

Chapter 7

Conclusion



Towards Real Urban Planning: Revisiting the City, Citizens and Development

Abstract The book concludes with a synthesized analysis of urban planning in Southern cities, with a particular focus on medium sized cities that play a role of intermediation between their suburban and rural environments and the whole urban network. Starting from the literature on the topic, as presented mainly in Chaps. 2 and 3, we will compare the conceptual advances, as well as the statistical and global data, with the results of the fieldwork carried out in three cities chosen to tackle this theme in specific local and regional contexts.

This brings us to highlight the similarities and differences between each urban situation, in order to draw the main lessons that emerge from the analysis. We are able to decrypt the constraints that cities – their authorities, their administrations and their populations – face. And whether or not these restrictions hinder the implementation of a coherent urban planning system. It is on this basis that we will be able to identify the key elements that represent the pillars of an alternative version of urban planning to that which exists (when it exists!), in terms of foundations and guiding principles, objectives and methods used to achieve them, content and instructions. Planning can thus become a real instrument to guide and to manage the city and its region. We recall that urban planning, as we envisage it, is not only a technical exercise dealing with the territory, in the spatial and geographical sense of the definition, but truly an approach aimed at integrating societal issues into a planning process. Planning thus clearly contributes to moving towards a city that is not only socially and economically inclusive, but also sustainable, in which social and economic factors are rooted in the preservation of natural resources, within the framework of participatory and democratic public policies.

Keywords Urban planning · Sustainable urban development · Intermediate cities · Urban complexity · Interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity

7.1 Between Poverty and Urban Development

I started from the disarming observation (which I was able to verify both in the field and in my research) that many innovative urban development experiments are being conducted in many Asian, African and Latin American cities. These experiments are often considered successful, and even as best practices to replicate. One hopes that they presage new and improved forms urban management that takes into account inhabitants' concerns. And yet, United Nations statistics, televised reports and field research all confirm the same thing: the number of slums, poor people and disparities between rich and poor are increasing. It is not impossible to imagine that something is actually wrong, and that a gap exists between this local effervescence and the harsh reality at the global level.

While we mustn't despair, strong arguments do favor a critical analysis of reality: overall, the structure of cities is improving. Yet, more and more urban dwellers are living precariously.

This seeming contradiction is, in fact, an illusion, and merely reflects the enormous challenges that cities face, especially in South countries: the extremely rapid increase in the number of city dwellers is leading to endless sprawl of the inhabited territory. The main characteristic of South cities is that this growth - both demographic and spatial - is also taking place at record speed. It is therefore not surprising that spatial planning and the organization of human activities confront many obstacles; social demands and needs far surpass both service and infrastructure supply, as well as urban actors' capacity to meet them.

In such extreme conditions, solving the technical, material and human problems these agglomerations face requires (1) identifying pressing needs and social demands in order to define the priorities of public and private investments and (2) that the authorities take important measures. All this while handling emergencies and everyday life as best as possible. It is in this risky, sometimes hazardous context that planning must reinvent itself, torn between rigor and flexibility, standards and creativity. The specificities of each site (what makes each city and urban society special), its history and geography combine with these overarching principles.

This urbanization can appear perfectly coherent and organized or, on the contrary, disordered and chaotic, as is often the case in South cities. This partial or total disorganization is the result of varied and variable factors that were addressed in the preceding chapters. One notable reason is both individuals' and the public authorities' inability to handle and solve problems as they arise. The latter tend to follow learned precepts and apply classic urban planning recipes. Be it procrastination or political choice, the result is the same: a thousand and one other (individual, social and institutional) ways of problem solving creep in, sometimes in a formalized way, but often outside the law based on informal arrangements, social struggles, political patronage and corruption. It's anything goes. We have synthesized this situation in the following formula: *territorial fragmentation = social segregation*. Thus do we witness the reproduction of the great sociological patterns of urban organization

comprised of power struggles, conflicts, negotiations, socio-economic inequalities and political issues.

Urban precariousness in all its forms bears witness to this. Be it slums, the environmental risks associated with deforestation, flooding in neighborhoods without adequate drainage, or the insecurity of informal work, all are signs of the fundamental incompatibility between social demands and the needs of the population on one hand, and public/private financial investment capacity (based on choice criteria that are not always transparent) on the other. Poor populations react to this via do-it-yourself survival solutions, resourcefulness and spontaneous or collective actions. Because the poor must act fast (and act together) in order to not lose the game. And this game is crucial for them because it is their urban integration that is at stake. That, and the lives and futures of their children. It cannot wait. Conversely, for those on the other team (i.e. speculators, capitalists and politicians with power), playing for time, procrastinating and palavering may be a bit risky but can have big pay offs. So for them, sometimes it is worth waiting, or even bending the rules a bit. This also takes the form of speculation on future lots in informal neighborhoods (while pocketing value-added land, or, as politicians would say, “beautifying” them in return for votes in the next election).

