

Urban planning and sustainable development

Introductory note

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The publication of this special issue on the topic of “Urban Planning and Sustainable Development” was made possible through the valuable support of the journal’s editorial committee, in particular Mélanie Gauthier and Gabriela Coman, and through the efforts of the many anonymous reviewers. We would like to take this opportunity to extend our thanks for their contributions and commitment.

- 1 The concept of sustainable development has emerged over the past decades as a new requirement for urban and metropolitan level public action, which involves conceptual principles and practices as applied to land-use and urban planning. Today, it is commonplace to find the term “sustainable city” and the expression “sustainable urban development” cited to denote intentions and paragons of political utopia and of land-use and urban planning practices considered to be innovative (Da Cunha et al., 2005; Mathieu and Guermond, 2005). In spite of this, the question can be raised of whether sustainable development will be a factor in renewing land-use planning and if so, under which conditions (Guermond, 2006; Gauthier et al., 2008). Can sustainable development help revitalize planning practices? Can sustainable development be used as a basis for revising urban and metropolitan planning? Have specialists in the field of land-use and urban planning re-examined their practices in light of sustainable development principles? What is the real scope of the urban sustainable development approach at each of the spatial scales (metropolitan, regional, medium-size cities, etc.)? In providing answers to these questions, the concept of sustainable development, including its utopian character, must be seriously considered, and an interdisciplinary approach to addressing the object itself must be developed (Mathieu, 2006). This also involves thinking about the way interdisciplinarity can be geared towards both the requirements of public action and the needs of modern societies, which more fundamentally raises questions about the relation between research and action and about the way to redefine the science and society relationship (Gauthier, 2006). The papers assembled in this special issue devoted to the

topic of “urban planning and sustainable development” are in keeping with the view that the concepts of “sustainable city” and of “urban sustainable development” are to be seriously considered from a wide range of theoretical, conceptual and methodological perspectives. The seven contributions of this issue reflect a set of themes related to urban planning and sustainable development by presenting case studies of selected Canadian and European cities.

- 2 The first paper examines a planning tool for increasing urban density, the Floor Area Ratio (FAR), which was at the centre of public debates during the 2001-2006 local urban plan review process in Paris. Authors David Guéranger and François-Mathieu Poupeau begin by showing how the theme of “sustainable cities” has been coupled with operative watchwords such as reducing urban sprawl through densification and rebuilding within the city, and implementing the “compact city”. The FAR was first introduced in France in the late sixties as a technical tool aimed at regulating urban density. Some “reform-minded experts” deem this urban planning tool to be outmoded and inefficient, offering only a coarse measure of density, and it has been harshly criticized for its poor ability in painting a vivid picture of the urban realm. By providing an overview of the main debates that have taken place on the reform proposals regarding this tool of public action, the authors consider the extent to which the FAR is “a tool that is able to withstand reform”. Guéranger and Poupeau illustrate how this technical tool is in fact intrinsic to Parisian urban planning history, which makes reform highly unlikely regardless of the wishes of some experts and local officials. The paper draws particular attention to the victory by the landscape protection and quality of life interests who favoured the status quo over those promoting urban renewal and pragmatism who were more inclined towards renewing urban design practices and conceptual principles. The implications of this paper are clear. It is shown that the theme of the sustainable city is, to a certain extent, facing resistance to change while dealing with the complex issue of fostering innovation in professional practice and new ways of understanding the city.
- 3 Another major issue of concern for local elected officials and professionals working in large contemporary cities and urban areas is urban policy coordination between transportation and planning. Drawing on a comparative analysis of actual experiences across Basel, Bern, Geneva and Lausanne, which are Switzerland’s largest cities, Vincent Kaufmann and Fritz Sager direct their attention to the relation between urban development and local transportation policies. The authors build on their previous work (Kaufmann et al., 2003; Kaufmann and Sager, 2006) to discuss the many facets of the relation between transportation and urban planning. First, they find that the cities of Bern and Basel are more compact urban areas than Geneva and Lausanne and then ask “how does this reflect a better coordination between transportation and planning policies?” They follow with a cross analysis of local policies implemented in the four major Swiss cities. Their aim is to identify the key elements of success, which include urban morphology, the functioning of supra-local institution, past policy decisions, and other factors related to the local political culture. Their detailed and well balanced analytical and empirical perspective on Swiss cities helps deepen our understanding of the variety of local situations. The significance and contribution of the analysis lies equally with the historical and multicriteria methodology developed to take into account the diversity of local practices. In spite of their relatively exploratory nature, the research findings’ implications for practice are obvious as they help articulate the relations between scientific knowledge and urban public action.

