

# Sustainable Difference

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## Abstract

Urban planning instruments globally refer to the concept of the welfare state and its time and country-specific interpretation. As a result, urban environments at all scales look more and more generic. This normalization conflicts with the growing demand for distinction benefits and visibility immanent in any new investment into urban systems. Facing urban realities at new scales, urban planning approaches at the same time have lost the capacity to effectively influence urban change towards a more sustainable development.

How municipal urban policies can react to this potentially detrimental ambivalence?

To provide a response, urban policies have to critically consider the normative parameters that shape future cityscapes, such as lifestyle regimes, the privatization of public interests or resource shortages.

The paper postulates that by focussing on a city's specific demographic issues and by pro-actively managing urban specialization, urban policies will increase local identification as well as minimize social segregation.

The different dimensions of this potentially normative approach to create sustainable difference are illustrated by a concrete example from Dordrecht/NL.

## Planning Instruments or Socio-Economic Megatrends - What Drives Urban Change?

According to latest reports by the UNFPA, almost 3.35 bln. people are inhabitants of urbanized areas,- that is: half of the world's population. In some of the world's most competitive regional economies in Western Europe, more than 70% of the population already lives in urban agglomerations. The social and economic motivations and drivers of this attractiveness and the steady growth of urban systems worldwide are well understood. The same can be said for the social and ecological problems as well as for infrastructural and logistical challenges related to urban change. There are limited insights, however, about the normative conditions of urban change and how to orientate them towards sustainable development.

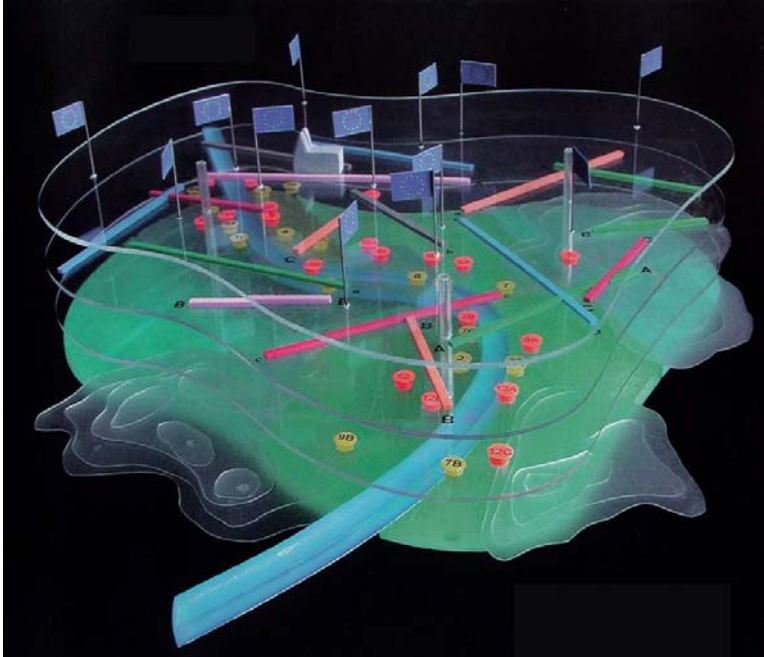
The emerging urban realities are different from the idea of urbanity embodied by the public space in the traditional European city. Urbanity today is an invisible quality. It is characterized by a high density and diversity of flows of goods and persons and evolves along with the modes of economic production and their territorial organization.

The reproduction of the city in this context is no longer bound by territorial limits; it is rather tied to the variable scales of an urban system. However, instruments of urban planning and spatial development are still embedded in municipal policies.

They rely on the convergence of spatial and social policy normative for the development of the modern city since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. As regulatory instruments, they aim at reconciling private and public

interests. Ultimately defining a legal framework, they are normative for the public and social space, the morphology of urban fabrics and the semantic expression of the city. Indeed, they create opportunities for private investments, they guarantee individual security, they sustain indiscriminate mobility and they provide a competitive social and educational infrastructure.

A differing legal constitution of urban policies produces a different city. This observation is equally applicable to the reproduction of the city as an urban system. Tax levels and funding streams are key parameters for attracting commercial investments. Their growing influence on urban change correlates with the dramatic loss of influence and reach of municipal and regional urban policies and planning instruments. (Fig. 1)



*Fig. 1:  
REGIONALE 2010 - Regional  
cooperation in the metropolitan  
region Cologne-Bonn 2000-2010,*

*Conceptual model for the new  
orientation of regional funding  
priorities.  
(neubighubacher, 2002)*

Orientating urban policies towards sustainable development, however, demands for a re-empowerment of the municipal level. Cities have to radically rethink and update their toolbox for managing urban change. In order to regain a regulatory capacity, they have to critically assess the megatrends and the distinctive “social project” underlying them.

