

The Evolution of Aspects and Tendencies in Sustainable Development in European Planning and Urbanism

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Abstract

Our work aims at questioning the understanding of the notion of sustainable development in the fields of urbanism and planning, considering the actual lack of any long-term visions projected on these practices. A critical lecture of planning through history retraces fundamental tendencies and aspects of socio-economical and ecological awareness in European collective projects. It also helps us out establishing a link to understand the actual situation as a possible receptacle for utopian ideals.

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Introduction

A consensus on the concept of sustainable development has been reached since its introduction in the Brundtland report.[1] As a keyword vector of political decisions, it has an impact on the everyday life of individuals, modifying lifestyles and attitudes. Though, the interpretation of this concept as a slogan offers enough latitude which could affect the nature of its actual implementation.

In the field of urbanism and planning, concerns about the efficiency of increasingly fragmented cities and territories in Europe are still lacking their instrumental counterparts capable of containing this process. In fact, an absence of any long-term development vision integrating socio-economical and ecological aspects contradicts the practice of a discipline having traditionally expressed and steered societal desires.

The city's diseased organism

In Europe, urbanism and planning found their origins out of the crisis in liberalism during the industrial revolution, aiming originally at correcting their most harmful consequences: diseases, fire and housing crisis. These first attempts can be considered as having harbored the first prospective by reformists and utopians [2]. Contributions such as Charles Fourier's harmonic community in the form of his autarkic "Phalanstère"[3] (1800) expressed the problem of the pursuit of happiness in the capitalistic context as a function of the way of living. In the upcoming industrial era, the subordination of the city to production means called for improvement. A literal stigmatization of power struggles could be read within the city [4].

Unlike Fourier's proposal, which formulated an alternative society organization, other projects attempted to deal with the form of the city, trying to make it more equitable in terms of living conditions for its population. Judging the city harmful as an artificial environment, the garden city model of Ebenezer Howard[5] (1898) codified the principles of a blend city and nature, also defining an ideal size for his model to work best as stand-alone. Although Howard's garden city became a reference for many realizations, their partial implementation as suburbs unfortunately contributed to their fragmentation.

An egalitarian grid

According to Le Corbusier[6], the suburban dream of social upliftment revealed itself as a nightmare: the scattered metropolis became unmanageable, the body of the cities dysfunction having inevitably repercussions on the smooth running of the society. Based on the modernistic ideals of hygiene, order and efficiency, Le Corbusier's proposal of the „Ville radieuse“[7] (1935) stood for a reproducible model, aiming at replacing existing cities on a long-term vision. Consisting of autarkic „housing units“ linked up to an ubiquitous infrastruc-

tural grid, this environment restored the condition of nature in a city from now on corresponding to the „basic human needs“, also defined by Le Corbusier. His undertaking illustrates the theoretical power of planning as an instrument of steering and enforcement of a long-term society project, and also the power of images as capable of delivering comprehensible messages in favor of societal aspirations.

In the context of the European post-war nation-states, the „Central Place Theory“ [8] (1933) of Walter Christaller can exemplify the implementation of egalitarian strategies on a state-level. The economic growth is hereby vector of development, and is redistributed equitably throughout the territory in order to guarantee a comparable quality of life to everyone on a long-term. At this moment, it can be observed how the efforts of a development based on egalitarian ideals tend to shift to the super-ordinate level of action.

Towards pragmatic utopia

The efficiency conditions of urbanism have been heavily modified since the turning point in world economy in 1989: we have been since then confronted to a new form of global expansion of the market, overtaking the nation-state frame and having extremely prejudicially social and ecological effects [9]. Although the deployment of an egalitarian grid throughout the nation-state territory permitted a welcomed homogenization of opportunities, the renouncement of the European compact city model since the 1960s was accompanied, in absence of any alternatives, with the consecration by default of a proliferating suburban environment which swallowed the old centers [10]. This regression can be measured in terms of a social impact, considering the dissolution of the city as a community, a well as in terms of an ecological impact, since the emergence of fragmented entities stigmatized irreversibly a sprawling body of the city.

The increasingly individualistic dominant lifestyle oriented towards self-fulfillment explains the urban quest for segregation. It seems paradoxical that this era, marking the end of collective society projects [11], also boasts a growing ecological consciousness, which, not surprisingly though, primarily aims at preserving consumerist lifestyles. Even “utopia goes pragmatic” [12] and doesn’t take any societal changes in consideration: Bjarke Ingels Group architects propose how to turn hedonistic lifestyle responsible, at least within the borders of Denmark. Other iconic projects propose for instance to encourage self-sufficiency in form of vertical farming, another attempt of reducing the ecological footprint of the consumer, as well as one’s bad conscience. [13]

Conclusion

If sustainable development consists of an awareness of problems, then it has to recourse to utopia, carrying strong images understandable to all parties involved in order to grasp the

whole range of this concept as an ultimate collective project. The current context is particularly demanding of an increased reflexiveness in order to pursue an ethically genuine direction. In the field of planning, this comes along only with a redefining of the practice modalities, far away from the actual dependence on opaque decision-making.

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