

Urban Design and the AI Revolution: The Technology and Its Implications

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ABSTRACT

Artificial intelligence (AI) is becoming an increasingly important tool in urban design as cities respond to population growth, housing demand, transportation challenges, and environmental pressures. This paper presents a structured narrative review of how AI is currently used in urban planning and how it may shape future development. The review draws on peer-reviewed studies, technical standards, and selected industry examples, with sources organized into three categories: optimization systems, machine learning models, and generative AI systems. Across the literature, AI is shown to support planners by analyzing large datasets, identifying patterns, testing design trade-offs, and generating alternative planning options. At the same time, the evidence highlights important limitations, including biased or incomplete data, inaccurate outputs, cybersecurity vulnerabilities, high computational demands, and concerns about transparency and accountability. The paper also applies the PESTLE framework to examine the political, economic, social, technological, legal, and environmental implications of AI adoption in urban design. Overall, the review suggests that AI can improve planning efficiency and support more sustainable development, but its value depends on responsible governance, human oversight, and careful management of technical and ethical risks.

INTRODUCTION

Cities are constantly evolving, and the pressures shaping them are becoming more complex each year. Rapid population growth, rising temperatures, housing shortages, strained transportation networks, and the push for more sustainable development all demand new ways of understanding and planning the urban environment. Traditionally, urban design has relied on a mix of expert knowledge, community input, and manual analysis. While these approaches remain essential, they struggle to keep up with the scale and speed of today's challenges. As a result, digital tools, especially those powered by artificial intelligence (AI), are beginning to play a much larger role in how planners and designers work.

Over the past decade, AI has moved from being a niche research topic to a practical part of everyday planning workflows. Tools that rely on machine learning, automation, and large-scale data processing are

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now used to model future traffic conditions, evaluate environmental performance, analyze social patterns, and even generate early design concepts. What makes AI particularly important in urban design is not just its ability to work quickly, but its ability to identify patterns and relationships that would be difficult, or sometimes impossible, for humans to see on their own. Because cities involve so many interconnected systems of transportation, housing, economics, climate, and community needs, AI's ability to process complex data has become increasingly valuable.

At the same time, the rapid rise of AI brings up new questions about how much designers should depend on these tools, who controls the data they rely on, and how they might influence future development. Many researchers highlight AI's potential to support sustainability efforts and make planning more efficient. Others point out risks such as biased data, over-automation, or the possibility that technological tools might overshadow the lived experiences of communities. These mixed perspectives show that AI is not a simple solution to urban problems, but rather a powerful set of tools that must be used thoughtfully.

This paper explores both the current role of AI in urban design and the direction the technology appears to be heading. Drawing from recent studies and industry examples, the goal is to understand what AI can realistically do today, what emerging tools are likely to shape the near future, and how these technologies fit into broader considerations. The paper also examines these impacts through the PESTLE framework to understand how AI may influence cities politically, socially, environmentally, legally, and economically.

METHODS

This paper uses a structured narrative review to examine the applications and implications of artificial intelligence in urban design. Sources were identified through targeted searches of Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, and IEEE Xplore, as well as publications from the National Institute of Standards and Technology and other relevant organizations. Searches were conducted using combinations of terms including “artificial intelligence in urban planning,” “AI urban design,” “machine learning urban planning,” “generative AI architecture,” “digital twins,” “smart cities,” and “AI risk management.”

Sources were included when they addressed an application of AI in urban design or planning, described a relevant technical workflow, examined the social or policy implications of urban AI, or presented an established standard for managing AI and cybersecurity risks. Sources were excluded when they were unrelated to urban planning, lacked sufficient technical or analytical detail, or duplicated evidence already represented in the review. Approximately 35 sources were initially examined, and 17 were retained for the final review. Peer-reviewed publications, conference papers, government reports, technical standards, and selected preprints were considered, but preprints were identified separately because they had not undergone formal peer review.

The analysis was completed in three stages. First, the software and workflow review identified the tools, data inputs, processes, and outputs associated with optimization systems, machine learning models, and generative AI. Second, the literature synthesis compared evidence across sources to identify shared

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findings, differences, and recurring limitations. Third, the standards-based risk analysis applied guidance from NIST to issues such as reliability, bias, privacy, cybersecurity, and human oversight. The broader implications identified through these stages were then organized using the PESTLE framework.

