



NINE URBAN BIOTOPES
Negotiating the Future of Urban Living

URBAN SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY AND SOCIALY ENGAGED ART PRACTICE

TWO LITERATURE REVIEWS

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What is urban social sustainability?

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The exponential population growth and the urban proliferation all over the planet is moving humankind from an agrarian species to an urban species (Wu 2010). A decisive question of our time is to know whether urbanization is really a durable solution or a threat to the perpetuation of our species and, more broadly, of the planet. Some researchers argue that cities are indeed the solution to our current and future ecological challenges. Cities occupy only 3% of earth's land surface but host almost 50% of the world population. This high density which characterized urban biotope is source of advantages. It leads to the concentration of production and consumption. It reduces the demand of land and the use of vehicles. It supposes lower costs for water supply, collection of waste, health care, education, and emergency services.

On the other hand, the high concentration of human activities in the urban environment engenders multiple problems: new diseases, new inequalities, new violence, new crimes, congestion, large quantities of waste and often a life spent in a polluted environment. To guarantee that cities become a solution to ecological challenges, the quality of urban life must improve and must at least "meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (UN 1987).

The publication of the Brundland Report in 1987 (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987) and the increasing awareness of the "increasing urban nature of humanity" and of its impacts for the world's future (Wu 2010:1) have popularized the notion of "urban sustainability" which is now a central keyword in urban studies (Satterthwaite 1997). Over the last few decades, more and more research, publications, conferences and debates have put this polysemic notion at work.

This paper works in two steps. The first part gives a large overview of the notion and of different issues that are generally at stake. The second part focuses on social aspects of sustainability and argues that if cities are the product of social dynamics, sustainability itself has to be thought as a social process. Drawing on this assumption, the conclusion of the paper discusses sustainability as a realistic utopia and promotes a radical commitment to social sustainability in the urban age. At the same time, the overall paper constitutes a general glossary which presents the main keywords related to this debate.

I. On urban sustainability

What is **urban sustainability**? "Sustainability has been defined through the United Nations as a global process of development that minimises environments resources and reduces the impact on environmental sinks using processes that simultaneously improve the economy and the quality of life" (Newman 1999: 219). More basically, a city is sustainable if its conditions of production do not undermine the conditions of its "expanded reproduction" (Castells 2000: 118-119). The permanent transformation that



characterizes an urban biotope and its expansion has to operate without engendering a diminution of life and environment quality (Holdren et al. 1995)

In order to make this possible, a large body of literature is centred on the will to make cities “compatible with sustainable development goals” (Satterthwaite 1999: 3). This extensive literature on urban sustainability focuses on the central aspects of urban functioning, such as planning, transport, communication, finance, industry, ecology, health, environment, pollution, and waste management.

Beyond the variety of theoretical approaches, empirical interests and type of recommendations in this body of work, “urban sustainability” is generally perceived through **three interconnected dimensions**: ecological, economic and social. **Ecological sustainability** concerns the attempt to produce cities with respect for their natural environment. **Economic sustainability** is the guarantee that the connectivity of the city to local, regional, and global networks will generate enough wealth to ensure its economic reproduction. **Social sustainability** refers to the social configuration which makes the forms of competition and collaboration, equity and inequity, and equality and inequality in city tolerable.

To capture these interconnected dimensions, many researches attempt to grasp the urban environment from a holistic point of view. Looking at the city as a whole (Newman 1999, Hilgers 2009) or as a complex ecosystem requires apprehending the metabolism of the city: material production (roads, building, rails, wire, tar, computers); supply and demand (in water, food, land, raw materials, energy, leisure); and people (their relationships, life style). Grasping the city as a system requires us to consider its internal and external dynamics, including the mental and material processes that produce the city, as well as to underline their systemic relations, to highlight interconnected logics, and to identify certain forms of equilibrium which need to be preserved or improved. In these functionalist approaches “urban sustainability” refers to the sustainability of the general equilibrium of these three dimensions.