- 4 The paper by Hannah Maoh and Pavlos Kanaroglou, which also focuses attention on the relationship between urban and land use planning and transportation, looks instead at ways to develop a simulation tool for assessing urban sustainability. Applied to two Canadian cities, Hamilton, Ontario and Halifax, Nova Scotia, the primary purpose of the simulation tool is to estimate progress towards urban sustainability using a system of environmental, social and economic indicators. The paper introduces an evaluation framework in an effort to broaden the scope of knowledge required for urban planning and to pave the way for more practical research which sets out to assess urban sustainability in Canadian cities.
- 5 Through his study of Manchester's environmental and sustainable development policies enacted since the 1970s, Vincent Béal explores the way environmental issues are being addressed within cities. Building on the radical geography school of thought in the UK, the author aims to provide insight on how the development of capitalism and the new forms of governance and regulation have together influenced urban policies on the environment and on urban sustainable development. He defines three distinct time periods, namely Grassroots Environmentalism, Roll Back Environmentalism, and Roll-out Environmentalism, in order to identify not only the discursive ways in which the notion of urban sustainable development is represented, but also the social, political and economic configurations and reconfigurations that characterize these three time periods. Thanks to a detailed, thorough field study, the author is able to establish links between environmental policies and mechanisms of urban governance. He then proceeds to test two hypotheses by studying the transfer of policies from a "local environment" to an "urban sustainable development" perspective: the marketing of the environment as a basis for competition between territories, and the shift in the real focus of elected officials' efforts from political competition to urban policy-making. In the author's view, the arrival on the scene of "urban sustainable development" has been a key factor in facilitating the emergence of an entrepreneurial approach to addressing environmental issues, which is emerging against the backdrop of a post-democratic era. This very well-documented study of Manchester raises the question, however, of the possibility of generalizing the results to other European and North-American cities.
- 6 Tanya Markvart's paper focuses on the contribution of radical green political theory to decision-making processes in the area of land-use planning for sustainable development. In so doing, she begins by defining a range of general criteria derived from a critical review of Dobson's (2000) writings on ecogism. Distinctions are then drawn between her set of criteria and the main criteria for sustainability developed by Gibson et al. (2005) to integrate environmental evaluation practice into a perspective of sustainable development. The author uses the criteria to develop an analytical grid for the study of the Waterloo Moraine located in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. The results of this case study point to the conclusion that since ecogism refers to non-human aspects it is limited in its capacity to take into account the political and socio-economic factors of land-use planning. The paper shows how ecogism does not sufficiently address some of the sustainability criteria developed by Gibson et al. (2005), including disparities between rich and poor, future generations, participatory decision-making processes, the principle of precaution and adaptation, etc.
- 7 The next paper by Paul L. Nichols looks at the social aspects surrounding urban forestry and offers an interesting discussion on the relations between brownfield redevelopment projects and urban forestry. The author considers more specifically the efforts made by

the Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Corporation to restore and revitalize Toronto's West Don Lands, by focusing attention on how urban forestry can be used to build physical and social links. The paper stresses the social benefits which urban forests provide in the form of social interactions and community cohesion.

- 8 The final paper deals with the issue of traffic congestion, which is, according to author Graham Senft, a factor in moving towards sustainability. The literature on sustainable transportation has barely touched on this topic. Based on field work conducted on the Metro Vancouver area, the author examines how traffic congestion can play a part in changing individual and institutional behaviours. The paper draws on a series of interviews with local actors in order to explore traffic congestion's potential to be used as a catalyst for stopping sprawl in its tracks and renewing transportation and land use planning practices. Through his analysis of the Metro Vancouver area, the author reveals the existence of two discourses at the regional level and two parallel cognitive models that bring the city centre into conflict with the suburbs. His analysis shows that, in terms of sustainability, the sense of social consciousness is heightened in the centre compared with the suburbs. Moreover, although notions such as "the conscious city", social consciousness and change are theoretically ungrounded, the main interest of this paper lies with the original way in which the question is framed and how future research efforts could improve understanding of the basic requirements for building the "sustainable city".

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Guest Editor