

CALL FOR PAPER

Special Issue

The “sustainable city” in the south of the Mediterranean: Challenges,
circulations and the pursuit of the new urban policies

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Climate change, eco-friendly urban planning and control over energy consumption are some of the questions under discussion in countries along the southern Mediterranean coast. In recent years, these issues have been brought to the forefront of debate not only by elected officials and government bodies but also by private actors, civil society (NGOs and associations) and international actors working in the country. Considered today as spaces where are concentrated the vast majority of the population and energy consumption, and as a complex system of institutional and economic actors, cities are places where sustainable urban development (SUD) initiatives can indeed be pursued. This raises the question of how to coordinate the process of dissemination of this new ordinance in place since at least the year 2000 on the south shore of the Mediterranean, make essential adaptations and apply it in the field.

In this special topic issue of the UE Journal, our goal is not to assess the environmental vulnerability of Arab cities or to compile a list of institutions responsible for sustainable development at the national level. Rather, the emphasis is on sustainable urban development advocacy and projects undertaken across one or several cities. This includes critical analyses (both on a theoretical and political level) of slogans as well as methods of advocacy. We suggest to authors interested in this proposed topic the following set of questions for consideration.

The initial SUD projects are not particularly culturally groundbreaking: overall, the first “sustainable” experiments under way, whether or not labelled as such, are part of still very basic approaches, which are definitely linked to authoritarianism. In this regime, the state clamps down on bottom-up initiatives and the formation of genuine local governments. An uneven and somewhat weak “institutional” sustainable urban development political base seems to exist despite the lack of any arena for debate. It is mainly “top-down” and instigated by international actors. This makes research conducted in this area interesting: under such conditions, how are urban sustainable policies and projects implemented? How do actors apply this global new buzzword while taking local needs into account, even though they must deal with a political reality that imposes many obstacles on the way towards achieving immaculately “sustainable” territories?

Regarding the specific content of sustainable urban policies in this part of the world, we ask whether demonstrated mechanisms and areas of application can be found elsewhere, which are implemented under the “best practices” heading or are defined as models such as eco-districts and developed on urban expansion or renewal sites? Alternatively, can grassroots “sustainable” initiatives enhance urban areas such as historical zones and traditional knowledge in line with climate change adaptation? Across the range of experiences and models for action, how is the process of validation and labelling of sustainable places actually being conducted? It can be argued that we have entered a period where international standards of competition are imported especially in the construction industry (such as LEED, HEQ, etc), reflecting the economic challenges of exporting these new eco-technologies from the North or from the most powerful developing countries specializing in this industry (i.e. solar panels made in China). All considered, to what extent are these standards being adapted?

Another key focus area of this special topic issue is to examine the underlying tension between local and global concerns within urban “sustainable” policies. Although the Agenda 21 program, for example, emphasized local environmental problems, sustainable development priorities have evolved in recent years thanks in part to new mechanisms of action (i.e. the CDM) in order to address issues related to climate change. This raises the question of socio-political shifts and the reframing of economic and social problems arising from this change. In the end, the result may be far less impact on the quality of everyday living environments in low-income neighbourhoods, while more profits are made by local or foreign companies able to handle control complex technologies.

Finally, we also wish to discuss the distinct spatializations of these first urban sustainability experiments in the south of the Mediterranean. Although capital cities and their large-scale building or tourist-development projects can be seen as an opportunity to showcase these new sustainable approaches, despite being subordinated to technological and commercial imperatives, other types of cities and urban spaces can equally serve this role. Indeed, in second-tier cities and even small- and medium- sized towns local factors can more easily meet criteria for conducting experiments (some types of industrial cities, for example).

An additional point that should be made is the unique spatial character of the study area, the sustainable city on the south coast of the Mediterranean, which is the focus of this call for contributions. Its singular nature can be addressed in at least two ways. First, gaps and convergences can be identified through comparisons between cities that vary according to size, function or country. Second, the singular nature of the southern and eastern areas of the Mediterranean can effectively be considered in a wider context and contrasted with neighbouring geographical areas (north coast of the Mediterranean, Persian Gulf, other developing nations in the South), in order to create explicit connections between one or several Arab cities with other cities elsewhere.

Finally, the effects and opportunities arising from the “Arab Spring” can certainly not be ignored. The year 2011 calls into question the breadth of urban action for countries in the region. Of course, no one can predict the outcome of the various “revolutions” taking place, which are best understood as a process, which will obviously be long lasting in places such as Egypt or Tunisia to name just a few. Within this new context, we ask whether a more “embodied” form of sustainable development could be endorsed in the future, which is not necessarily “high tech” and used to a lesser extent by regimes for its own aims and purposes (such as the Ben Ali regime in particular). Conversely, will the current economic situation end reforms, as families are no longer able to bear their costs. The issue remains open to discussion.

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Abstracts must be submitted by October 30, 2011 and sent to the journal’s editor. The deadline for submitting the final paper is January 30, 2012. All correspondence regarding manuscripts will be handled by e-mail at EnvUrb@ucs.inrs.ca.