

Sustainable Urban Development
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Urban planning, design, and development processes are central to sustainability, and many jurisdictions around the globe have started to meet the challenge of reforming these so as to produce more sustainable urban development. The range of existing or potential urban actions is vast. Priorities include reducing greenhouse gas emissions, adapting to global warming, greening the city, promoting biking and walking, ensuring compact and walkable urban form, improving social equity, and developing green economies. The best strategies in any given place depend on the context, but there is substantial agreement on many basic approaches, and many of these are now embraced by mainstream organizations such as the American Planning Association and the Royal Town Planning Institute.

The literature on the subject of urban sustainability is also vast. Building on the work of past visionaries such as Ebenezer Howard, Lewis Mumford, Jane Jacobs, and Ian McHarg, groups such as the Worldwatch Institute and Friends of the Earth as well as individual writers developed initial urban sustainability visions in the 1970s and 1980s. Then a flood of sustainable city-related writings started to appear in the 1990s, spurred in part by the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. Excerpts from many leading contributions to the urban sustainability literature are contained in Routledge's *Sustainable Urban Development Reader* (3rd edition 2014). This section of Routledge's Sustainability Hub will likewise reference many urban sustainability themes and resources.

The main point I'd like to develop in this brief introductory essay is that the sustainable development of cities and towns is not a question of technocratically applying a given set of strategies, though that can be important, but of developing more creative, ecological, and proactive ways of understanding and addressing urban problems. Sustainability requires a different mindset from those that created the problems in the first place, to paraphrase Einstein. Such paradigm change is very difficult, and requires a process of social evolution, within which institutions, economics, technologies, and social environments change so as to reinforce different behaviours and outlooks within individuals.

One main part of the new mindset is ecological thought. This doesn't mean focusing on environmental issues; rather, it means understanding the world in terms of dynamic, evolving, interconnected systems, and learning to see opportunities to improve urban sustainability within these complex contexts. This approach is truly transdisciplinary – thinking outside the boxes of traditional disciplines, institutions, and research methodologies. Whereas in the past many urban planning and development specialties proceeded in isolation from one another – often planning transportation systems, land use, housing, economic development, and environmental protection separately, as though they did not affect one another – the urgent need now is for integration.

Closely related is the need to coordinate different scales of urban planning (linking strategies at the building, site, neighbourhood, district, city, region, nation, and global scales), and to think across time frames (developing a better sense of how actions might benefit both near- and long-term social and ecological welfare as well as building on knowledge from the past). Such types of integrative thought can lead to more effective sustainability solutions since they better reflect the dynamic, interdependent nature of urban systems. Urban planning has been moving towards

more ecological outlooks for several decades now (and many of the earlier visionaries mentioned above also called for this), but much more can be done.

Equally important is the need for professionals to be more proactive and visionary. The sustainability mindset throws out the modernist notion of the detached, objective urban planning expert crunching numbers separate from policy formation or action, and acknowledges the need for everyone to be active in helping to bring about more sustainable cities and towns. At different times in their lives each person can play many different roles – as activist, organizer, visionary, technical expert, community member, collaborator, and communicator. Granted, we must all specialize to some extent, and some jobs call for particular roles more than others, but it is crucial to keep the focus on action and on actually achieving sustainability goals. ‘Muddling through’, as urban planners have frequently been content to do in the past, is not enough. Greenhouse gas emissions must be reduced, species saved, social equity improved, and other objectives met. When little progress is being made through one approach, another can be tried.

Current political systems in many parts of the world are dysfunctional, and great economic power supports the status quo. Business-as-usual just isn’t going to produce sustainable urban development. So new mindsets as well as new social and political institutions – for example to limit the power of corporations and the wealthy – are essential. The challenges are great, but as the links on this website will make clear, the variety of interesting strategies and opportunities related to sustainable urban development is large as well. Behind each example lies the question of which creative new ways of understanding sustainability opportunities have led to the innovation, and how participants might develop even more creative approaches in the future.

References

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