

URBAN ENVIRONMENT: MAPPING A CONCEPT

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Urban environment is a peculiar term evolving from a discipline rooted in the social and the natural sciences – two important scientific epistemologies – without entirely belonging to either one of them. Since it is often considered by researchers interested in understanding the actions and social practices taking place in the urban realm, it may be closer to the social sciences although it is also used in discussions on air, water, soil, climate, vegetation and animal life. Its main field of application is society found within a space characterised by a dense pattern of development and an intensity of social interactions: this is what is implied by urban. It refers to a relatively central, intricate organisation of the lived space (Lussault, 2004) and can include any area ranging from metropolises, urban centres, semi-urban fringes, neighbourhoods, suburbs, to mid-sized towns.

Pointing to the urban environment involves, in essence, the understanding of modified, transformed, disturbed and recreated environments. It follows that the study of the urban environment addresses topics related mainly to the natural sciences, but also describes and analyses actions carried out by social actors. The urban environment is therefore considered from the point of view of social relations, global and local issues, problems that need solving, and outcomes or impacts linked to human activities. The key distinction with regards to the urban environment lies in the way that biophysical elements are examined using methods developed by the social sciences and defined from conceptual categories not drawn from the natural sciences. By attempting to understand the environment, and looking beyond nature in general, our attention is directed towards the ways in which society is organised and surroundings are shaped. To paraphrase William Cronon, the urban environment can thus be seen as a set of entangled social facts and states of nature (Cronon, 1996).

A number of revised and still evolving schools and disciplines have interlaced over time to contribute to the emergence of the urban environment concept. It first appeared within the context of urban and land-use planning, because it was a major point of concern for hygienist, reformist or utopian planning movements, which influenced how cities were built at the end of the nineteenth-century (Berdoulay and Soubeyran, 2002). Urban ecology pioneers of the Chicago School of Urban Sociology (Park et al. 1925) provided the impetus for its development and the concept was later taken up by urban ecosystem thinkers such as Jean Duvignaud (1963), Eugen Odum (1971) or Pierre Dansereau (1973) to name a few. Their work ended up being embodied in a series of notions including the sustainable city, the liveable community, or the ecological footprint. Each tried to take social with ecological factors into account simultaneously, but with limited success. The pilot project lead by Stephen Boyden (1977) on ecological integration in Hong Kong was an attempt to expand our understanding of the complex dynamics that emerge when ecosystem and anthropological approaches are combined. Moreover, the urban environment concept is indebted to international institutions, starting with UNESCO's *Man and the Biosphere* Programme, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), or Habitat II and similar world summits where the sustainable development concept and the Agenda 21 blueprint were first brought into the mainstream.

Capturing the breadth and depth of the urban environment concept is a compendium of papers on urban sustainable development edited by Wheeler and Beatley (2004) that cover key areas of the field. Assuming a relationship connecting the urban environment with sustainable urban development, they trace the concept's origins by delving into the work of Ebenezer Howard (1898), Jane Jacobs

(1961) and Ian McHarg (1969). While addressing transportation, plant ecology and the restoration of urban areas, energy, architecture and urban planning, the compendium also deals with the social and economic aspects by taking up the issues of environmental equity and social justice.

Within the same field of study, which is the focus of our journal, the endeavour to map the urban environment concept juxtaposes a host of concerns in relation to planning, urban governance, landscapes, public policies, public and environmental health, and environmental history, whether qualitative or quantitative methods are used, whether they refer to the deciphering of actors' strategies or to the causal analysis of neighbourhood effects, or indeed whether they take interest in peoples' lived experience or individual perceptions.

With an unbiased view of the approaches under consideration, except for the one taken to ground urban environment issues within complex and dynamic social contexts, and with an allergy for all forms of ideology, the editorial staff hopes that every published paper can sustain the development of this conceptual map and give shape to an emerging scientific discipline.

Gilles SÉNÉCAL, Editor

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