INTRODUCTION

# URBAN SUSTAINABILITY AS MYTH AND PRACTICE

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Sustainability is everywhere. As the world's population grapples with rapid urban growth, ecological degradation, global climate change, and the distribution of risks and rewards in a complex global socio-ecological system, sustainability has become a call to arms, a catchword, and a slogan. "Sustainability," Miriam Greenberg writes (Chapter 4), "has become, quite simply, a new common sense." And yet, as anthropologist Clifford Geertz famously demonstrated, common sense is neither sensical nor common – it is imbued with both emotions and rationalities that are shaped by specific historic, geographic, cultural, economic, and political conditions. Most importantly, common sense wisdom "is shamelessly and unapologetically ad hoc" (Geertz 1983:81). The authors in this volume similarly treat sustainability as a seductively ambiguous term (Trouillot 2003) that reflects both universalized assumptions and a tangle of disparate, contradictory, paradoxical, and culturally contingent ideas and practices.

We believe that the power and ubiquity of sustainability as a discourse, and its diversity as a set of practices, come to the fore especially in the context of today's rapidly growing cities. Here, the term simultaneously signals a "modern" way of envisioning the future, a way to understand relationships between the built environment and ecological resources, a foundation for demanding more just social relations, an approach to urban planning, a branding strategy, and a nostalgic reference to a preindustrial past. We contend that the diverse meanings ascribed to urban sustainability are not merely fodder for academic discussion. Rather, as we show in this volume, they have concrete consequences for the lives of everyday

urban dwellers, for the environment, and especially for social justice and equity. In short, the essays collected here highlight the fact that urban sustainability can entail both vital strategies for change and strategies for domination.

Accordingly, our explorations of sustainability in the global city develop a dialectical understanding of universalized conceptualizations and particularized local practices (Harvey 1996). Thus, we examine the concept of sustainability as a globally circulating discourse that aligns with widespread myths that idealize technological innovation, economic growth, and modernity on one hand and draw on diverse and even contradictory visions of nature and its value on the other. In addition, we pay careful attention to sustainability as a set of specific local practices that reflect the beliefs, behaviors, and negotiations that are the stuff of daily life. Traversing the globe from Memphis, Tennessee, to New Delhi, India, and many places in between, we explore a diverse range of experiences with urban sustainability policies and programs, from those that involve substantive ecological and social change to those that are incomplete, fragile, or abandoned.

To develop our understanding of sustainability as both myth and practice, we use the tools of ethnography to create detailed accounts of local histories, cultural meanings, and everyday lives. At the same time, we contextualize those accounts in the historic, social, and cultural complexities that shape how people understand and experience the world. This ethnographic perspective sets this volume apart from an explosion of both popular and academic books – from professions and disciplines as diverse as architecture, urban planning, business management, geography, and environmental ethics – on the centrality of sustainability to contemporary urbanism and urban policy. While many of these works present a useful approach to sustainability, we find little information about how urban citizens interact with this ubiquitous discourse in their daily lives or about its larger consequences for issues of global equality and uneven development practices. In contrast, this volume focuses on what happens in between the promises and the propaganda of sustainability programs: How do commitment and belief shape how people act on and evaluate sustainability? How can we recognize and learn from program outcomes that varied from, or altered, public expectations?

In our various approaches to answering such questions, we examine sustainability's multiple contradictions, manipulations, and embodiments. At the same time, we show how this complex concept continues to offer an opportunity to explore the imagined futures that motivate human behaviors. We hope that the examples presented here allow readers to learn from past successes as well as unforeseen missteps and mistakes. Above all, we hope that this volume can help to inspire new kinds of policies, actions, and collaborations that move us toward more equitable, just, and sustainable urban futures.

The rest of this introduction develops a basis for this volume's dialectical approach to urban sustainability as both myth and practice, and as both a strategy for change and for domination. In the following section, we describe two poles of an ongoing debate over the role of cities in creating sustainable futures: the city as beacon of hope and the city as inherently unsustainable. We next trace the origins of these debates, outlining a brief genealogy of urban sustainability, its convergence with neoliberal policies and ideologies, and its path to ubiquity. We argue that while the meaning and use of sustainability splintered in some dramatic ways, the term continues to have global reach and mythic power. The subsequent section thus explores anthropological understandings of myths and the role they play in contemporary urban landscapes and lives. Of course, myths are as influenced by local practices as they influence them – thus, we complement this section with an introduction to the study of urban sustainability in practice. Finally, we provide a brief overview of the sections, chapters, and snapshots that make up this volume.

