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Divisible Cities

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A review of "Sustainable Cites" – Assessing the Performance and Practice of Urban Environments
Edited: Pierre Laconte and Chris Gossop IB Tauris & Co 2016

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This book, a collection of papers, offers the mirage of hope in its title that inside we could discover the tools to guide the city of the future. That hope evaporates within the introduction to the "performance gap" that exists between the theoretical and actual building energy performance. Tempting though to put the book aside it is worth persevering to appreciate the scale of the challenge and the efforts to bring a diverse range of data to heel. Even though the editors' focused on the Environment pillar of sustainability (Social and Economic being the other two), the papers happily wander across the necessarily porous boundaries between these categories. Sustainability is a relatively new mainstream concept. The Vancouver Declaration that emerged from the first UN conference on Human Settlement (Habitat I) in 1976 spoke to the protection and preservation of the environment, second to the social and economic imperatives. It would be 11 years before the UN Brundtland Commission (formally World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED)) defined sustainability as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." This simple definition retains within its framework the recipe for conflict, as nations seek to guarantee what they deem to be necessary for their people. Short of reducing the global population we are facing unpalatable choices. The IPCC's (The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) 4th report in 2007, silenced all but the extreme climate change deniers. To avoid potentially catastrophic environmental changes every country will have to re-tool their energy, food and transport networks. At the centre of the web is the city. Translating this palpable entity into data that can be processed, analysed and extrapolated is at the heart of the problem. The editors' brave attempt to analyse these tools is divided into 3 parts; 1 Levels of Observation, 2 Methodologies/Ways of Thinking and 3 Urban Sustainability - Best Practices. The herculean task of stripping away the appearance of objective reality from the metrics used to assess sustainability makes for worrying reading. Even the well-meaning fragile scaffold of overlapping indicators that make up BREEAM or LEED appear to be used more for their marketing advantages than for driving performance. Energy use in these developments can be between 2 and 4 times that certified. Some of the reasons include; a failure to translate design into reality, poor construction, a lack of precision or the lack of quality assurance (the norm in other industries), (Kerry J. Mashford). Mashford goes on to suggest that it may be quicker and cheaper to improve our existing stock of buildings than build more power stations, assuming that the human component cooperates in its management. One fears that by extension it may be argued that the human component may have to be removed from the management of our environment in the same way the pilot, the driver, the surgeon are being supplanted by robotics. When it comes to assessing the tools for assessing larger environments such as neighbourhoods in Germany (Elke Pahl-Weber & Sebastian Seely) or cities (Birgit Georgi) an analysis by KPMG found that, of 14 benchmarking schemes analysed, only 30 of 100 environmental indicators appeared in more than 1 benchmark while 70 were unique. Marcotullio, Sarzynski and others in their paper assessing Greenhouse Gas Emissions in Euriopean cities found that the manner in which urban areas were defined was inconsistent, undermining any consistent comparative analysis, yet we persist with Successful/Healthy/Wealthy City indices. Despite these deficiencies Birgit Georgi still maintains that the indices may still be useful as inspiration.

Ultimately this is a book about taking stock, parsing the environment into a dataset that provides us with the tools for qualitative and quantitative comparison. The various authors make similar overlapping requests for greater clarity, transparency and consistency in our analytical tools. If, as indicated in these papers, the actual problem is greater than we think we may no longer be talking about sustainability but survivability. William E Rees advocates Ecological Footprint Analysis in his paper outlining the corrosive and ravenous condition that urban life seems to promote, suggesting that at best cities may only achieve a state of "quasi - sustainability." If Rees's paper is about re-calibrating what is meant by urban bio-diversity, Mulhall and Braungart's paper suggests reconsidering CO^2 as a resource rather than a catalyst in our demise. Re-calibrating is also a theme in Sir Peter Hall's focus on the transport and its role in enhancing urban development and prosperity but like other papers confirms that the results can be uneven with the best laid plans delivering unexpected returns. Several cities (and sub city areas) were the subject of various papers to illustrate what could be considered best practice. Three of the highlighted case studies of Kings Cross (Chris Gossop), Hamburg (Willhelmsburg Island) (Uli Hellweg / Kai Dietrich) and Amsterdam (Pierre Laconte) amply illustrate the difficulty of exemplars. On the face of it they do not share any significant similar characteristic.

The master planners of King's Cross have ambitious targets for self-sufficiency and though progress has been made it remains an incomplete project. Hamburg, likewise provides us with detailed strategies from housing refurbishment to district heating systems. Their use of the IBA strategy to generate interest in new models for urban living is already paying dividends and as a practical laboratory of the now is worth a visit. Amsterdam, a product of contextualised Renaissance planning, required two attempts to find a habitable framework in 1663; a unified architectural theme with an urban mix of high density low rise, mixed use and social classes anchored what could be considered a powerful argument for integrated seamless design for and by its citizens. It also offers a simpler view of the complex and diverse data available today formed without resorting to complex computer software. The UNESCO World Heritage Criteria List may in fact be sufficient to quantify and qualify a sustainable city, albeit augmented with more specific energy, food and transport targets, applied consistently. Because of the diversity of data, the different categorisation of urban environments, political limits and environmental hinterlands, the usefulness of other indices have been shown to confuse the message.

It may be necessary to divide and separate the city into measurable categories but it lacks the meaningful insight into the human desire to belong together in a place that sustains the soul as well as life. The city like the earth is more than a sum of its parts. Misaligned or mismanaged it will be less than its sum. Beyond the book, beyond the mountain of data this book is a warning against inertia. The variety is systems used to reveal our inadequacies are rightly criticised, but it's the best we have at present. In the gap between now and the future we should do many small things, do them well and do them now. We may never know when we will be back this way again.

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