

## Qualifying Urban Space

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### **URBAN TRIALOGUES: Visions, Projects, Co-productions. Localising Agenda 21**

This paper is a chapter of the book *URBAN TRIALOGUES: Visions, Projects, Co-productions – Localising Agenda 21* (to be published in October 2004). The book is a critical reflection on the process and outputs of a multilateral programme, *Localising Agenda 21* (LA21) initiated in 1994 by the UN-HABITAT, a Belgian Consortium coordinated by K.U. Leuven's Post Graduate Centre Human Settlements (PGCHS), the Belgian Development Cooperation, and a host of local actors, including the municipalities of the programme's partner cities of Nakuru (Kenya), Essaouira (Morocco), Vinh (Vietnam), and Bayamo (Cuba). Oscillating between theory and practice, the book attempts to make use of the benefit of insight from the process. These are simultaneously embedded in the global debate on sustainable urban development and the realities of the four urban contexts.

The title of the book 'Urban Dialogues' can be interpreted in several ways, all of which refer to the discursive interaction of separate concerns for development simultaneously engaged in a quest for another urban future. These dialogues do not speak in emptiness, but resonate within particular contexts, the four *loci* of the Localising of Agenda 21. The book deals with dialogues between three dimensions of urban planning and development: visions, actions and projects, and co-productions. Inspired by 'Strategic Structure Planning,' this approach has been adapted to the specific aims and means of the Localising Agenda 21 (LA21) process in the four cities.

Elaborating, discussing, testing and modifying visions for the future of each of the cities concerned is an important aspect of this process. Visions are not vague utopias, but are based on a critical awareness, the research and diagnosis of its problems and potentials, and on a broad-based debate with urban actors. Visions summarize the desired future of a city into appealing images and strong expressions reflecting the natural setting, the built urban heritage and spatial reality, the unique cultural and social specificity of each city. Such visions are then elaborated and tested with proposed actions and projects of various types and size. Small-scale actions can mobilise actors, render processes visible and test forms of cooperation. Large scale projects translate visions into urban interventions which a structural impact. Visions and projects require intensive co-production involving various actors. Thus, practices of exclusiveness and sectorial separation among different administrations, professional disciplines and social organisations are replaced by powerful interaction and shared responsibilities as a real engine for urban development.

Besides the interaction between the above three planning tracks, the title also refers to two other important dialogues. The LA21 approach stimulated discussions between local government, civil society and the private sector – dialogues that represent the essence of the good governance 'triangle'. Elaborating visions, developing projects and organising co-production is an exploration and testing of the potentials of good urban governance.

Finally, the LA21 process supports another remarkable dialogue: the interaction between a local urban team/local actors embedded and engaged in each city's daily struggle, the UN-HABITAT with its international concern for world-wide development, and the Belgian Consortium of scholars and professionals from planning and urban design disciplines. This third dialogue, a unique combination of local and international experience, creates a resonance between the immediate needs and broad development perspectives. These dialogues have been developed as a vehicle to localise Agenda 21 in four cities.

The book's collection of essays targets a varied audience including decision-makers, community developers, scholars, designers, students and interested individuals. It not only offers the way forward on the implementation of the Agenda 21 programme at the local level, but perhaps most importantly it offers a critical reflection on the relationship between sustainable visions for possible futures and strategic urban projects, both elaborated through a co-productive process. Case studies form the core of this book. Documented as independent chapters, each includes an overview of the

layered narratives of urban history, the contemporary contestation of territories, the visions and strategic projects co-produced during the LA21 process. These are further complemented by a series of cross-reading essays that conceptualise and develop particular themes with reference to the case study cities. Throughout the various contributions, the term ‘localising’ has been broadened to stress the importance of the ‘locus’ – urban space and civic awareness as a frame and a resource for development. This stance not only provides a new drive for planning and urbanism, but also adds a crucial chapter to the Agenda 21.