## DEBATING THE ROLE OF CITIES IN SUSTAINABLE FUTURES

In 2010, a United Nations study estimated that the proportion of the Earth's population living in cities reached 50.5 percent, a number expected to rise to 69 percent by 2050.[1] Clearly, cities play an increasingly pivotal role in the future of our planet. Some uphold them as our best hope for alleviating global, social, economic, and climate crises (Yanarella and Levine 2011; Duany and Talen 2013). In this view, the efficiencies of scale, technological innovations, green designs, and participatory initiatives emerging from today's cities will lead the way to a more economically, ecologically, and socially sustainable planet – an image often posed in opposition to the equally powerful idea of suburbia and sprawl (Bruegmann 2005; Owen 2009; Fitzgerald 2010). Numerous books and articles published over the past two decades showcase the sustainable achievements of cities like Stockholm, Denver, Curitiba, Portland, Hamburg, the Tianjin Eco-City, Nantes, and Barcelona (Nijkamps and Parrels 1994; Fitzgerald 2010; Troy 2012). Certainly, municipal governments can more readily affect planning initiatives and economic incentives that lead to fairly immediate and substantive changes. Whereas summits in Copenhagen, Cancun, and Rio failed to produce commitments from world leaders and a consensus adequate to curb greenhouse gases, C40 Cities, a global network of megacities, secured promises from fifty-nine mayors from around the world to slash emissions of greenhouse

[1] See http://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/doc_press-release.htm

gases by 248 million metric tons by 2020, and by more than one billion tons by 2030 (Top 2013). As C40 Cities' website states, "Cities have the power to change the world . . . What our cities do individually and in unison can set the agenda for a sustainable future."[2] But how far can these civic campaigns go in solving global environmental problems? And how are those contributions to be measured? Moreover, as individual municipalities define sustainability, how do they negotiate competing short- and long-term imperatives? Is human justice as important to urban sustainability as food supplies, "green" energy, or public transportation?

Critics argue that the very concept of urban sustainability is an oxymoron (Rees 1997; Hornborg 2001, 2009). With their towering buildings, teeming sidewalks, and snarled traffic jams, cities are places of intense energy and resource use. The World Bank estimates that urban areas consume 75 percent of the world's energy and produce 80 percent of its greenhouse gas emissions (Baeumler, Ijjasz-Vasquez, and Mehndiratta 2012). While the power of municipalities to solve global climate crisis may be limited, it is a truism that individual cities affect socio-ecological processes far beyond their boundaries. Thus, while sustainability advocates frequently call for regionalism or greater resource independence, critical urban scholars point out that urban consumption and production systems are deeply embedded in global interdependencies that expropriate resources and surpluses from rural and developing areas to support growing urban demand (Bunker 1985; Swyngedow 2004; Hornborg 2009). As Chapter 2 demonstrates, these extensive relationships demand that, at the very least, we scrutinize urban policies, practices, and programs that declare themselves to be "carbon neutral."

Cities are also defined by their density, making them an inherently "vulnerable form of human organization" that is particularly susceptible to disaster and disease (Harvey 2003:25; Schneider and Susser 2003). Processes like densification, which shaped the industrial nightmares of nineteenth-century Europe and the United States, have now recurred in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. In the next few decades, hundreds of millions of rural immigrants will move from villages to cities in China alone, further complicating issues of air quality, traffic, and sanitation. Sustainable policies and practices constitute central debates within these changes. Indeed, to remain vital, a city must constantly accommodate new and growing populations, forever creating new market opportunities and absorbing capitalist booms and busts (Harvey 1996). While some believe that this ongoing flux generates creativity and innovative forms of efficiency, others wonder whether planning for sustainability is even possible, especially in the context of climate instability

[2] www.c40cities.org/news/news-20091215.jsp

and the potential for abrupt climate change. How far ahead must municipal governments plan, and based on which predictions? Is it even possible to find a balance between economic imperatives, the preservation of ecological resources, and the needs of burgeoning populations, while also pursuing social justice?

