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# PREFACE<sup>1</sup>

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It used to be that those interested in sustainable urbanism could be seen flocking to, say, Freiburg in Germany or Malmö in Sweden to learn about the principles of sustainable urban development applied in practice. Nowadays, just as often visitors may be seen venturing out to Tianjin in China, Kawasaki in Japan, or Songdo in South Korea, reflecting the growing focus on sustainable cities in Asia. There are several well stated reasons for this shifting interest (see e.g. Joss et al., 2013): from the rising influence of Asia in global politics, to the rapid rate of urbanisation across the region; and from new models of ecological modernisation and smart urbanism with Asian inflections, to the iconic status of gleaming new cities built for a global as much as a local clientele. But just as the European sustainable city has eluded easy categorisation, so it proves difficult – and is arguably even questionable – to try to extrapolate and advance a particular Asian model.

Indeed, as this volume comprehensively demonstrates, if anything sustainable urbanism in the Asian context is essentially characterised by rich diversity, and some evident contradictory tendencies too. This should, of course, not come as any big surprise, given the inherent variety in geographies, economies, political systems and cultural traditions across this expansive global region. And if one of the lessons of past globalism is to be alert to the risk of superimposing western-centric development models on the Global South, so it is equally prudent not to force artificially uniform thinking about sustainable urbanism in Asia.

One indispensable task executed by the various contributions contained in this volume, then, is to map and explain the variegated experiences of sustainable urban development across diverse conceptual and practice contexts. This not only highlights the many local contingencies shaping the sustainable city as discourse and praxis, but also points to the numerous, and again differentiated, challenges facing sustainable development on the ground. Consequently, a second key task addressed by the authors is how the ambitions of urban sustainability must be realised in what are often testing circumstances arising from rampant urbanisation and associated limited infrastructure and governance capacities. Even where there are clear, nationally championed policies for sustainable cities, policy implementation may still fail if local conditions are overlooked, as recently illustrated by an analysis of Chinese ecocity programmes (De Jong et al., 2016). And as several of the contributions explain, within such challenging urban contexts, sustainable development may have unforeseen consequences, in some instances even producing *unsustainable* outcomes. Here, the volume makes a particularly valuable contribution by pointing to the often deeply ingrained social inequalities (re)produced by urbanisation patterns and dynamics, which makes reconciling environmental improvements with social advancements ever so important if difficult to achieve. This then also points to the often inherent tension between internationally promoted

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high-aspirational urban sustainability projects, with their island-like secessionary tendencies (Grydehøj & Kelman, 2016), and home-grown, locally enmeshed initiatives. If an Asian approach to sustainable cities is to be claimed productively then this should probably be anchored in explicit local contexts.

Importantly, pursuing such a differentiated approach to conceptualising, analysing and ultimately practising sustainable urbanism does not have to mean that talking about the Asian sustainable city is an impossibility. By bringing the diverse discourses and variegated practice experiences in conversation with one another, an all-important discussion can be had about common as well as particular challenges and opportunities facing contemporary and future urbanism in Asia and beyond. In turn, this more convincingly global discussion should serve to enrich and even usefully 'decentre' the theoretical framings and conceptual vocabularies of urban sustainability research, which have often remained rooted in the western experience. It is for these reasons that the present thought-provoking volume is so welcome and should inspire researchers, policy-makers and practitioners alike.

## References

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