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# Sustainable Cities:


# Planning movements for Livable Cities

ERST 604: Urban and Regional Planning

Assignment #4

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A vision without a plan is just a dream. A plan without a vision is just drudgery. But a vision with a plan can change the world.

-- Proverb

**Introduction**

The concept of urban sustainability combines the definition of 'urban' with the meaning of 'sustainable'. Classification of these terms can be subjective; making the words difficult to define. The Merriam-Webster online-dictionary (2008) defines urban as an adjective meaning "of, relating to, characteristic of, or constituting a city". I agree with this definition, however, for the purpose of this assignment I am defining urban as a level of relatively dense development often labelled a city. This definition is more applicable to the planning context of this paper. The *Merriam-Webster* online-dictionary (2008) defines 'Sustainable' as a method of using a resource so that the resource is not depleted or permanently damaged. Further, 'sustainability' is a condition of a natural, human or mixed system to withstand or adapt to the future (Vallance, 2008b). Therefore, 'urban sustainability' combines the meanings of both words and refers to a city that continually meets the needs of society, or a livable city.

In addition to the definitions, Suzanne Vallance's (2008b) research found that sustainability has become a modern buzzword and has different meanings to different people. Depending on a person's perspective the word can have a variety of connotations, usually centred on economic, social and environmental connotations. As a Recreation, Park and Tourism Management student, for me urban sustainability has a socially environmental connotation. From my perspective, one example of a physical form of urban sustainability is a park. A successful urban park provides an opportunity for socialization among people, natural environmental processes to take place and for the two, people and nature, to interact. Although my perspective is limited to my expertise and narrowed by my passion for urban greenspace, it

acknowledges that other aspects of sustainability, such as economic and political conditions must exist for a functioning livable city. The combination of economic, political and ecological conditions creates planning movements which impact urban sustainability.

Planning movements are socially constructed and can have positive and negative impacts on urban sustainability. Planning movements can be described as a trendy form of development upholding specific political ideals. For example, a planning movement that contaminated America post World War II in the mid 1900's promoted single detached residential housing and zoning for separate land use. At the time, this planning movement was very popular. Consequently, today America suffers from sprawl's negative implications reducing quality of life and requiring transportation around the automobile (New Partners, 2006). Although research shows that low density planning can be sustainable in terms of self sufficiency (Vallance, 2008b), the argument of this paper supports density and mix use zoning development in order to promote non-motorized transportation as the ultimate form of a livable city.

Planning movements have various approaches depending on politics, culture, timing, resources, size, connections to other urban areas and government and personality (Vallance, 2008a). Planning movements in connection with sustainability include Green Cities (eco-city), Healthy Cities (social city), Creative City (economic city), Compact Cities, Smart Growth and New Urbanism (Vallance, 2008a). Although they all strive for sustainability, these planning movements have specifics differentiating them from one and another (see Table 1).

Table 1. The Association of Planning Movements with Dimensions of Society

| Planning Movement | Economic | Ecological | Social |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Green Cities** | Retrofits older cities | Accommodates nature | Maintains sense of place |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Healthy Cities** | Supplies diverse services | N/A | Reduces marginalism |
| **Creative Cities** | Global competitiveness | N/A | Accepting culture |
| **Compact Cities** | Generates wealth | Greenbelts<br>Energy efficient | Meets housing needs<br>Neighbourhood vitality |
| **New Urbanism** | Special attraction | Can encourage auto use | Favours the upper class |
| **Smart Growth** | Policy incentives for developers | Non-motorized transportation | Underplays social preferences |

(Vallance, 2008a)

Whether they are successful or not, overall these movements strive to improve the social, ecological and political conditions of cities. Basically, sustainable planning movements strive to make cities more livable. I will discuss the role, opportunities and challenges for planners and planning regarding these movements, with an emphasis on Smart Growth because I support and am most familiar with the movement.

**Discussion**

The role of planners is one of many in implementing a planning movement in order to achieve urban sustainability. Planners must work with policies, policy makers, developers, community members and the environment. Planners have a unique opportunity within this partnership to guide future development. Planners create a vision for cities (Hostetler, 2008). Being a visionary provides planners immense opportunity. City planning of urban sustainability has the opportunity to influence policy, which inturn influences development, which inturn influences the community, which unavoidably impacts the environment. Boone and Modarres (2006) provide a real-world example of this 'ripple effect' which began in response to a policy which intended to be sustainable.

Planners must learn from past experiences regarding these movements. For example, in an attempt to improve air pollution Mexico City banned driving on certain days based on vehicle licence plate numbers. Unfortunately, this policy had an opposite effect and resulted in an increase of air pollution because in order to drive on non-driving days, people bought inexpensive and sub-standard cars which emitted more pollutants worsening air quality (Boone,

2006). This policy is an example of how important it is for planners and the plan of a sustainable city to be rationale and not to assume social behaviour and extremely alter social norms. It also provides an example of how a policy will fail if it is too progressive. Despite an environmentally sustainable intention, the outcome can have negative impacts.