### **A Globalizing World**

The LA21 project in the four cities has sought not only to build local capacity in urban design and management, but also to critically contribute to the broader knowledge base of urbanism. It has attempted to conceptually marry a host of discourses that are often not partners in the urban debate – including contemporary urban theory, critical development theory and the agendas and priorities of various governmental and non-governmental organizations. Work in the cities with local partners was augmented by theoretical reflection – throughout the process was a continual weaving back-and-forth between realities and rhetorics, an oscillation between cases and abstract concepts, between visions and projects. The cities, practices and fieldwork supported tendencies and paradigmatic frames in the larger field of urbanism.

Contemporary discourse of the built environment is awash with ‘globalization’ and its far-reaching effects. In the contemporary dot.com era of space and time decentralization, there reside well-founded fears that the late modern world is being irrevocably ‘flattened out’ by the abstract processes of distribution, tourism and information. The global reorganization of capitalism has brought with it hyper-mobile economic, spatial and cultural change and produced new urban spatio-temporal experiences. In the early 1980s, command points of the organization of the world’s economy were located in cities such as New York, London and Tokyo. However, they now literally span the globe and include places from Manila to Delhi, Lagos to Shanghai, São Paulo to Osaka, Mexico City to Singapore (Sassen, 2001). Although much attention goes to the so-called ‘global cities,’ second tier cities (and increasingly rural areas) are also affected as economic systems are decentralized and work as interdependent networks. Across geographies and cultures, people lead markedly similar lifestyles in urban fields – replete with synonymous brands and logos. Yet, cities concentrate a multitude of inhabitants and a particular blend of culture and economies within an identifiable geographic setting and an urban frame formed by a particular history. So, despite claims and pressures of a globalizing and homogenizing world, urban spaces remain grounded – localised – by physical, social and cultural confines. Cities fundamentally remain territories of intense social and spatial claims, as formal logics of urban systems and the codified use of space uniquely distinguishes sites across the globe. As local conditions, caught in the tides of globalisation, cities remain the scale and frame *par excellence* for processes of localisation.

### **‘Localising’**

Localising Agenda 21. From the onset, the LA21 project sought to redefine the term ‘localising’ and clarify its potential spatial implications. Since the 1992 Rio Summit, the term localising has been (ab)used in order to pay lip-service to all the politically correct mantras of the moment. The Rio Declaration and Agenda 21, the 800-page ‘bible of sustainable development,’ recognized that current urban development, coupled with scarcity of resources, often accelerates environmental degradation – in turn, leading to loss of quality of urban living conditions, especially for the urban poor. Chapter 28 of Agenda 21 shifted a large part of the communal goal and global problems to local governments – in recognition of the fact that many of the problems and solutions regarding sustainable development reside in local activities and local political will.

Yet, the spatial implications of the ‘local’ have largely been left-out of the development discourse. If local scarcity of resources is seen as a common reality, local space is not identified as a resource in itself, except in its most basic form – as available land. Nonetheless, in related fields, such as social and urban geography, the local is viewed as the inexorable site of the production of cultural meanings and localizing can lead to the creation of social movements of reaction (Harvey, 1998) or

resistance (Castells, 1989). Geography views sites as locations where things happen, but not as agents that *make* things happen.

However, cities need be understood as a dynamic crossroads of local, national and transnational place-making processes. National and transnational practices are constituted by their interrelations with and groundedness within particular localities, at particular moments in time. This stance sounds plausible, but refers to a complex and unstable reality since the co-presence and intersection of transnational and local processes results in places having multiple and conflicting identities; spaces – and exceptionally urban spaces – are formed by contestation, difference and social negotiation among differently situated (and often antagonistic) urban actors, some of whose networks are locally bound and others who span regions (Smith, 2001). Even in modest urban settings, global/localizing processes intertwine histories and overlap territories that cut across landscapes and produce disorderly, unexpected and irretrievably contingent urban contexts. Maybe the accumulative and layered, residual nature of urban space – agglomerating histories, accidents, successes, failures, coherences and fragmentations – explains its absence in development discourses that prefer good sounding, politically correct and mobilising paradigms.