7.2 Planning for Sustainable Urban Development

Fundamentally speaking, urban planning is a decision-making instrument of major importance, whose mastery and wise use could help us think about the future and organize activities in a rational, functional way. But urban planning must be based on a future vision and idea of the city of tomorrow, with goals that actually become policies, strategies, programs and actions.

As the three case studies demonstrate, urban planning too often serves as a technical display, a technocratic, simplistic way to hide the lack of a solid urban project behind procedures, with utopian expectations that rarely have true outcomes. To put it another way, planning “instrumentalizes” poverty. Or worse, it merely serves as a dramatization, a fool’s game designed to make ordinary city dwellers believe in a “bright future” and dream of another life to obscure the harsh reality of their existence. The takes place through the exploitation of individuals and resources at the expense of the majority and for the benefit of a rich minority.

But nothing means anything if the urban planning process is not part of a more global vision founded on sustainable urban development. The words “sustainable urban development” describe this integrative environment, which acts as a framework wherein one can reflect on the complexity of the city and its urbanity in the present and future. Taking “sustainable urban development” as a horizon promotes the sharing of ideas and experiences in an open way based on explicit criteria to provide alternatives to classic models that have not had the expected outcomes.

The chapters on urban data and criticism of urban planning brought us back to this notion of sustainable development. In these final considerations, we can draw a parallel with another concept used in this work: that of the inclusive city. What is this sustainable, inclusive city, for which urban planning would serve as a decision-making tool?

Starting from three dimensions – environmental, social and economic – sustainability aims to balance the protection of natural resources, social equity and economic prosperity, while safeguarding against the latter dimension’s negative impact on the first two. This commendable perspective seems to be more wishful thinking than an actual conceptual analysis. In fact, since the 1980s, the impact of globalization of economic exchanges and the challenging of national protectionist measures – the very antithesis of the precepts of sustainable development – have been felt worldwide. The main consequence of this economic “revolution” is the imposing of the same economic model on all countries, economic producers and policy makers. This has unquestionably boosted the productivity of more dynamic emerging countries like China and Vietnam, with whom we have collaborated scientifically, in international markets. But it has also put enormous pressure on workers and working conditions, and relegated the poorest countries, which are unable to keep up with this global transition, to the margins. This is clearly the case in Burkina Faso, another country we have collaborated with, whose cotton exports have been hard hit by international market laws. Such countries have no means to defend their small rural producers against Asian and North American industrial giants.

The balance that sustainable development seeks is far from being achieved. Tensions between economic growth – which has been positive the world over for many years – and the social distribution of the wealth accumulated as such have steadily worsened. Overall, and in the three countries where we conducted our studies, the rich have become richer and the poor more numerous and even poorer¹ over the last three decades.

Moving away from this economic and social confrontation for a moment, we can nonetheless concede that progress has been made on the environmental front. Environmental criteria have had a positive impact on production methods, administrative organization and spatial planning. Considering environmental criteria in the organization of cities and the community activities that take place in them is in keeping with the concerns of the sustainable development model. A territorial dimension designed to spread human settlements out evenly over a given territory can be added to the environmental, social and economic dimensions, in the effort to avoid urban clustering and rural flight.

But (because there is a “but”), while these improvements are notable in many European cities, they have only recently appeared on the agendas of major Latin American cities (mainly in the form of pedestrian zones, green spaces and public

¹For instance, in January 2019 Oxfam declared that “0.8% of the world’s population have net worth in excess of \$1 million and controls 44.8% of the world’s wealth. The bottom half’s wealth fell by 11%, whereas a few thousand billionaires saw their wealth increase by 12%” (See <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2019/1/22/18192774/oxfam-inequality-report-2019-davos-wealth>).

transport lanes), and are virtually inexistent in African cities (except for the first Bus Rapid Transit initiatives in cities like Dakar and Lagos). In the medium-sized cities studied in this book and in the Global South more generally, crucial issues such as wastewater and solid waste treatment are largely ignored due to a lack of resources and the absence of political will, at the risk of individuals' health.

7.3 Intermediate Cities: Between Urbanity and Regional Integration

The desire to question urban planning based on small and medium-sized intermediate cities illustrates the often poorly-understood issues of urban typology and the role these intermediate cities can play in evenly distributing individuals over an urban territory. As such, intermediate cities act as an interface between the rural and urban worlds and serve as service and amenity hubs for their regions. The three case studies demonstrate these cities' potential for sustainable development throughout the regional and national territory. They also show that these cities are not only little known and rarely studied, but that, beyond their differences, they also face great difficulties in establishing reliable, helpful urban planning tools.