EMERGING TECHNOLOGY AND TOOLS

Artificial intelligence in urban design refers to computational systems that analyze, predict, optimize and generate urban layouts using large datasets and algorithmic processes. In this field, AI does not mean fully autonomous cities designing themselves. Instead, it involves systems that assist planners by processing spatial, environmental, transportation, and demographic data to improve decision-making.

Urban design often requires balancing competing goals, such as energy efficiency, sunlight access, photovoltaic (PV) potential, accessibility, and open space. It is time-consuming and difficult to manually calculate the best solution when so many variables are involved.

To address these challenges, AI systems used in urban design generally fall into three main categories: optimization tools, machine learning models, and generative AI systems. Optimization systems focus on finding the best balance between competing design goals. Machine learning models analyze existing data and identify patterns or make predictions. Generative AI systems create new design options and layouts based on instructions or constraints. Together, these technologies represent the main ways AI is currently being applied in urban planning and show where future development may be heading.

Table 1 summarizes the tools, data inputs, strengths, and limitations associated with each major category of AI.

AI category	Typical tools or models	Main data inputs	Primary strength	Main limitations
Optimization systems	Rhino, Grasshopper, Wallacei	Building geometry, sunlight, energy, and spatial constraints	Tests many design trade-offs efficiently	Computing demands and dependence on defined objectives
Machine learning models	Deep learning and ensemble classification models	Satellite imagery, maps, and labeled urban data	Identifies patterns and produces updated urban information	Biased, incomplete, or location-specific training data
Generative AI systems	GANs and multimodal	Maps, sketches, text prompts, and	Produces multiple design alternatives	Unrealistic outputs; limited

	diffusion models	existing layouts		explainability; need for human validation
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Table 1. Comparison of Major AI Categories Used in Urban Design

Optimization Tools

One real example of this is a design process using tools like Rhino and Grasshopper, along with plugins that simulate environmental factors like sunlight and energy use. Another tool named Wallacei is used to test many different design options and find the best balance between competing goals, such as density and sunlight. The system can generate thousands of possible building layouts and highlight the best trade-offs between these goals. Designers then review these options and choose the one that works best (Zhang and Wu 2023).

Machine Learning Models

Machine learning is also used in urban planning to analyze and understand city data. For example, it can look at satellite images to identify land use, such as residential or commercial areas, or detect features like buildings and roads to keep city maps up to date. Research shows that these models depend on how the data is collected, organized, and analyzed, and they still have some limitations. In practice, the process involves collecting labeled data, training a model (often using powerful computers), and then using the model to produce maps or data layers. Planners then check these results and use them to support further analysis (Zhang et al. 2018; Jagannathan et al. 2025). Taken together, the studies by Zhang et al. (2018) and Jagannathan et al. (2025) show how machine-learning approaches to urban land classification have developed from individual deep-learning models toward ensemble systems using multi-year satellite imagery. Although their methods differ, both studies demonstrate that model performance depends

Generative AI Systems

Generative AI in urban design works by creating design options based on instructions given by planners. These instructions can include written prompts, such as asking for more green space, or visual guides, such as maps or sketches. The generated designs are then checked to see if they look realistic, follow planning rules like zoning laws, and provide a range of different layout options (He et al. 2025).

Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs)

Another approach uses a generative adversarial network (GAN), in which a generator creates new urban designs while a discriminator compares them with real examples and provides feedback that gradually improves the generated results. In urban design, GANs can learn patterns from road layouts, block shapes, and building forms, then create new design alternatives based on those patterns. However, these outputs

should be treated as possible design options rather than final planning decisions because planners still need to evaluate whether they are realistic, equitable, and appropriate for the local context (Fedorova 2021). Taken together, He et al. (2025) and Fedorova (2021) show that generative AI can expand the range of urban design alternatives, although their models differ in how they use prompts, images, and existing urban patterns. Both approaches preserve a role for human evaluation, reinforcing the use of AI as a design-support tool rather than an autonomous planner.