The global/local duality is a false dichotomy whereas all global impositions are unavoidably culturally coded by the politics and realities of everyday life. The deeper nature of cities, revealed through inhabitants' use, is one where aggressive global patterns – ever more aggressive – co-exist with cultural strata. Although global capital will no doubt continue to expand and tighten its grip on the economy, the world is not becoming culturally homogenized (Appadurai, 1996). In some contexts, localism remains the means of survival while in others regional specificity and multiplicity if local contexts continuously consolidate their role and confirm that the global/local bi-polarity is not simply an opposition but component parts of a single process in the stabilization of a new era.

Within the LA21 project, localizing has not been interpreted as the one-way translation of 'universal principles' into local conditions, but, on the contrary, the importance on the role of 'the locus' – the inhabited space – has been stressed as an inherent component, a critical instance, a modifying agent, within the paradigm of sustainable development. The locus need not be interpreted in the conservative sense with its limited sense of tradition and a never changing reality which tends to advocate the mere protection the existing 'genius loci.' On the contrary, it need be viewed more in Elia Zenghelis' contemporary interpretation of uncovering and strengthening existing logics of reality and finding the capacity of sites in a critical process that distinguishes junk for resource, misery from scarcity/austerity and narrow-mindedness from perspective (Zenghelis, 1993). The locus is not a romanticized idea; contrary, it is a place full of richness, poverty and contestation.

### **'Sustainability'**

The most oft quoted definition of sustainable development is that of the so-called Brundtland Commission (World Commission on Environment and Development) – formed in 1983 and which made its report, 'Our Common Future,' in 1988. It states, "Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable – to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet its own needs. The concept of sustainable development does imply limits – not absolute limits but limitations imposed by the present state of technology and social organization on environmental resources and by the ability of the biosphere to absorb the effects of human activities. But technology and social organization can both be managed and improved to make way for a new era of economic growth. The Commission believes that widespread poverty is no longer inevitable. Poverty is not only an evil in itself, but sustainable development requires meeting the basic needs of all and extending to all the opportunity to fulfil their aspirations for a better life. A world in which poverty is endemic will always be prone to ecological and other catastrophes" (Brundtland, 1987:8). However, the definition has been criticized by many for its deliberate ambiguity of language and lack of conceptual clarity. Gilbert Rist has gone so far as to say that it is mere 'diplomacy by terminology' (Rist, 1997:186). Sustainability has entered practice through legislation more than by way of concrete conceptual grounding.

The 1996 Habitat II Conference in Istanbul highlighted the role of urbanization in sustainable development. Subsequent Habitat agendas established explicit links between key city issues such as

poverty, social exclusion, gender equality, governance and the management of human settlements. Again, urban space itself remained absent as a resource (or a loss) and as a support (or a burden) for urban development. Globally, UN-HABITAT has a large number of programs working to marry sustainability, modernization and urbanization. Indeed, it is mandated to promote socially and environmentally sustainable towns and cities with the goal of providing adequate shelter for all. As such, debate revolving around urban spaces becomes inevitable.

However, in most UN and development literature, the sustainability of urban space is primarily addressed by way of two biases. One is an emphasis upon the concept of *land itself* as a neutral entity – an unqualified surface to build upon, whose qualities have been appropriated in socially disproportionate shares – that needs to be redistributed (as a vital minimal provision for the poor). The other is an overtly *environmental* inclination (whereby universal ecological processes and concerns drive the essential principles of future territorial evolution). In campaigns that stress land redistribution, the object of debate is primarily idle land; the existing (occupied and speculative) land market is rarely criticized and not part of a discourse that avoids open conflicts with the free market economy. Meanwhile, the environmental bias predominately focuses on the reduction of pollution and clean-up of brownfield sites. In both biases, the qualified, man-made land and landscape (embracing built and unbuilt territories) is largely excluded as an active agent of sustainable spatial quality and environmental soundness. The development discourse finally discovered the link of development and the environment but has yet to realize the potential of space and its management as a primary resource regarding sustainability. As well, the monitoring/evaluation of cities by the UN and other development agencies does not penetrate deeply into the strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and challenges of existing spatial structures. Instead, they tend to primarily advocate the environmental, social and governance aspects of development. To a large extent, spatial issues are sidelined and left to be mere consequences of more pressing concerns. Logically speaking, however, sustainability needs to constantly address spatial issues of location, access, density, carrying capacity and ecological footprints. The neglect of the spatial dimension of urban development (whereby ‘space’ stands for the urban built environment, man-made landscape and built patrimony) entails the loss of an extremely valuable and not easily renewable resource, spoiled by lack of awareness.