This example also shows how inter-dependent planners, policies, developers, community members and the environment are to one and another. Due to their different professions, perspectives and motives, it is often challenging to amalgamate support under a unanimous view of urban sustainability. Planners are restricted by policies, developers are limited by planners and policies, community members' lifestyle is formed by developers and the environment is impacted by the community's lifestyle (Hostetler, 2008).

Another challenge regarding sustainability is that planners do not know the future. A key component of urban sustainability is making a city adaptable and usable in the future. Is it possible to achieve complete urban sustainability? Technology rapidly increases the rate of change and planners today are not aware of what urban environments will be in the future. For example, the planning movements for urban sustainability exist today because planners could not predict the future. Returning to the example of suburban sprawl, at the time planners did not realize the social, political and environmental consequences of planning around the automobile. Therefore, urban sustainability can best be achieved by planning cities that are malleable, fluid and adaptable to change. Contrary to this intangible means of achievement for sustainability, current city plans, zoning and policies are most often resilient to change.

Planning can be sustainable within a modern society of continuous technological changes and fleeting popular trends, through a strongpoint of the Smart Growth movement. Smart Growth utilizes incentive based policies for sustainable planning by developers (Boone, 2006; New Partners, 2006; Hostetler, 2008). A longitudinal research study shows that dangling a

carrot in front of developers proves to be the most effective way to create sustainable development (Hostetler, 2008). These incentives can range from 'fast tracking' permits to tax incentives and other financial or capital compensation for developers. However, in order for the development to be successful it must be more then environmentally friendly, it must be livable. "Just because a place is environmentally "fit" doesn't mean you'd want to spend your life there-think glaciers and rain forests" (Kahn, 2007). Finding the perfect balance between what is green and what is livable can create paradise. For example, imagine waking on a Saturday morning on a bustling greenway. Minutes by foot from your front door are your favourite bakery, farmer's market and coffee shop, newspaper stand and a beautifully landscaped little park. Your dry cleaning awaits just two doors down. If you lived in a Smart Growth neighbourhood, this would be home (Bochner, 2003)

Smart growth neighbourhoods, sometimes called 'livable communities', are defined by their "planned use of space, emphasizing attractive, landscaped neighbourhoods, conservation of open space, a complementary mix of residential and commercial properties and an open, comfortable design that promotes walking, bicycling and transit use" (Bochner, 2003 p.41). The suburban sprawl planning movement orientated around single use zoning and transportation around the automobile has created seemingly endless opportunities across America to retrofit cities with Smart Growth principles. The Sierra Club, an American environmental organization, provides 'city transformations' in their 'stop sprawl' campaign. The purpose of these transformations is to depict what "smart growth" looks like. They show how the built environment affects the look, feel and quality of life of communities. The following real-world, "computer-generated simulations show the difference between sprawl and smart growth and demonstrate how sprawling communities can be revitalized and made more livable" (Price, 2008). Steve Price of Urban Advantage uses digital photo re-imaging to

transform the following city's existing conditions into a more livable environment (see Images 1 and 2 below).

Kendall, Florida, USA:

Image 1: Existing conditions reflecting suburban sprawl.