Data Inputs and Compute

All three types of AI systems depend on accurate spatial data, such as maps, building outlines, road networks, and environmental information. Machine learning and generative systems also require well-organized training data so they can identify useful patterns. The computational demand of these systems varies depending on the model, dataset size, resolution, and number of design alternatives being tested. More complex models may require specialized hardware or longer processing times, which can make them difficult for smaller planning departments to use.

For example, Jagannathan et al. (2025) trained an ensemble deep-learning model on multi-year Sentinel-2 imagery, illustrating how these systems can support repeated land-use classification across time while maintaining accuracy under varying conditions.

FUTURE DIRECTION OF AI IN URBAN DESIGN

AI in urban design is expected to move beyond analyzing existing information and toward systems that use real-time city data from sensors, transportation networks, and smart infrastructure. Future tools may combine optimization systems, machine learning, and generative AI with digital twins to test transportation performance, environmental impacts, land use changes, and infrastructure plans before they are implemented. Researchers are also exploring stronger human-AI collaboration, city-scale simulations, and more energy-efficient “Green AI” systems that could support larger and more complex planning projects while reducing environmental impacts. These developments suggest that AI may eventually become a larger part of long-term urban planning while still keeping humans responsible for final decisions (NIST 2025; Lartey and Law 2025; Rojahn and Grum 2026).

TECHNICAL LIMITATION AND RISKS

The main risks of using AI in urban design include whether the system works accurately in real-world situations, whether the data used is biased or unclear, and whether the system is vulnerable to cyberattacks as it becomes more connected to sensors and digital models of cities.

Another challenge is the accuracy of data inputs. AI systems depend heavily on the quality of the information they receive, so missing, outdated, or incorrect data can lead to unreliable results. AI systems may also produce “hallucinations,” where generated outputs appear realistic but do not accurately represent real conditions (Jang and Kim 2025). In urban planning, this could create problems if layouts, predictions, or simulations look reasonable but fail to match actual environmental, transportation, or community needs. Transferability is another limitation because models trained using data from one city may not work equally well in another location with different conditions. These challenges show why human review remains important even when AI systems become more advanced (Fedorova 2021).

To help manage these risks, the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) created a framework that explains what makes AI trustworthy. This includes making sure systems are fair, understandable, and protect people’s privacy. The framework also outlines four main steps for managing risk: setting rules, identifying risks, testing systems, and taking action to fix problems (NIST 2023).

In addition, smart cities use many connected devices, such as sensors and smart infrastructure, which increases the number of possible points where systems could be attacked. To address this, NIST provides guidelines for how these devices should be secured. These include making sure devices can be identified, properly configured, and protected from unauthorized access (NIST 2021).

If cities use digital twins, which are virtual models of real urban systems, there are additional challenges. NIST explains that these systems need clear standards so different technologies can work together, as well as strong cybersecurity planning from the start. This is important because digital twins introduce new types of risks along with traditional cybersecurity issues (NIST 2025). The 2023 Dallas ransomware attack disrupted municipal services and illustrates the vulnerability of increasingly connected urban systems (City of Dallas 2023). Although the incident was not caused by an urban AI system, it demonstrates how attacks on shared digital infrastructure can affect multiple government functions at once. This risk becomes directly relevant to AI-enabled sensor networks and digital twins because these systems connect large amounts of real-time data, software, and physical infrastructure. As cities become more digitally integrated, cybersecurity must therefore be treated as a basic design requirement rather than an issue addressed only after implementation.

POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF AI IN URBAN DESIGN

The integration of AI into urban design has important political impacts because city planning decisions affect housing, transportation, environmental policy, and economic opportunities. When governments use AI tools to analyze data and guide development decisions, it raises questions about who controls these systems and how transparent their decision-making processes are.

Lartey and Law (2025) explain that AI is increasingly being used in urban planning to support data analysis and predictive decision-making, but they also identify concerns about transparency, accountability, and inclusivity. NIST (2023) addresses the same governance problem from a

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risk-management perspective, identifying accountability, transparency, explainability, and fairness as core features of trustworthy AI. Together, these sources suggest that governments should evaluate not only whether an AI system performs well, but also whether its recommendations can be explained and whether responsibility for resulting decisions remains clear.