Several authors quoted in this book question planning as it is practiced in South cities. They consider it inappropriate, as it is based on Western models and is unsuited to the characteristics of developing countries. These errors in urban planning notably affect small and medium-sized cities, which lack the human and financial resources to address important issues. In fact, it is now internationally recognized that urban agglomerations of less than 500,000 inhabitants have the highest population growth rates – in other words, higher than those of bigger cities. They are also those that suffer the most from a lack of administrative services (computer and internet communication, for example) and reliable, qualified staff. Moreover, they often have budgets that are insufficient for their needs, thus making them highly dependent on the central government and lenders.

Focusing on intermediate cities has shown their important in the fight for sustainable development, as a viable, attractive alternative to large urban areas. Easily assimilated to “ordinary cities” as defined by J. Robinson (2006), many indeed require appropriate management and better planning to organize their territories and the human activities there more effectively. All of this within the cities limits of city, but with an important impact on the regional environment as well.

Because they are smaller, one might think that the problems these intermediate cities face are less serious and more easily resolvable. This is a fallacy. As they are rarely known outside their provincial or national borders, they have difficulty attracting talent and funding, and must manage their problems locally, without consistent, structured outside support or recognition of their efforts.

At the crossroads of rural and urban, these small and medium-sized cities, which act as intermediaries between a varied, abundant supply and social demands, are in

desperate need of effective urban planning. And as we have seen, in those cases where urban planning does exist, it has not really served as a guide for reasoned, reasonable urban management.

7.4 An Alternative Based on Interdisciplinarity and Social Dialogue

In Chap. 3, we reversed the logic by proposing a framework indicating the different dimensions and phases of alternative planning (Table 3.1) and have attempted to explain it.

Rather than focusing on space and materials as too many urban planners and engineers tend to do, we suggest a conceptual and methodological approach based on listening to inhabitants and social dialogues in order to identify needs and priorities. This must take place well before designing plans and reproducing patterns that have no proven foundations. There is no contempt for technology or engineering here. On the contrary, we know that engineers, urban planners and architects are the backbone of urban planning. Data management and mapping tools, like open access to geospatial data, are revolutionary in that they favors exchanges between urban actors and facilitate the fundamental questioning of political and technical powers.

But my 30 years of career experience and the three studies discussed in this book show that understanding urban complexity can only be accomplished through an interdisciplinary approach involving the social and technical sciences, and transdisciplinarity between researchers, service providers and inhabitants. Opening ourselves up to innovative ways of doing things is not scientific coquetry; it is an ethical, social obligation that allows us to deal with the all too often catastrophic living conditions of poor urban families. As urban researchers, it is also our job to not accept such social inequalities and obstacles in terms of access to urban services and amenities.

Although we wrote this some time ago, this is unfortunately still the case: the poor pay for their right to the city at a higher cost than other city dwellers. This is true not only in terms of human energy but financially as well, as access to public utility networks is rare when not altogether inexistent for the most destitute. Yet, as we know, the city is a privileged space of sociability and individual and collective creativity.

Some final recommendations could serve as a guideline for promoting planning alternatives.

Again, taking up the four references in terms of sustainable urban development – the environmental, social, economic and territorial dimensions – we must first analyze the factors that challenge the sustainability of the urban actions that have been carried out so far, before envisaging any technical planning action.

This diagnostic work is based on sustainable urban development. Urban development is an “ideal”, and sustainability is its “time horizon”. Urban sustainability criteria are thus “the angle” from which urban complexity will be analyzed. Urban planning should serve as “instrumentation” to organize action and measure its effects.

On this basis, taking into account the research conducted at the beginning of the book on the evolution of the “urban world” and the shortcomings in the application of exogenous urban planning models in South cities, we have concluded that two paths can guide urban planning towards sustainable, shared development.

The first guides development through the “inclusive city” concept, a city whose main concern is integrating people in a society that promotes well-being and personal, family and social growth. This ultimate goal, which is a long-term ambition, is the counterpart of the individual and collective exclusion, marginalization and segregation we see today. By its mere existence, inclusion denounces the one billion poor urban dwellers living in precarious conditions and criticizes this disastrous reality as not being a “fatality”, nor a “natural phenomenon”, nor an “inevitable consequence” of growth. On the contrary, it is “a fact of society”, the result of a social construction, a logic of social and economic exploitation that characterizes contemporary society and leaves its mark on South cities.

The inclusive city includes the four dimensions of sustainable urban development because it fashions a living environment that is conducive to individual emancipation and social solidarity. It contributes greatly to the fight against poverty, as the urban analysis and political action that emanate from its focus on margins, gaps, shortcomings and risks, as well as on the conflicts born of these tensions. This shift in our perspective highlights the many expressions of the segregation process. It seeks ways to integrate the poor based on their real needs because those left behind are symptomatic of an overall logic: that of the hard, brutal, violent, contemporary South city and its unfair growth dynamic.