Despite the UN-HABITAT Agenda’s stated focus on sustainable urban form and design, LA21 in the four cities is one of the few campaigns that *explicitly* address spatial issues. In its interpretation of the enigmatic term sustainability, the LA21 project has stressed the capacity to *sustain future development* (as opposed to the Brundtland’s definition of the capacity to sustain what has been realized) and the capacity to *prepare opportunities* for future generations (as opposed to the Brundtland’s definition to preserve opportunities for future generations). More fundamental, however, is LA21’s *qualification of space*. Space is never neutral, but complex in its structuring and layering natural and man-made settings, both historical narratives and contemporary contestatory aspects. In addition to the inherent ‘locus’ of landscape and topographical space, the urban space of cities consists of complex, multi-layered spatial translations of different eras and ideologies, an accumulation of patrimony. The urban fabric consists of places of contrast and contradictions where multiple users and interests strive to act in the city and pursue their particular interests. In the contemporary urban sphere, mega- and minor-players, multi-nations, non-governmental organizations and citizens all compete on the same playing field (albeit with different power). It is the task and power of design to unravel, clarify and negotiate contradictions of the overly complex conditions of the contemporary urban realm.

In such a qualified space, sustainability obviously means something other than sustaining a better status quo, polishing the sharp edges of inequality, equally redistributing and cleaning land – but sustaining urbanity and structuring growth. Sustainability involves actions that not only harm the next generation, but also ones that actively create new urban dynamics. It must work relate to appropriate ‘lifetimes’ of interventions – from the ephemeral to the most durable – in the built and non-built environment. It, obviously, needs to address the rational use of resources. The existing spatial structure of both man-made and natural environments is such resources that need first to be recognized as invaluable qualities and subsequently protected and strengthened. Urban coherence can be won or lost through the structuring of the built and unbuilt environment. Resources can easily be spoiled and

opportunities of adding value can be lost by not qualifying space by disrupting coherence, inappropriate building, misunderstanding location, hindering access, neglecting diversity, mistaking orientation, not taking advantage of proximity, etc. For example, the seafront of Essaouira is an incredible resource – for both the identity of the city as well as the growing tourist industry. However, the coast is in danger of becoming a heterotopia of gated entities, as prime sites are developed in a piecemeal and immediate fashion by private investors who ignore the necessary complementarity between the private domain and the public realm. During the LA21 process, a series of fundamental agreements were brought into the debate to attempt to maintain the spatial coherence of the seafront promenade and contribute to the public sphere of the city. The cultural and societal costs of restoring damage caused by inappropriate construction on valuable fabrics and unique landscape reserves are irrecoverable; *post-factum* costs are exuberant.

Sustainability can thus not be disassociated from the economic, social, environmental or *spatial*. Indeed, the LA21 programme has worked with all four criteria in order to deem both visions and urban projects as strategic and therefore sustainable. From the economic imperative, sustainability relates to creating new opportunities for income generation – including the interaction between formal and informal economies, especially in regards to the use of resources and spatial opportunities afforded. The social perspective fundamentally aims to enlarge and reinforce the public realm and guide development to follow existing logics and daily-use tendencies; it implicitly targets the working and living conditions of the urban poor. The environmental aspect seeks to achieve a balance between the consumptive and productive use of space and to improve the balance between the man-made and the natural environment. The spatial configurations of visions and strategic urban projects in Essaouira, Nakuru and Vinh are translations of these economic, social and environmental components which simultaneously clarify and strengthen the basic structure of the city.