Two intimately linked political economies that are usually beyond the reach of urban policies particularly challenge the regulatory capacity of cities seeking to unfold a self-determined urban change:

- the privatization of public interests, and
- the lifestyle city - the spatial and economical specialization of urban systems.

Since the mid 1980s, urbanity has been discussed and reinvented as a life style. This can be interpreted as an attempt to reconcile the anonymous urban reality of growing urban systems with the individual and collective demand for identification. Almost invisibly, this discourse has been incorporated by mainstream culture and urban economy. Municipal policy making has to address and critically adapt to this trend as a normative development context.

## The Welfare Promise of the City

The lifestyle city presents, however, a social model of the city that is radically opposed to the reference model of urban policies since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. In this policy model, the production of public space aims at providing spatial relief and preventing unhealthy congestion in the “modern city”. Modelled as a social reform project, it provides at the same time insurance for the social elites against social unrest. Development strategies deriving from this policy model build upon a consensus on liberal values. They provide the prospect of social inclusion in material and political respects. However, benefiting from the rewards of the city, at the same time, requires social discipline and integration.

Following the realisation of Public Parks in larger English cities around 1830, this reform project becomes normative for the urban development of the modern city. Its welfare promise reaches beyond the parks and includes a program for the transformation of the public space of the whole city. Most of the instruments of urban and economic development until today refer to its welfare promise. (Fig. 2.)

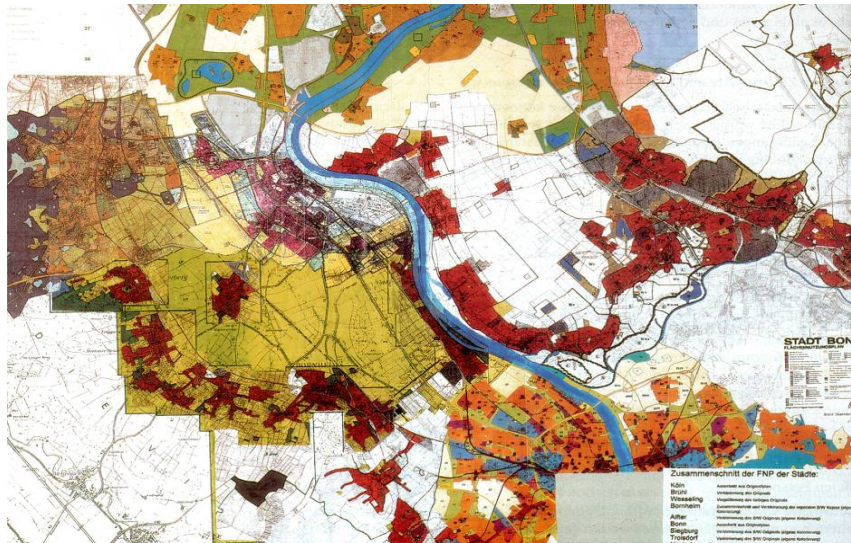


Fig. 2:  
Visualization of all municipal regional zoning plans of the core metropolitan area of Cologne-Bonn, 1997 (S. Hubacher in ILS 1998, p.14)

Despite its great popularity as a dominant model for the reproduction of the city and despite its welfare achievements, the translation of the welfare promise and its disciplinary regimes into a normative planning practice, from a structural point of view, turned out to be a far reaching failure. Regulatory planning instruments ruling urban change are blind with respect to local identities and regional economies. After decades of urban growth, urban planning has unintentionally produced a generic cityscape lacking urban identity and recognizable difference. This observation is particularly relevant for China and other world areas where new cities are currently planned and built at breathtaking speeds. Without a radical reorientation towards creating sustainable difference, the predominant modernist urban planning ideologies, here again, may lead to generic city identities.

## Impacts of Urban Specialization

Along with the emergence of generic urban environments in the last 60 years, the market economy is glorifying individual demands and multiple choices. Media cultivates the tyranny of the intimate. Primary identification is no longer sought in the shared consensus of community values, but rather in the realization of individual distinction benefits. The consequence of this “subjectivity” of social objectives is a growing polarization and social segregation.

This has led to a change of paradigm with dramatic consequences for urban development. Rather than promoting social inclusion at the regional or municipal level, urban policies are focussing on the invention and/or urban renewal of image-critical areas. This “island urbanism” promises high visibility

and distinction benefits, rewarding investments by interpreting urbanity as lifestyle diversity. With large real estate fairs such as the EXPO REAL in Munich and MIPIM in Cannes, exclusive platforms have been created to promote this concept of the “entrepreneurial city”, which is aggressively competing for inward investments.