NIST (2023) and Sanchez et al. (2025) similarly note that AI systems can reflect bias when they are trained on incomplete or uneven data. In urban planning, this could lead to decisions that benefit some communities more than others, reinforcing existing inequalities. For example, if certain neighborhoods are underrepresented in the data, they may receive less investment or attention in planning decisions. Because of this, both sources argue that clear rules and ethical guidelines are needed to ensure that human decision-makers remain responsible, rather than allowing AI systems to take control of important planning decisions. Governments may also need to create policies that require transparency, regular evaluation of AI systems, and public involvement in how these tools are used (NIST 2023; Sanchez et al. 2025).

SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF AI IN URBAN DESIGN

The use of AI in urban design has important social impacts because cities are built around people and their daily experiences. Decisions about housing, transportation, green spaces, and public services affect how communities live and interact. As AI becomes more involved in planning, questions arise about whether people will trust environments that are partly designed through automated systems and data analysis. Urban planning has traditionally depended on community participation, so maintaining public involvement remains important even when AI tools are introduced. AI may improve efficiency, but planners still need to consider human experiences and local needs when making decisions (Sanchez et al. 2025).

AI may also change the role of urban planners and designers. Tasks such as map analysis, environmental simulations, and testing multiple design layouts can now be completed more quickly with AI tools. Lartey and Law (2025) suggest that planners' responsibilities may increasingly shift toward reviewing AI outputs, communicating with communities, and making final planning decisions. Sanchez et al. (2025) add that continued human involvement is an important ethical safeguard because planners must identify potential bias, protect privacy, maintain transparency, and prevent marginalized communities from being excluded. Human judgment therefore remains essential both for interpreting AI outputs and for keeping final decisions accountable to public values.

Another concern is fairness. AI systems depend heavily on data, and if certain communities are missing from that data, the results may become biased. This could affect investment decisions, transportation access, or future development plans. Research on algorithmic fairness explains that unequal datasets may unintentionally reproduce social inequalities. Because of this, planners must continue involving communities directly so local perspectives remain part of the planning process (Sanchez et al. 2025).

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ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS OF AI IN URBAN DESIGN

AI has the potential to improve environmental planning by helping cities become more efficient and sustainable. Urban planners already use AI to study traffic flow, building performance, sunlight exposure, energy use, and land use patterns. These systems can help reduce congestion, improve energy efficiency, and support greener development strategies. AI is also being explored for environmental monitoring and climate planning because it can process large amounts of environmental data quickly (Almulhim 2025).

While Almulhim (2025) emphasizes the planning benefits AI can deliver through more efficient traffic, energy, and land-use management, Rojahn and Grum (2026) caution that these gains come with an environmental cost of their own, since training and operating advanced models requires substantial computing power. Many systems rely on energy-intensive hardware and data centers, and as AI models become larger and more complex, electricity use and environmental impacts may increase. Although improvements in computing efficiency help reduce some of these effects, they do not completely remove the environmental costs of developing and operating AI systems (Rojahn and Grum 2026).

Researchers have proposed the idea of “Green AI” to address these issues. Green AI focuses on reducing energy use while maintaining system performance. Studies show that selecting efficient algorithms and improving datasets can reduce computing demands without greatly reducing accuracy. If these technologies continue improving, AI may become more environmentally sustainable while still supporting urban planning goals (Rojahn and Grum 2026).

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OF AI IN URBAN DESIGN

The use of AI in urban design creates legal challenges because responsibility can become less clear when automated systems contribute to planning decisions. Lartey and Law (2025) note that it may be difficult to determine who is accountable when an AI recommendation contributes to poor planning outcomes or unequal development. Peráček and Kaššaj (2026) extend this concern to municipal management, explaining that cities must translate emerging AI, data-protection, and cybersecurity requirements into practical systems of documentation, auditing, oversight, and coordination. Their analysis suggests that effective regulation depends not only on having legal rules, but also on whether municipalities have the capacity and management structures needed to apply them. Cities should therefore establish clear institutional responsibility before AI-supported recommendations are incorporated into public decisions.

Ownership is another legal issue. Generative AI systems can create layouts, maps, and design ideas using large datasets collected from many sources. This raises questions about who owns AI-generated designs and whether the information used to train these systems was protected by copyright or other legal

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restrictions. As AI becomes more common in urban planning, governments may need clearer rules for ownership and use of machine-generated work (Gaidartzi and Stamatoudi 2025).