For example, the surroundings of the *medina* wall in Essaouira, throughout its urban history, created a continuous chain of differently programmed spaces – ranging from playing fields, to ceremonial spaces, to informal markets, to formal spaces and shopping facades – and thereby addressed social and economic aspects. So, the strategic project of the surroundings first of all conceived of the area as a cohesive, public open space – clarifying the structure of the compact city and marking a transition zone to the *lotissements*. As a space of decompression, whereby space is not merely consumed and over-built, the project for the surroundings of the *medina* wall also addressed a serious environmental concern. The Nakuru bus park area project proposed to reorganize open spaces and infrastructure, stressing the flexibility of the use of space (for formal and informal economic activities), creation of new public space (formally linking the railway station and matatu park), and decongesting a polluted node in the city (improving the environmental ambiance). In Vinh, a proposal for the reorganization of the market not only tried to change the perception and use of the areas buildings and open spaces, but also that of the Vinh River. The backside of the market (site of illegal solid waste disposal) was proposed to turn into a front, cleaning and activating the river's edge as a place for informal trading and a stop for a new water-based transport network.

### **Contested Territories and Negotiation**

Throughout history, built space has been as much a site of contestation as of negotiation and mediation. From stone walls and fences demarcating agricultural property, to property lines and building envelopes in urban contexts, to territorial claims of waterways, space has remained representative of real/virtual power and money and therefore an object of contestation. Contested territories are numerous and promise to increase as economies become more integrated into the global system. The real estate mantra of 'location, location, location' accentuates the importance of financial qualifications of space and often undermines the societal and cultural value of territories. The city and its immediate periphery remain a battleground of property rights and structures. Protection and expansion of the public realm is often relinquished due to short-term economic and/or political ambitions. At the same time, the history of urban morphologies and building types is full of examples of mediating spaces. Fabrics mediate between the public and the private. Suburbs mediate between the city centre and the countryside. Public space mediates between particular interests and the common benefit.

The LA21 process has identified the contested territories in the case study cities and stressed that these very sites are ideal vehicles for negotiation – between the private investment and the public realm, between the international donor community and local governments, between global pressures and civil society. Space has the advantage that it crosses multiple sectors and disciplines (inclusive of architecture, landscape and urbanism) and therefore remains the most suitable ‘ground’ for negotiation. The LA21 project has borrowed from Hilde Heynen and Loeckx (Heynen and Loeckx, 1998) the identification of built space as embodying three different roles – all of which are essential to understand its capacity as a vehicle for negotiation. First is space as a *receptacle* – a medium that represents and manifests social and cultural values and changes. Second is space as an *instrument* – a spatial tool for the regulation of behaviour and creation of new territorial and as an instigator of cultural change. Finally is space as a *stage* – likened to the theatrical interpretation as a place that is simultaneously active and passive, active in the sense that physical forms condition the possibilities of spatial behaviour and passive in that it is a static background for the play of everyday life and its inherent dynamics.

Through the initiatives of LA21, contested territories have provided the physical sites to reinterpret space as receptacle, instrument and stage. Vision and strategic projects and actions come from the turning of contestation into a debate. At the same time, an underlying goal was to actively promote the enlargement of a legitimate and spatially materialized public realm and to strengthen existing (man-made and natural) spatial structures. For example, in Nakuru, negotiation between the city and World Wildlife Fund (who manages the Lake/Nature Park) occurred for the first time over discussion of the strategic urban project of the park edge. LA21’s proposed restructuring of the park-to-city interface and the specific redesign of the placement of the fence between the two was simultaneously able to expand the city’s social space and protect the park from damage to its fragile ecology. The proposed transitional space between urbanity and nature – the linear urban park – would turn the park into a frontyard of the city (thus discouraging its use as a backyard garbage dump) and provided a host of recreational and social spaces for the city’s residents. In Essaouira, negotiations LA 21 partners and ERAC, the semi-public agency *Etablissement Régional d’Aménagement et de Construction*, resulted in an strategic urban project for a key area of the medina surroundings, *Bab Doukkala*. ERAC had originally intended to claim the open space site as an area for housing. However, following the development of the city’s visions, the site was reconfigured to at the same time to a vibrant open, public space activated by small shops in an arcade, a formal frontage towards the medina wall and housing (lifted above the ground-floor shops).