These approaches of urban sustainability mobilized a set of recurring concepts such as *compactness*, *mixed land uses*, *transport* and *ecology* (Jabareen 2006).

Compactness: the compactness of a city is characterized by the easy access to a diversity of services and facilities. The proximity of the diversity and the diversity of the proximity (Hannerz 1980) increases social interactions, access to facilities and services and reduces the energy and the need of land (Jenks and Burgess 2000).

Mixed land uses: Many cities have been planned through a functional division of space (industrial, commercial, residential, institutional, for transportation) whereas a mix of these functions in every neighbourhood facilitates city’s functioning and reduce the need for transportation.

Transport: Walking, cycling and efficient public transport decrease the need for cars and pollution.

Ecology: Green urbanism, passive solar design, and systems of waste management which balance the production of pollution contribute to sustainability. Ecological sustainability is targeted in various urban processes of production and consumption including the social production of the city itself (its management, maintenance, functioning, infrastructures).

As we see, sustainable approaches to the city concern the city as a whole (its population, transportation, structure, resource conservation, production, industries, health system, food, leisure, security...) and aim to articulate in a sustainable way natural capital, human needs, and human activities by reducing the impact of human activity on the environment and by improving the quality of life.

However, like sustainable development, urban sustainability is principally investigated from economic and environmental points of view. Indeed, numerous studies have perceived urban metabolism through its physical and biological dimensions without considering its social roots. Recent critiques have raised this issue by reminding that “sustainability for a city is thus not only in metabolic flows (resource inputs and waste outputs), it must also be about increasing human liveability” (Newman 1999: 222). Yet the question of urban liveability itself is often reduced to environmental problems (air, water and soil pollution, noise, global warming, etc). Despite the fact that cities and sustainability constitute and are



constituted through social processes, the social side of sustainability is still often neglected (Kunz 2006, Littig B, Griessler E 2005 Cuthill 2010). Furthermore, some policies in favour of urban sustainability have reinforced inequality within the city and decreased local democratic accountability (Gibbs 1997: 203). In order to lead cities to sustainability, we need to consider the social conditions of the possibility of sustainability itself.

II. On urban social sustainability

What is social sustainability in urban context? In 1993 Yifatchel and Hedgcock provide one of the first definitions. **Urban social sustainability** is “the continuing ability of a city to function as a long-term, viable setting for human interaction, communication and cultural development” (1993: 140). Today this wide definition is still accepted, but a more precise meaning of social sustainability has not been agreed upon. It would be a mistake (and probably impossible) to impose a single and unilinear definition. Every social configuration has its own specificity and its own tensions. The notion is thus relatively malleable and changes according to context, city and case study.

Beyond the plurality of definition of urban social sustainability, I suggest distinguishing three main interpretations that constitute complementary aspects of the notion (for a similar mapping see Vallance, Perkins, Dixon 2011). The first refers to a meaning inspired by development studies and I will call it **basic social sustainability**. Here sustainability refers to basic needs, social capital, justice and equity. The second concerns the social change needed to reach an environmental sustainability, “the ways which people actively embrace or resist those changes” (Vallance, Perkins, Dixon 2011: 342-343) and I will call it **sustainable behaviour**. The last is related to the importance of diversity, the awareness of social-cultural characteristics and specificities of each situation where social sustainability is at stake, and I will call it **cultural sustainability**. Of course in concrete situations, these three components overlap and intertwine. For example, cultural values are values *per se* but are also an essential element to elaborate an awareness campaign which aims at modifying the behaviours. Yet this mapping gives a good vision of all the implications of the notion of urban social sustainability. Let’s analyse now these three components.