For a number of scholars, sustainable goals and outcomes will always be shaped – and constrained – by political and economic agendas (Moore 2007; Krueger and Gibbs 2007; Choy 2011). For instance, in today's increasingly competitive global marketplace, cities must vie for investment dollars, selling the city's image to investors, visitors, residents, and even urbanists (see Chapters 1 and 4). In some ways, urban governments have far more power over constructing their images than they do over making a substantial difference in climate change. The packaging of cities as commodities (Boyer 1994; Low 2005) is now intimately tied to sustainability discourse (we discuss this in further detail in the following section). As green awards proliferate, and world cities continually call attention to their green amenities, it becomes hard to separate boosterism from assessment or to distinguish examples of sustainability that advance social justice from those that reproduce social inequalities (see Krueger and Ageyman 2005). For instance, a gleaming new Bank of America building in Manhattan received widespread acclaim in 2010 for being "the world's greenest office tower." Yet, by 2012, New York City data reported that the Bank of America Tower produced "more greenhouse gases and use[d] more energy per square foot than any comparably sized office building in Manhattan."[3] For critical sustainability scholars, such examples demonstrate that, as sustainability increasingly becomes a politically neutral and co-optable concept, it risks becoming mere greenwash, with diminished relevance for both ecological improvements and social justice.

In this volume, we seek neither to align ourselves with boosters nor naysayers. Rather, we explore what sustainability means in different urban contexts, and the implications of those meanings for urban citizens, especially those who are socially, economically, politically, and geographically marginalized. We know that neither city governments nor individual citizens can control environmental imbalances on their own, nor can they determine the fate of the climate or the planet. Yet we also firmly believe that by bringing together diverse groups of actors, including universities, think tanks, grassroots movements, nonprofit agencies, lobbyists, capitalist investors, and even those who are simply heedless of environmental consequences, cities can be crucibles for thought, debate, innovation, and action on a global scale.

[3] www.newrepublic.com/article/113942/bank-america-tower-and-leed-ratings-racket/

## "URBAN SUSTAINABILITY": A RISING TIDE

Developing one – or even six – definitions of urban sustainability would contradict our aim to highlight multiple and variegated perspectives on, and interpretations of, the term. At the same time, we find it useful here to outline a brief genealogy of the concept of sustainability and its marriage to "the urban."[4] While we recognize that sustainability draws upon centuries of concerns with creating healthy, just, and functional cities, the term and its applications have crystallized and also diverged in recent decades in ways that merit special attention.

The popularization of the term "sustainability" can be traced to the circulation of its close companion, "sustainable development." During the post–World War II era, the idea that so-called "first world" countries should assume a responsibility to rescue "third world" countries from poverty and repressive governments fostered a proliferation of international economic development programs and accompanying global institutions (such as the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and the International Monetary Fund). Cold war–era fears about the spread of communism rationalized these programs, distracting public attention from the degree to which they ensnared developing countries in webs of debt while allowing corporations and governments in the global north to accrue massive wealth and power (Redclift 2005). Moreover, development programs encouraged the use of pesticides, monocropping, deforestation, and other practices that were extremely detrimental to environmental resources (Escobar 1995). Eventually, the failure of development programs to eradicate poverty, and the pervasive environmental degradation they caused, became inescapable (Portney 2013).

In 1983, the UN Secretary General created a new commission, to be led by former Prime Minister of Norway, Gro Harlem Brundtland, and charged it with setting an international agenda for promoting development that prioritized social, economic, and environmental goals over such devastating growth. In 1987, the commission published "Our Common Future," also known as the Brundtland Report, stating:

> *A world in which poverty and inequity are endemic will always be prone to ecological and other crises. Sustainable development meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.*
>
> *(Brundtland 1987:8)*

[4] Many excellent texts contain more extensive histories and working definitions of sustainability and urban sustainability. See our index and bibliography for references to such work.

Importantly, the Brundtland Report calls for economic development that is both ecologically and socially conscious. Thus, its ideals were similar to those of socially democratic countries, and they echoed the philosophies of social justice activists across the globe.

The Report had a powerful impact, spawning a series of global discussions. Some of the most influential of those took place during the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development – Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. There, participants adopted Agenda 21,[5] which followed up on some of the ideas set forth by Brundtland. Consistent with neoliberal practices and ideas that devolved responsibility away from federal governments, Agenda 21 emphasized the role of "local authorities" in creating policies, regulations, and infrastructure that would advance sustainable goals (Portney 2013). Accordingly, leaders from European cities and towns came together two years later to pass the Aalborg Charter,[6] a plan for achieving sustainable goals, mainly through local initiatives.