I remember what my Cameroonian director said when I was working as a young head of the liaison service and land affairs for the Nylon zone management agency, in Douala, Cameroon, in the 1980s: “It’s not the 90% success that matters. What counts are the 10% who are left behind. The most complicated thing is finding the right solutions for getting that marginalized 10% out of where they are.” I reinterpret Pierre Elong Mbassi’s sayings as best I can remember them, knowing how much they have guided me and still serve as a yardstick in assessing the work done. We can be proud of what we do well for the vast majority of urban dwellers, but must remain vigilant (and creative) about supporting the urban poor in their initiatives. They know the city is their future. They are entitled to it, like all of us. And all the more so as they represent the majority of urban dwellers in developing countries, albeit one that does not interest the wealthy and of which the authorities are wary.

To my mind, urban development should first and foremost focus on urban poverty in order to understand its origin – be it residential, land-wise or infrastructural. This precariousness translates into a lack of access to urban services and networks. This collaboration between researchers, professionals and poor citizens is not neutral; it stems from scientists’ desire to enter the public arena and position themselves. The right to the city and social justice are not just moral values. They are also goals of well-thought out sustainable urban development. This means that social justice and the right to the city force us to understand this “state of facts”. For if we do not understand urban dynamics in their very foundations and orientations, there is no way to transform the city as a whole.

The second path concerns the methods to be followed.

Knowledge that is not shared is not true knowledge. Co-creation provides an opportunity for debate, comparing ideas and visions, and brainstorming on the design and application of acceptable, appropriate solutions. This implies political will and an institutional framework that allows for it.

Urban settings are highly conducive to such prospects. The urban reality is complex in terms of its ever-increasing technological components, but also in terms of its social, economic and cultural interactions. The interactions between society, the built environment and natural resources add to the complexity. Analyzing a complex phenomenon like South cities requires the bringing together of a host of diverse skills. An interdisciplinary approach is essential to establishing a thorough diagnosis of the urban reality. Urban planners, architects and engineers must pool their knowledge with the know-how of social scientists, environmentalists, geographers, financial specialists and public managers. But the approach goes beyond research between scientific disciplines. Really making things happen on the ground means working with representatives of urban society such as resident associations, neighborhood groups, business associations, political parties, religious groups, etc.). Consultancy must no longer be merely technical or scientific. A transdisciplinary approach that allowing for a comparison of the “needs identified” and “social demands” is imperative. Analyzing urbanity through a shared diagnosis with urban actors at a precise moment in a given situation is essential for developing urban planning founded on rigorous, realistic, solid bases.

7.5 A Few Simple Rules for Dealing with Urban Complexity

These conclusions and recommendations may seem obvious...on paper, at least. But we know that applying such a methodology can be difficult, as it challenges the established powers, hierarchies and power relationships between urban actors.

At different times during our urban research and consultancy to urban stakeholders (local governments, etc.), we followed these steps:

1. a reference framework based on sustainable urban development goals;
2. an inclusive city position;
3. a poverty alleviation focus;
4. an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary urban diagnosis.

These are the necessary premises for an effective urban planning approach.

The city must be considered and transformed based on the existing reality and the actions carried out by different actors at different scales. This “reality principle” is the best way to safeguard against pharaonic megaprojects (new cities and other top down absurdities). The iteration between inhabitants, professionals, researchers and decision-makers is the most failsafe technique for incorporating the many innovative processes, which can be tested in full scale.

That is why planning the city and its surrounding environment must respect certain fundamental criteria, among them:

- the development of an urban plan, which is a participatory process involving the population in both the analysis and decision-making phases;
- the proposed investments are based on
 - (a) the available budget and
 - (b) outside grants;
- priority actions and investments help in the fight against poverty and promoting the individual and collective integration of urban dwellers without discrimination;
- a shared database with open, transparent access and easy-to-use technical tools;
- the government, local administration and decision-makers are accountable to city-dwellers so as to make planning a tool of communication and exchange between the local authorities, the population and stakeholders, and to ensure that the impact of public action in general is measured, especially in urban projects.

An in-depth diagnosis and participatory planning are key elements for providing sustainable urban development planning alternatives.

Given the number of urban dwellers on the planet, the extent of urban poverty and the living conditions of the poor, the stakes are high and must be taken seriously. For they are the basis of real and profound changes in South cities and the best way both to promote sustainability and to fight against various forms of urban exploitation and segregation.

Reference

Robinson J (2006) *Ordinary cities: between modernity and development*. Routledge, London. ISBN 0-415-30487-3

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