Basic social sustainability

Cities are at the heart of social, political economic and cultural transformations, but in most places in the world, urbanization is taking place with an increase of social inequity and poverty. This massive increase of inequality in cities puts their own social equilibrium in peril. Gentrification, social selection, ethnic division and evictions produce tensions and provoke social suffering, anger, and despair, but also a feeling of insecurity and a violence against the poor (Wacquant 2007, 2009). **Basic social sustainability** concerns the social balance within an urban community. It is guaranteed through two main principles: **equity** and **sustainability of the community** (Bramley et al 2009, Bramley and Power 2009, Dempsey et al 2011).

In a context of urbanization where the growing inequity “will be inherited as a calculable social cost by future generations” (Yiftachel O Hedgcock 1993: 142) **equity** concerns the “pursuit of equitable or just urban policies” (ibid 141). An equitable society gives the opportunity to everybody to have access to services and facilities and to participate economically, socially and politically to the life of the community (Ratcliffe 2000, Pierson 2002, Dempsey 2005). Equity supposes social justice and social justice supposes to have “sustainable governments” (Castells 2000, Gibb 1997). Policies have to consider (or be made in favour of) the most disadvantaged.

By definition, reflections on sustainability involve a consideration for the next generations and their social and ecological environment. One of the most original and important aspect of urban sustainability is thus the importance of inter-generational equity. Houghton identifies four others equity principles which can sustain new policies: equity within generations, equity in geographical investment, equity



in administrative and justice procedures, and equity between species within the city (Haughton 1999: 235-237). This last principle called "inter-species equity" supposes going beyond a strictly anthropocentric perspective on sustainability.

The sustainability of a community is the ability of this community to reproduce itself, to perpetuate its viability, and to guarantee integration and social cohesion within the community. The UK sustainable communities plan highlights eight essential aspects which characterize a sustainable community: "1) active, inclusive and safe; 2) well served; 3) well designed and built; 4) well run; 5) environmentally sensitive; 6) well connected; 7) thriving; and 8) fair for everyone" (Bramley and Power 2009: 32). Other characteristics should be added to these criteria: healthy environment, stability of the community, space of sociability, participation in the community, etc.

While the built environment (including design, space, house, buildings, and urban forms) plays an important role, the social dimension is here predominant and concerns mainly the strength of the community and, correlatively, the efficiency and density of social networks and interactions, and the feeling of belonging to a neighbourhood (Forrest and Kearns 2001, Hilgers 2009, Dempsey et al. 2011). As many studies show, people feel more integrated when they belong or invest their time, energy or money in associations. This contributes to increasing their social capital and to develop their sentiment of belonging. It also helps to develop tolerance to difference and gives the opportunity to explore multiple identities and avoid social exclusions. As we see, these aspects of the reflections on social sustainability join many classic themes in sociology: participation in local communities, social network, social capital, integration.

Sustainable behaviour

Beyond the heterogeneous and eclectic mess which characterizes the city, urban planning has the ambition, and somehow the power to domesticate urban behaviour and urban growth in order to submit them to viable regulation. Numerous studies on urban sustainability and urban social sustainability aspire to link these two terms by promoting "'eco-friendly' behaviour or stronger environmental ethics" (Vallance, Perkins, Dixon 2011: 344). **Sustainable behaviour** refers thus more to the social condition of possibility of sustainable development than to the social goals of sustainable development.

Technology and behavioural management are generally conceived as the main tool to promote sustainable behaviour (Rotmans, Marjolein, van Asselt 2000). Urban sustainability agenda is now at the heart of numerous urban plan schemes and it has been conceptualized through different approaches that aim to modify human comportment. Haughton (1997) distinguishes four main perspectives which are more or less compatible. 1) '**Self-reliant cities**' attempt to reduce consumption and increase renewable resources. This approach has a strong focus on inter-species equity and considers that "cities built for maximum profit or to confer maximum wealth on all citizens equally cannot emerge as ecosocieties" (ibid. 237). 2) "**Fair shares cities**" set out to "ensure that environmental assets are traded fairly" (ibid. 237). 3) The **economics approach** uses free market ideology to address the question of sustainability. 4) **The management of urban form** aims at redesigning cities. This last approach is the most common and the most used by planners. Indeed, debates on sustainability have renewed a debate on urban forms.

