jamero *et al.* (2017), for example, show that small-island communities in the Philippines overwhelmingly preferred in situ responses to sea level rise rather than relocation. After a 2013 earthquake caused permanent tidal flooding, residents chose to remain, adapting by elevating homes, walkways, gardens and furniture and modifying behaviors (Jamero *et al.*, 2016; 2017). Rather than assuming climate migration as inevitable or desirable, this alternative perspective emphasizes the aspiration to remain: the capacity of communities to continue inhabiting and maintaining their environments in place. This is

also evident in Pacific Island contexts, where representatives have explicitly rejected the category of 'climate refugees' and emphasized land, sovereignty and the ability to remain (McNamara and Gibson, 2009; Kelman, 2015). A right-to-stay perspective reorients adaptation towards sustaining life where it already exists, rather than relocating to designated refuge zones.

So, we return to urban resilience. The climate refuge imaginary rests on an assertion that resilience is no longer possible for certain places. While resilience has been criticized for producing subjects of precarity (Evans and Reid, 2014), it nevertheless maintains confidence that cities and populations could persist despite environmental change with good planning and design. The climate refuge imaginary marks a shift away from that possibility.

Data availability statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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