

PART I

**THE SUSTAINABLE CITY: THE CONCEPT, EUROPEAN
POLICIES AND IMPLEMENTATION**

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FOREWORD

The sustainable city is a recent concept whose rapid popularization has left policy-makers and researchers little time for a full appraisal. However, the twenty or so years since the concept was first outlined do now allow for a retrospective reading of the theories that have emerged. The 1991 European Union Green Paper on the urban environment highlighted the existence of a genuine European urban culture and an Expert Group on the Urban Environment was tasked with putting forward a series of recommendations. Sustainable development became a key issue following the 1992 Rio summit, rapidly taking on a number of forms. Europe quickly embraced the concept, leading to various studies, plans of action and the implementation of funding.

The first conference on sustainable urban development in 1994 led to the Aalborg Charter, which lays out the principles of sustainability in an urban context, including undertakings to maintain biodiversity, air and water, promote community-led initiatives, strive for social equity through sustainable employment, maximize effective land use in city centres, and seek a mix of functions in urban areas. The second conference on sustainable cities, held in Lisbon in 1996, highlighted the need for action. The 1998 Vienna forum brought the environment and sustainable development into European Union policy, thereby creating a framework for action and funding. Participants exchanged ideas on best practice and their own experiences, while grants were targeted at urban networks.

The first French geography PhD thesis on the sustainable city came in 1999, when Cyria Emilianoff defined the concept through expectations combining the old and the new – the capacity to endure, a high quality of life in all areas and

Agenda 21. The sustainable city is part of the broader context of sustainable development and the specific expectations associated with urban spaces. While Europe's urban areas have been known to shrink in times of recession or destruction since the Middle Ages, they remained established poles that adapted and grew where they were. The quality of life was thought, or hoped, to be better in such urban areas than in rural areas, at least until the industrial revolution. Meanwhile, the interpretation and implementation of Agenda 21 combines innovative programmes and old projects brought up to date.

Elsewhere in Europe, other countries have developed their own sustainable city policies. The examples in these studies, drawn not only from around Europe but also from one developing country further afield, demonstrate that there is a broad gap between the concept and its implementation on the ground, even though the initial intentions may be in keeping with the ideal of sustainability. The studies show that it is difficult indeed to implement the three key tenets of sustainable development in terms of planning policy.

On an environmental level, the greenways that are such a widely praised aspect of current policy are nothing new, as Frédéric Alexandre shows. They became popular urban features as early as the 19th century, as public health approaches to town planning led to their development. Long before Agenda 21, capitals including Paris, Berlin and London made moves to protect their green spaces and build model housing for workers to safeguard the health and comfort of the population while providing a healthy, strong workforce for industry. In the first half of the 20th century, the need to control urban growth also gave rise to the 'green belt' theory, with mixed results, as is clear today. It remains to be seen whether the sustainable city that recycles such expectations, in many cases in the form of regulations, will be an improvement. The current situation is somewhat paradoxical: while environmental protection is at the top of the agenda, urban sprawl has never been so widespread in Europe, and results so far do not appear to be in line with expectations.

Boris Lebeau's article shows that when it comes to the economic and social aspects of the sustainable city, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. The ideals of social diversity and local democracy espoused by urban planning also gives mixed results, as the example of Saint-Denis, in the northern suburbs of Paris, indicates. The initial project followed the theories of urban sustainability, as Saint-Denis created an eco-district in the La Plaine neighbourhood, introducing a mix of functions and a socially diverse population by promoting first-time home ownership; however, the results proved disappointing, as the economic activity and successful creation of new jobs did not meet the needs of the local inhabitants. In an age of globalization, the mobility of inhabitants, especially employees, and of activities has had unexpected effects, not always welcome, as the gap between the local population and economic activities can prove challenging.

Marie Redon's study of Haiti reveals how difficult it is to export the model of the sustainable city wholesale, even with substantial government aid. Following

the devastating earthquake of January 2010, the local authorities stated it was their ambition to rebuild Port-au-Prince as ‘a sustainable city that meets the objectives of the millennium’, drawing on international aid. However, this aim is proving problematic. Attempts to export European policies to the developing country have shown the limits of such an undertaking, even before work has begun. Geographical factors, including the recent hurricane as well as the earthquake, economic under-development, social inequality and poverty, all conspire against reconstruction, making the rapid implementation of a sustainability programme highly unlikely.

What does the sustainable city have to offer planners? The concept may be attractive in political terms – as are all planning theories, such as the 1970s fashion for growth poles. However, there is a long road between consensus-based intellectual construction and practice, particularly since there will inevitably be a delay between the uptake of an idea and its implementation, and contexts evolve swiftly.

New ideas often recycle or adapt existing notions to prevailing circumstances: for geographers, issues of changes of operator and scale are particularly relevant. Planning towns and cities for new populations after the industrial revolution was mainly driven by individuals, who were often employers, philanthropists, or both. Planning sustainable cities leaves more room for local authorities and inhabitants to make their voice heard, at least in formal terms. Funding is more likely to be public than private. The ideal city, which the sustainable city aims to be, is no longer confined to a handful of fortunate sites with a new approach to planning; it has become a universal value. The final question is one of timing: what place is there for the sustainable city in a world where speed, mobility and short-term time scales are key values?

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