Privacy also becomes important because many urban AI systems depend on transportation data, sensor networks, demographic information, and location-based records. Smart city systems collect large amounts of information, and planners must ensure this data is protected and used responsibly. Strong legal frameworks will likely become more important as cities continue expanding their use of AI and connected infrastructure (Peráček and Kaššaj 2026; IEEE Digital Privacy n.d.).

ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS OF AI IN URBAN DESIGN

AI could have major economic impacts on urban design because it may reduce planning time and improve efficiency. Tasks that once required large amounts of manual work, such as environmental analysis or testing different layouts, can now be completed more quickly using AI-supported tools. Optimization systems can evaluate many design options at once, allowing planners to explore more possibilities while potentially reducing project costs (Almulhim 2025).

At the same time, AI systems can be expensive to build and maintain. Many applications require powerful computers, specialized software, large datasets, and trained professionals. Smaller cities and local governments may struggle to afford these technologies, creating differences in access between regions with more and fewer resources. This could increase inequality in technological development between cities (Almulhim 2025; Peráček and Kaššaj 2026).

In the long term, AI may improve economic performance by supporting better transportation systems, energy management, infrastructure maintenance, and land-use decisions. Lartey and Law (2025) connect AI adoption with more informed urban decision-making, while Almulhim (2025) provides more specific evidence that AI-supported predictive maintenance and resource optimization can reduce operational disruptions, improve infrastructure reliability, and lower maintenance costs. However, these benefits depend on data quality, infrastructure readiness, and whether long-term savings justify the initial costs of implementation.

Across the PESTLE categories, the evidence shows that AI's benefits and risks are closely connected. AI may help cities analyze information faster, test more planning options, and support sustainability goals, but those benefits depend on whether the systems are transparent, secure, affordable, and fair. Political accountability, social equity, environmental impact, legal responsibility, and economic access should therefore not be treated as separate issues. Together, they determine whether AI becomes a tool for better public decision-making or a technology that reinforces existing urban inequalities.

LIMITATIONS OF THIS REVIEW

This review has several limitations. First, it relies on existing publications and technical standards rather than original interviews, experiments, or case studies. Its conclusions therefore depend on the quality and scope of the available secondary evidence. Second, several technologies discussed in the paper are developing rapidly, meaning that particular tools, capabilities, and regulatory approaches may change after publication. Some cited systems were also evaluated in research or experimental settings and may not perform in the same way when applied to real planning projects. In addition, the reviewed sources use different methods, geographic contexts, and definitions of artificial intelligence, which makes direct comparison difficult. Finally, selected preprints were included because of the emerging nature of the topic, but their findings should be interpreted cautiously because they had not completed formal peer review. The paper's conclusions should therefore be viewed as a synthesis of the current evidence rather than as definitive claims about all uses of AI in urban design.

CONCLUSION

Artificial intelligence is rapidly changing the way cities are planned, designed, and managed. As urban areas continue to face challenges related to population growth, transportation, housing, and sustainability, AI offers new tools that can help planners analyze data, predict outcomes, optimize designs, and explore a wider range of solutions than traditional methods alone. Technologies such as optimization systems, machine learning models, and generative AI have already demonstrated their ability to improve efficiency and support more informed decision-making.

However, this research also shows that AI is not a perfect solution to urban problems. The effectiveness of AI depends heavily on the quality of the data it uses, the transparency of its decision-making processes, and the ability of planners to identify and manage risks such as bias, cybersecurity threats, and inaccurate outputs. The PESTLE analysis further demonstrates that AI's influence extends beyond technology itself, affecting political accountability, social equity, environmental sustainability, legal responsibility, and economic development.

Looking ahead, AI is likely to become even more integrated into urban planning through real-time data analysis, digital twins, smart city infrastructure, and more advanced generative design systems. Future tools may allow planners to simulate entire city systems before making major decisions, helping cities respond more effectively to challenges such as climate change, population growth, and resource management. Despite these advances, human oversight will remain essential. Rather than replacing planners, AI should be viewed as a tool that enhances human expertise and supports better decision-making. The future of urban design will depend not only on technological innovation, but also on society's ability to use these technologies responsibly, ethically, and in ways that benefit all communities.

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