Urban systems in this context increasingly reproduce themselves as a *Lifestyle City*: as a patchwork of distinctive lifestyle communities. This process evolves at different urban scales simultaneously. There is hardly any relevant real estate investment that doesn't have a brand name. At the same time, “City Branding” has become a privileged approach to economic promotion. Further, gated communities grow in significance as a relevant real estate market segment.

## Creating Sustainable Difference

Functionally, this process is resulting in urban specialization. It is normative in highlighting unmistakable or imaginary local traits and specific qualities of the social space or economic milieu of the city: Lifestyle regimes inevitably lead to city addresses that conceal and promise distinction. At the same time, they challenge municipal attempts to sustain social balance and cohesion. This struggle is amplified by the volatility and mobility of lifestyle regimes: While they unfold a normative impact as a driver of urban change and social segregation particularly on neighborhood level, they are rooted in relational networks rather than places. Lifestyles change infinitely faster than cities.

Thus, generic processes of urban specialization lack sustainability. Rather than complying with the latest lifestyle demands, they have to be adapted to the specific demographic context of urban agglomerations or neighborhoods. Creating sustainable difference, therefore, demands a specialization monitoring and management. Target groups that are particularly relevant for a positive or negative urban identity such as women, youngsters, migrants, elderly or educated workforce in this context demand particular attention. Thus, demographic issues are normative for urban development responses susceptible to meet the demand for distinction benefits as well as to sustain a social balance.

On a project level, creating such a **sustainable difference** raises three dimensions, in which municipalities are able to enhance a self-determined urban change:

- Strengthening local productive systems as well as stimulating social innovation and services are particularly promising to **enhance social and economic opportunities** closely related to the local competence and capacities.
- Taking demographic issues as a departing point for a distinctive urban development facilitates and demands for **involving civic society** and its social and economic resources as a key driver of urban change. It drives the creation of unique local milieus and provides urban policies and implementation strategies with the legitimacy of a shared social vision. By identifying and mobilizing local potentials as well as local and regional stakeholders as well as by promoting corporate citizenship, urban policies are capable to support sustainable development even without growth effects.
- Finally, creating sustainable difference has a strong physical dimension. Difference has to materialize. Urban policies have to manifest themselves through tangible changes of the urban environment that allowing for identification. The rehabilitation public space to meet the evolving needs of key target groups as well as architectural interventions or measures valorizing the build heritage are particularly suitable **to make urban change visible** and to contribute to sustainable difference.

Operational models for creating sustainable difference are emerging worldwide. The selected examples intend to highlight different scales and levels on which currently strategic action is taken.

## Project examples

### 1. Integrated Community Development and Cultural Heritage Site Preservation Through Local Effort in Asia and the Pacific (LEAP)

Particular attention merits the program run by the UNESCO promoting “Integrated Community Development and Cultural Heritage Site Preservation Through Local Effort in Asia and the Pacific (LEAP)”. LEAP is an initiative that fosters local community stewardship over the vast and varied heritage resources of Asia and the Pacific. The LEAP programme aims “to encourage local community action for heritage conservation, within existing legal frameworks and under the supervision of conservation professionals. LEAP project activities assist people living within or near heritage sites to take a leading role in site management and preventive conservation, as well as site interpretation for visitors, thus providing local communities the opportunity to benefit both economically and socially from conservation of their community’s heritage.”

Sustainable difference here results from the normative impact of an UN-programm in areas including developing countries generally lacking resources and support mechanisms (Fig. 3). The different people centered action models developed for reference locations in a number of countries in Asia and the Pacific region can be easily transposed and applied to other fields of urban development.

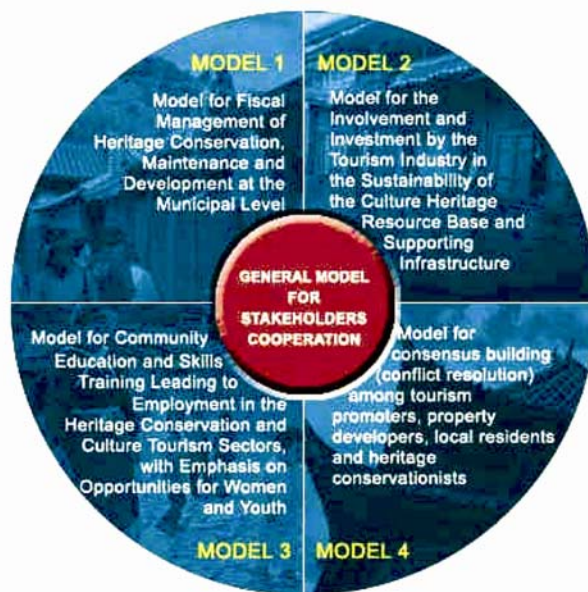


Fig. 3.  
*Culture Heritage Management and Tourism: Models for Co-operation among Stakeholders:*