As sustainability discourse grew in popularity, neoliberal ideas also achieved prominence, solidifying into a range of policies that would restructure economies and governance in cities, states, and nations throughout the globe. In addition to favoring local – rather than national – governance, neoliberalism also promulgated the idea that if left to prosper unfettered, market-based economies would not only "lift all boats" (i.e., benefit all citizens) but also regulate themselves. From this perspective, the role of government should be to promote private economic development and allow the market itself to resolve the ecological and social concerns raised by the Brundtland Report (Escobar 1995; Harvey 2005; Redclift 1987, 2005). Accordingly, neoliberalism encouraged the widespread privatization of public services, including the provision and distribution of water and energy. As well, it led to the privatization and commoditization of environmental resources, such as forests, nature reserves, and even carbon. Private companies, the thinking went, would be incentivized to find efficient and profitable ways to provide and manage these services and resources, and be free from the partisan politics that tend to bog down governmental entities. As geographer Eric Swyngedouw explains, neoliberal approaches to sustainability were based on

> *[T]he basic vision that techno-natural and socio-metabolic interventions are urgently needed if we wish to secure the survival of the planet and much of what it contains. Difficulties and problems, such as environmental concerns that are generally staged and accepted as problematic need to be dealt with through compromise, managerial and technical arrangement, and the production of consensus.*
>
> *(2007:26)*

[5] www.un.org/esa/dsd/agenda21/

[6] Since 1994, the Aalborg Campaign has resulted in a number of initiatives including the recent Aalborg Commitments signed in 2004. See www.aalborgplus10.dk/

According to neoliberal logics, technological fixes to environmental problems were objectively rational and thus divorced from macro and micro politics. As a result, all kinds of stakeholders could come to the table and eventually find consensus on the optimal way to approach environmental issues. Redclift refers to such neoliberal versions of sustainability as "the 'new' sustainability discourses," which, he contends, "were often clothed in new language – deliberation, citizenship, even the rights of species – but they hid, or marginalised, the inequalities and cultural distinctions, which had driven the 'environmental' agenda internationally" (2005:81; see Chapters 3 and 9).

This new clothing fit especially well in urban contexts. After economic crises of the 1970s left North American and European cities in chaos (much of which was blamed on failures of governance), neoliberal trends toward privatization, free markets, and small government took hold of city policy agendas and the structure of municipal governments (Hackworth 2006). At the same time, the social unrest of the 1960s and early 1970s gave rise to political discourses about enfranchisement, equality, and participatory politics, which were selectively appropriated by urban regimes (Steinberg 1996). Several decades later, as public concerns about global climate change and urbanization grew, neoliberal agendas adopted sustainability as a popular discourse that simultaneously signaled environmental concern and progressive and participatory governance. As a brand, it especially appealed to the upscale, cosmopolitan, and politically liberal urbanites that cities hoped to attract (see Chapter 4).

It is crucial to note here that we do not intend to dismiss sustainability as a wholly co-opted discourse, now useful only as a marketing device for duped urban citizens. Rather, we recognize that for many activists and practitioners, it has continued to provide a useful framework for addressing the economic, social, and/or ecological concerns initially imparted by the Brundtland Commission. In particular, the sustainability conferences and agendas of the early 1990s ignited the imaginations of urban planners, architects, and designers who went on to use the concept to innovate more ecologically minded projects.

Indeed, for urban professionals, sustainability rekindled ideals about green space and density that have historically been an important part of city planning. For instance, parks and gardens have always been important features of urban areas, from the reflexive spaces of China and Japan to the Imperial Esplanades of Paris and Vienna (claimed by revolutionaries and republicans for new publics). During and after the Industrial Revolution, these spaces became especially essential, as planners and activists reacted to urban pollution and pestilence by channeling their concerns about the importance of green space, clean air and water, and salubrity into city beautiful and garden city movements. Such efforts resulted in massive park creation, public health, and restoration

projects. A few decades later, similar ideas about the role of green space in urban improvement informed regional planning and civic campaigns that sought to preserve nature through designated areas and connective parkways (Fanstein and Campbell 2003; Condon 2010; Farr 2012). In addition, planned spaces combined walkability, community-mindedness, and access to open spaces and recreation. These spaces then constituted the foundations for the creation of a wide variety of garden cities and new towns – from Ebenezer Howard's visions of a rural–urban hybrid to Clarence Perry's models for new neighborhoods, the planned developments of Greenbelt suburbs, or generations of greenfield suburban "communities." Importantly, planning for parks, greenways, and even garden cities was never without controversy, especially as clearing the way for green spaces was often a mechanism for clearing impoverished areas, and opportunities to experience urban nature were frequently limited to middle and upper class, white citizens (Checker 2010).[7]