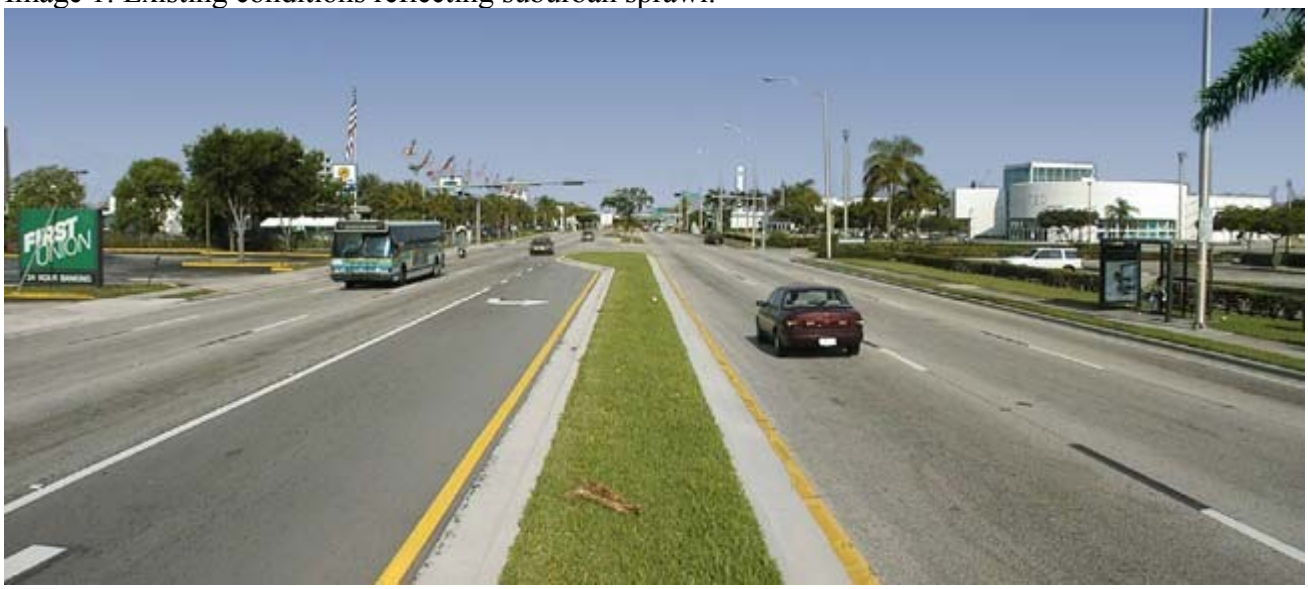


Image 2: Incorporating the development of Smart Growth principles by adding light rail, street trees and street-oriented mixed-use development.

One could argue the above images are a transformation of gentrification, especially in a time when half the world's population lives in cities, and funding for basic social services are tight. A common perception is that urban parks and gardens are a luxury (Ackerman, 2006). When in actuality, the opposite is true- urban parks and greenspace is essential. Research

studies show that well planned natural environments within urban settings provide social, environmental, psychological and physical benefits for individuals and society (Kaplan, et al, 1998). Fortunately, an increasing number of city residents, politicians and planners share this belief. In 2003, the United States Conference of Mayors passed an urban forestry resolution to promote the preservation and new growth of trees and forests in city environments. Two years later, the trend expanded internationally when 50 city leaders from around the globe signed a Green Cities Declaration at the United Nations World Environment Day in San Francisco. "Mayors from Delhi to Dakar, Moscow to Manila, resolved to reduce waste and pollution, ease traffic congestion, and- by the year 2015- ensure an accessible public park or recreational open space within a third of a mile of every city resident" (Ackerman, 2006 p.113). The past five to ten years has seen an explosion in urban parks and public spaces which contribute to making more livable cities (Ackerman, 2006). But how does vegetation make cities more livable? Ackerman explains that,

> grass and trees provide a welcoming place for people to gather. In the hectic and crowded cores of cities, people need the little grove of chestnut trees outside their apartments where they can mingle in the shade and hear the hiss of wind in high trees. They need big public lawns where they can play together. They need the tiny sprouting plots of neighbourhood gardens, where they can put aside the city's stress on time and temporary in favour of growth and permanence (p.112).

Champions of urban parks hail recent progress in the greening of cities but warn that much remains to be done to ensure cities are more livable. Parks are one form of a socially acceptable tactic to make cities more sustainable. Although implementing urban parks is an important ingredient for the making of a more livable city, there are many more ingredients to add to the recipe. I believe embedded social and cultural norms of consumption and lifestyle must change for ultimate urban sustainability to exist. For example, the 'American dream' needs to transform from a single detached spacious home and manicured yard in the auto-

dependent suburbs; to a more dense residential and mixed use neighbourhood beside a community greenspace and garden (see image 3 and 4 below).

Image 3. Typical American Dream House

Source: KHovanian Homes

Image 4. Smart Growth Housing

Source: Massachusetts Smart Growth

**Conclusion**

Planning movements have implications on social, economic and ecological aspects of the city. It is rare for the holistic approach of a planning movement to be fully implemented. However, due to the inherent localized nature of planning complete implementation of planning movements do exist; an example being the Sea Side community in Florida (Boone, 2006). More realistically, scattered and partial implementations of planning movements take place providing an overall general movement towards urban sustainability. The Trust for Public Land (TPL) is one organization making this happen. '"Some leaders consider their cities all built up, with no room for more parkland" says Peter Harnik, director of the Centre for City Park Excellence at TPL. "But if a city has space for one more building, Harnik posits, it has room for one more park"' (Ackerman, 2006 p.116). Ackerman (2006) suggests Harnik's belief should be a goal of city planners. "A park near every doorstep where people can gather and gain a healthy does of that remedy Henry David Thoreau said we can never have enough of: Nature" (Ackerman, 2006, p.116). Adding urban greenspace is a start in transforming suburban sprawl into sustainable cities. This transformation requires other aspects of society to align in

order for these planning movements, such as Smart Growth, to create more livable cities such as in Image 5 below.

Image 5: An image depicting a form of a sustainable city

Source: International Making Cities Livable

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