Lijiang Workshop, 10/2001, Models for co-operation

Source:  
<http://www.unescobkk.org>  
(UNESCO Bangkok)

### 2. MSC-Regeneration: Demographic and Urban Change in Medium-Sized Cities

In the European context, creating sustainable difference is a key mission of the MSC-Regeneration Project led by OPL Parkstad Limburg (NL) and funded by the EU Interreg IIIB program. By 2007/08, the partnership from seven Northwest European medium-sized cities will provide a variety of action blueprints for a sustainable improvement of the social and physical living environment in the involved cities at different scales. The methodologies and urban policies will be made accessible for other cities, too. (Fig. 4). As medium-sized-cities are the most challenged by the economic globalization and metropolitan growth worldwide, the policy

agendas and approaches resulting from the project are relevant not only for North-West Europe, but will be replicable in other development contexts, too.

From the activities of the MSC-Regeneration partnership can be learnt, that it is much easier to increase the city's attractiveness and identification for its inhabitants than for newcomers. On a municipal level, combining top-down and bottom-up strategies involving residents and key stakeholders are most promising to achieve sustainable difference.

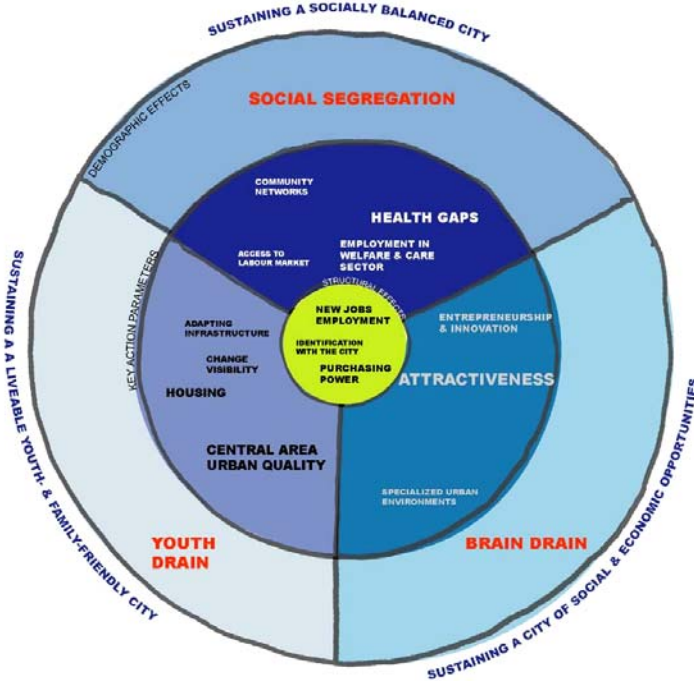


Fig. 4:  
 EU-Interreg IIIB NWE Project MSC  
 Regeneration - Demographic and Urban  
 Change in Medium-Sized Cities,  
 Conceptual Model for Cross Sector  
 Strategies – Action Parameters.

Source:  
<http://www.msc-regeneration.com>  
 (© OPL/ neubighubacher, 2006)

### 3. Urban Renewal in Dordrecht-Wielwijk

The case of the Dordrecht Wielwijk renewal realized within the MSC-Regeneration initiative, is exemplary for creating sustainable difference on a city district level. The City of Dordrecht has connected the renewal of this socially deprived neighborhood dominated by ethnic minorities with the vision to provide every citizen a residential career in the city or in the agglomeration.

This requires a diversification of the housing stock in the renewal area and includes implementation of innovative educational initiatives and social services. New municipal directives on managing rain water will lead to improve the efficiency of the regional sewage systems and at the same time provide living quality to the urban space through the introduction of open water. First projects such as the neighborhood centre are visible civic icons for the regeneration beyond the neighborhood. Prominent architectural interventions act as catalysts for a new civic identity of this generic modern postwar district. They support the demand for cultural distinction and at the same time contribute to social inclusion through a targeted social infrastructure, services and shops of specific ethnic or social minorities. (Fig. 5).

The strategy currently involves an area of almost 30.000 inhabitants but in terms of its financing and complementary measures has a regional reach. It is facilitated by the specificity that large shares of the housing stock are property of public equivalent housing corporations. Indeed, the city will in a few years be able to cover their new housing demands resulting from social careers within the neighborhood or its vicinity. Creating sustainable difference through

the intelligent management of urban specialization in social, economic, ecological and cultural terms, here will contribute to increase social stability, social control and identification.



Fig. 5:  
*Dordrecht-Wielwijk, renewal of the  
neighbourhood centre, architect:  
Lucien Kroll, 2004*  
(pict. neubighubacher, 2006)

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