Today, historic ideas about integrating nature and urban/suburban space find expression in various interpretations of sustainable urban planning. However, the role of social justice in these approaches remains highly controversial (see Chapter 10). For example, Landscape Urbanism is a relatively recent planning approach that advocates for native habitat designs that include diverse species and landscapes that require very low resource use. However, critics claim that Landscape Urbanists prioritize aesthetic and ecological concerns over human needs (see Chapters 3 and 9). In contrast, New Urbanism is an approach that was popularized in the 1980s, promotes walkable streets, compact design, and mixed-use developments. But Landscape Urbanists find that these designs do not prioritize the natural environment and often involve diverting streams and disrupting natural wetlands. Still others, such as those advocating for "just sustainabilities" or "complete streets," find that both approaches are overly idealistic and neither pays enough attention to the realities of social dynamics and systemic inequality.[8]

Such debates have practical implications and often surround contemporary urban sustainability projects. For instance, New York City's High-Line park, which opened in 2010, was guided by principles of Landscape Urbanism and has won numerous awards for its sustainable features. Built atop an unused and crumbling elevated railway line, the park features mostly native plants and functions as a state-of-the-art green roof, requiring minimal supplementary

[7] It should be noted that the history contained in this section is highly abbreviated. For more in-depth and complicated accounts of the topics touched on here, including urban green space planning, suburban sprawl, the growth of the suburbs, etc. see Index and Bibliography.

[8] www.smartgrowthamerica.org/complete-streets/

watering. For some, the project showcases an inspiring blossoming of nature amid urban detritus. But others question its ramifications for social justice and read it as a sign of gentrification and, in its special financing, the harbinger of a "two tier" system of urban parks across New York (Morenas 2013).

Contemporary iterations of sustainability discourse also reflect long-standing discussions and concerns about the environmental and social repercussions of postwar sprawl. For example, the growth of North American suburbs can be traced to post–World War II public policies that privileged home and car ownership as well as highway creation. By encouraging and enabling middle class, white urbanites to live outside the city limits and experience the benefits of more "natural" surroundings, these policies also fomented divisions of class, race and gender across metropolitan landscapes (see Chapters 11 and 12). Such patterns of escape have since echoed in peri-urban and second-home development in Europe, gated communities in Latin America, and new suburbs in China (Sugrue 1996; Fleischer 2010). But as suburbs and satellite cities sprawled farther and farther from urban cores, they encroached on rural areas and required suburbanites to commute vast distances to the jobs, shopping, and cultural venues that the cities offered (Bruegman 2005; McDonogh 2013).

In the 1980s, Smart Growth and New Urbanism movements reacted to the negative environmental and social ramifications of sprawl by calling for the creation of compact, transit-oriented communities with walkable commercial districts and mixed-use developments (even if many such projects end up in suburban venues). These ideas also appear in future-oriented narratives of urban sustainability, which try to balance natural and cultural resource preservation and enhancement, development, and public and economic health. Such ideas (often framed as some form of sustainable, smart, or low growth) have now become normalized in urban planning. Yet they remain difficult to operationalize, and are often ensnared by the competing agendas of local businesses, zoning boards, civic organizations, and environmental groups (Farr 2012; Duany and Talen 2013).

More recently, with growing awareness of climate change predictions and in the wake of recent disasters, such as the Kobe Earthquake and Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, sustainable urban development concepts have spawned another subset of discourses, known as "resiliency" or the ability of urban populations to withstand and recover from environmental disturbances and disasters (Vale and Campanella 2005; see Snapshot 2 and Chapter 5). This perspective draws on a biological phenomenon – population recovery after stress – to talk about human actions and natural events. Emphasizing a systems approach to recovery, resiliency can include an array of ecological resources that