Numerous studies have tried to connect **urban forms** (density, compactness, mixed uses, aesthetics) with social sustainability. Researchers try to design or identify the most suitable forms for sustainability and propose an updated conception of the city: compact cities, eco-city, neotraditional development, urban containment... (for a synthesis see Jabareen 2006). However, despite their social dimensions, much of this formal research minimizes or ignores the concrete production of policies and the processes of their implementation. Urban social sustainability cannot be limited to a technical, problem-solving approach, or institutional management. On the contrary, considering the local context and its history is fundamental to fostering a dynamic of sustainability. Policies are at the centre of struggles of power and of meaning which must be considered when one wants to orient the city toward a precise goal. When we look at the social aspect of sustainability, it is essential to consider the contentious nature of the urban change, the networks and alliance necessary to implement a new voluntary orientation.



The ambition to regulate behaviour often leads to the appearance of standardized measures. However, it seems extremely difficult to measure the complexity of social sustainability through an index or to rank cities according to their sustainability (Munda 2004). How is it possible to calculate positive externalities? Should we consider them in short-term or long-term 'visions'? What about the variation of development between cities? Beyond the illusion of coherency given by overly complex definitions¹, the ambition to build a single measure to gather the multiple and disparate dimensions of social sustainability (Bramley and Power 2009) seems simply unrealistic.

Because of the ambition to regulate and manage urban subjects, "sustainability" itself is frequently used as a political tool. Sometimes this leads to the subordination of the struggle against inequality to more consensual social objectives justified through their "positive role in sustainable growth" (Maloutas 2003: 168). In this case, promoting social equity is "justified as a means to a more sustainable resource management rather than as an end in itself" (Maloutas 2003: 168), and the treatment of inequalities and inequities appear subordinate to the notion of sustainability. This could be problematic when sustainability is used as a tool for « delegitimation of any goal that can be called unsustainable. » (Maloutas 2003 : 168). However, we can also shape the objective of sustainability according to social preoccupations. In other words, the meaning of social sustainability is itself an object of contestation.

Cultural sustainability

The third dimension of social sustainability is notably inspired by postcolonial studies. The notion of **cultural sustainability** is associated to the promotion and preservation of social and cultural diversity, but it is also a way to resist against a hegemonic interpretation and use of the notion of social sustainability which reflects and refers only to Western developed cities. In the dominant European social democracy, sustainability is often used as a political tool to legitimate public intervention through planning, to mobilize and engage people, to create a new type of socio-political consensus, and to promote a European development model (Maloutas 2003). Research on sustainability seems often "underpinned by a tacit assumption that a single desirable sustainable city can be pre-defined, and that the purpose of policy and research is to facilitate the development of that city" (Guy and Marvin 1999: 269).

Over the last decade there has been a major scholarly push in urban studies, led by research in the South, to decenter the field, to contest Western analyses, and to produce studies that discuss and critique dominant theories (Simone 2004, 2009, Robinson 2002, 2006, Mbembe, Nuttal 2004, Myers 2011, Edensor, Jayne 2012, Hilgers 2012). The same movement has to appear and be reinforced in the realm of urban sustainability. Of course, cities in the global South are dealing with similar issues as cities in the North, but sometimes each region or individual city faces specific challenges.