### **‘Designerly’ Research Trilogues**

Finally, it must be stressed that the requalification of space requires new design tools in order to maximize its potential. Through the LA21 project, a series of operative methods to understand existing spatial structures of contexts and to eventually strategically and intervene have been developed. It has built upon the vast knowledge base in descriptive urbanism to effectively describe reality – employing methods such as reading the city as a complex text, with multiple, layered narratives; graphically analyzing cities to discover the syntax and vocabulary of the urban text; creating morphological syntheses of cities (as did Bruno Fortier and Christian Devillers); establishing taxonomies of urban fabrics and naming new urban patterns (as does William Jan Neutelings and Stefano Boeri) and understanding the logics and ecologies of landscapes (as do R.T. Foreman and Henri Bava).

‘Designerly’ research is understood not as problem-solving, but as questioning – reformulating problems and forming insights. Conceptual design is equated with provisional synthesis of several factors and at multiple scales; it is also able to overcome antitheses that are insolvable in theory. The staging of scenarios differs from that of making forecasts and precise testing of desirable situations for which certainties are required. Design has come into the LA21 process in a three-fold manner. First, it has read spaces from above (the reading of eco-systems, watersheds, geographical/topographical formations, etc.) and below (the understanding of space from a haptic and experienced sense). Second, design is a tool for negotiation (on the basis of sites of contestation as described above), whereby specific solutions on strategic sites are discussed; here design has the luxury of being both very concrete and yet open for alternatives and modifications. Third, design offers a synthesizing frame for

pacts and agreements. Unlike mere ‘talk,’ the implicit power of images mark them uniquely placed to convince various stakeholders.

The ‘three track’ approach of LA21 in Essaouira, Nakuru and Vinh has shuttled between ‘designerly’ investigation, negotiation and framing of agreements in the pursuit of sustainability through a critical interplay of visions and strategic urban projects and actions. In many other projects, negotiation and communication occur through verbal exchanges and agreements. In LA21, the more typical binary way of thinking (exemplified by the verbal process) was complemented by a spatial way of thinking (embodied in the design process) – the latter which provides room for change and difference. As well, within a coherent frame, the design process itself often revealed visions and possible interpretations of the future development of territories that would have otherwise gone undiscovered. For example, in Vinh the vision of the green city which works as a sponge could only be deduced through the visual recognition of arcing land masses or islands of higher land in the low flood plain. The reading of the existing landscape from ‘above’ (from aerial photographs) was then nuanced in possible scenarios of interlocking urban parks by fieldwork experience from ‘below.’

In conclusion, the LA21 process of vision-building, strategic and structural planning and the formulation of strategic urban projects stems from an understanding of the locus – the existing logics of cities and their landscapes (including its historical layers and ad-hoc daily appropriations). The shift away from master-planning is grounded in the ‘strategic’ – that which can be successfully planned and evolve through a clear set of policies – and the ‘structural’ – that which strengthens the coherence of existing urban morphology, acts as a support for future urban development, provides the ‘missing link’ or serves as a trigger to spatial development and/or generates complementarity or synergy between separated or fragmented actions or actors. Strategic and structural planning reduces the overall scope what can be planned while, at the same time, requires more precise planning and interventions. Fundamental to this type of planning is the differentiation of time frames – from immediate actions to long-term perspectives, from ephemeral to lasting spatial interventions. The process constantly weaves back-and-forth between the abstract and the concrete, as well as between various scale levels. The different scales and levels of interventions must also be sustainable in relation to appropriate scales and levels of decision making. Strategic and structural planning demands ‘designerly’ investigation, negotiation and the framing of agreements with perpetual critical testing and revising.

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