Beyond all the progressive positions associated with sustainability at large, it is important to acknowledge that challenges and struggles vary from one city to another. It is important to consider the multiple urban trajectories in different countries and to perceive the local as place of contradictory interests. The multiples variations (in the meaning of such terms as equity, environment, needs) and values at play indicate that there is no single strategy, no single trajectory to achieve the objective of sustainability. Rather than searching for a universal and consensual definition, we should assume that the objective to reach urban sustainability is political and underpinned by numerous implicit assumptions that one must objectify. Debates, conflicts, dynamics undercover of sustainability are necessarily shaped by a multiplicity of social interests, a plurality of interpretations, a diversity of initiatives and opportunities (Guy and Marvin 1999) which are embedded in cultural configurations. Urban social sustainability has no single definition. The objectives, priorities, definitions of the ideal level of social sus-

¹ A good example is the following definition: "a 'sustainable city' is a city where the three environments characterising an urban agglomeration interact in such a way that the sum of all positive externalities stemming from the interaction of the three environments [physical, economic, social] is larger than the sum of the negative external effects caused by the interaction" (Camagni et al. 1998).



tainability vary depending on context. The configurations which make the forms of competition and collaboration, equity and inequity, equality and inequality acceptable are culturally determined.

Instead of pleading for a uniform and universal model, we need to consider the variety of attempts, multiple experiences and trajectories which could lead each singular urban configuration toward its own sustainability. Sustainability requires inventions and knowledge and the multiple models of experience of various types of concrete sustainability are susceptible to support alternative visions which can be inspiring in unexpected places. This dissemination supposes to develop knowledge about city which can be built and share at multiples sites and scales. That is a necessity if we want to fill in the growing gap between the "rhetoric of the importance of sustainable cities" and the reality of the city (Bulkeley and Betsill 2000). This is why, even if it has been often neglected, the focus on the local and on local initiatives but also the opportunity to share and disseminate experiences in transnational networks such as 9UB is fundamental to move toward a better social sustainability.

The dissemination of good ideas and good practices is a condition to learn and expand sustainability. However this "transfer of policy techniques and lessons is not a simple matter of the exchange of knowledge or information but, rather, is deeply entangled with competing governmental rationalities about the nature of the policy problem and the legitimate means through which lessons can be learnt and transferred between places" (Bulkeley 2006: 1035). Urban sustainability has to be learnt and these lessons and priorities must be chosen according to an open and common political agenda.

Until now, "the impacts and implications of disseminating" innovative practices remained poorly understood (Bulkeley 2006: 1041). Using art as a matter of transmission, the nine urban biotope projects will be a worthy experience that could be useful for many cities, engaged artists, and citizens.

Conclusion

Urban social sustainability is without a doubt a "context-dependant concept" (Maloutas 2003, Ghahramanpouri and Sedaghatnia 2013). From a rigorous scientific point of view this notion appears often blurred or too vast. However, from an activist's point of view this flexibility opens a large space for diverse and multiple initiatives which concern the common good. The ambition to reach and develop urban social sustainability constitutes indeed a real opportunity to develop innovations which aim at improving individual and collective life in the city and beyond.

It is true that many cities do not have economic resources, knowledge, ability or the opportunity to choose the way of western sustainability. It is also true that they do not always have the same difficulties and challenges. This does not mean that they cannot invent their own paths toward sustainability yet it "involves a self-conscious choice; it does not simply happen" (Alberti and Susskind 214-215). The "sustainable city's citizen" (Haughton 1997) need to be informed of the situation of the world and their city, of the role they can play to contribute to the production of a sustainable environment, of the existing alternatives and the opportunity which have to be build. They also need to be stimulated to convert the ideal of sustainability into a possible and concrete utopia.

Sustainability requires initiatives, investment, and commitment. The comparison and the construction of networks is a way to share experiences and experiments, to identify potential alternatives to promote and reach urban sustainability. Innovative urban development projects, exchanges between citizens, artists, scientists, politicians, experts, and laymen in one city and between cities constitute a necessary path to enlarge a global awareness and to promote initiatives, participation, and exchange of ideas. A network of initiatives, projects and cities which works on urban social sustainability such as the 9UB project shows that it is possible to take into account the impacts of urban behaviour within a city, to change our representations and practices, and, at the same time, to consider the environment in a global context.



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