SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND URBAN IDENTITY: A SOCIAL CONTEXT

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The most attractive idea within the scope of the present considerations of global future is the planning of sustainable development. The recent treatments of this idea have established a new paradigm of urban and territorial development. Presently, however, the thesis of sustainable development is acquiring negative connotations because it is being exploited for various manipulations.

To demonstrate fully its value in the sphere of urban projecting, the theory of sustainable development should include a clearly expressed component of cultural-urban pluralism. In other words, the global strategy should retain the important local characteristics, to a measure and in a way that would contribute to the coherence of (European) urban system. In an urban-cultural context sustainable development implies a satisfying of social needs on a higher level of aspirations than is the case in a vulgar interpretation of the economic, urbanistic and ecological assumptions of sustainability for a community. In this it is assumed that the natural and necessary needs of the individual have been previously meet. For a holistic concept of sustainable development cannot be based only on strategies which insist on a full stomach for the world population, on normative approaches to the economic measuring of the growth and development of a society, on the premises of ecological purism or on the comprehensive urban planning.

The main idea within the framework of general concern about urban future may be condensed to the following two questions: (a) how much are the social upheavals which characterize the modern world and which involve all European cities a prearranged framework and (b) how much are they a conceivable framework for urban future?

Despite of holistic concept of sustainable development, reduction of the problems of the prospective city to geopolitical and cultural planes is not only possible and reasonable but necessary. This, however, does not mean that the apparently narrower view will make the search for possible answers any easier. The urban reality operates with a widely accepted syntagm about a large set of specific but unessential social and spatial characteristics of the (East European) city. But the reality is that these cities deserve all attributes that make them a full-fledged factor of the European urban milieu.

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It is the cultural context that represents the focal point for each contemporary urbanological and sociological analysis on the way to understanding urban reality. It is a well-known theory that there is strong inter-relatedness between cultural identity and geographic areas, a link that is of great importance for man’s well-being, his emotional stability and his attachment to local, regional and national groups (1). Cultural identity certainly represents one of the leading principles of the concept of sustainable development. The urban-cultural identity emerges as the crucial factor in a series of highest-quality matrices that participate in the entire cultural profiling of a society. It is, at the same time, an extremely important factor in defining the urban component of sustainable development.

The understanding of the cultural framework of urban societies not only helps clarify the essence of social diversities, but it also serves as the basis for all predictions about urban questions – naturally, also for questions found in the search for sustainable urban development. Thus, what make cities and urban societies different are the characteristics of their own cultural beings. So far nothing has been said that is already not well known in the urbanological and urban-sociological mode of thinking. Why are we, then, nevertheless, insistent on this matter? It is because of the fact that the concept of sustainable development is inconceivable in a way other than one based on profound knowledge and recognition of diversities, which determine individual urban societies.

If the urban world is so strongly interwoven with such intense cultural influences, a question might be posed as to the possibilities of the conceptual objectivization of urban sustainability. It is exactly these diversities that prove that the idea of sustainable development has to place a strong accent on the cultural
features of societies, regardless of the type of sustainability paradigms. In such circumstances, national policies in organizing spatial relations and the implementation of the Agenda 21 are of utmost importance. Taking into consideration the fact that cities, in their urbanistic articulation, demonstrate all features of social particularities, it is exactly urbanism that emerges as a strong element in the operationalization of the idea of sustainability. Something that is appropriate for the urban space of a developed city in the West can prove completely useless in some cities in the undeveloped parts of the world. At the same time, this should represent a corrective measure in most of the past endeavors to perceive the idea of sustainable development in the dominant economic or political context.

The main group of attitudes toward the method of urban development planning includes those facts which may be characterized as speculative. Perhaps the single most important attitude is the one which draws the equal sign between the needs for a coherent European urban future and universal egalitarianism. Concerning the prospective of the "non Western" urban areas in the prevailing conditions, the main question seems to be the following: what prerequisites are needed to minimize the uncertainties associated with the prospective of the city in this cultural zone. In seeking for an answer two alternative approaches may be taken: the first one considers the global circumstances for human living in this geopolitical area, while the second is concerned with the specific characteristics of each individual social reality and urban milieu.

The first approach to the global social changes, that provides room for considerations about a transformation of the city in the former East Europe, is concerned with a question: what happens to the city after the social stage, in which the city had taken part, has toppled of the political scene? Francis Fukuyama, in his 1989 article "The end of history", claimed that the wave of reforms in the Soviet Union and East Europe and the expansion of consumerism is in a way a "triumph of the West and the Western ideology - the end of history that we know: the ultimate accomplishment of the ideological evolution of the mankind and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final social "form". If this apocalyptic version of civilization development is taken as a standard of measure, i.e., if the end of history is in fact "the end of human deliberations about the primary principles", then where can we place the ideology of urban reality/future of a relatively insignificant cultural-urban area such as the East European city? Does it mean that the course of its future transformation has been predestined by the fate of the capitalist city of the Western civilization? Perhaps, everything is not as simple as Fukuyama forecasts. It is an irrefutable fact that the main civilization course runs right through the center of urban. Today, this is clear than ever before, maybe because we are carried by the swiftest of its currents. There is also no doubt that social relation, having a firm foothold in institutional relations, control the process of urban transformation. However, it is a historical fact that the complexity of transformation of the city exceeds the scope of transformations dictated by the global changes. No matter how radical and sudden, even when the reality turns, into its own inverted mirror image, these changes are incapable of inducing automatic transformation of the city. Urban transformations recognize innumerable nuances of gradation and adaptability which defend the historical self-sustainable substance of the city.

The second approach to the global social changes falls within the realm of political speculations about urban future. Recognizing a need for different avenues of cultural development in different parts of Europe, Johan Galtung asks a belated question: What is going to happen, after the vehement political changes that have taken place, when Europe becomes dominated by the junk civilization in all segments of the society? Obviously, the focal point of this phenomenon is in the city. We should be concerned about the prevailing concepts of globalization which threaten to instate in all Europe the false thesis which says that the planning of sustainable development is more important than cultural-urban pluralism. A form of resistance to the indiscriminate globalization is various forms of nostalgia for the social security and cultural identity of the past. It may be expected that these sentiments will escalate into specific forms of urban unrest which the "non-Eastern" Europe will try to hide through special social programs. Also, there is not doubt that urban movements, oriented either left or right, will be invariably caused by the process of social leaven for the emergence, development, and escalation of ideological ideas. It is obvious that the shadow already covers "the rest of Europe", in the form of peripheral capitalism (a variant of the Third World neocapitalism adapted for Europe). Social diversification is more than obvious in the East European city. That it is not a case of the process of stabilization and coherence is demonstrated by the fate of most European cities which are presently passing through the period of primitive imitation of peripheral capitalist relation.

If the planning of sustainable development does not establish itself as a paradigm of cultural-urban development, the future of the "non Western" cities is also open to other speculative variants. The possible scenarios of urban changes would in fact be sub-variants of the transformation of the postindustrial/capitalist city. Nevertheless, it appears that such variant of urban transformation won't be a complete incarnation of M. Castell's thesis, which says that "the global society and its predominant production method are the factors which determine the character of living in an urban community", simply because the dynamism of changes imposed in front of the modern society functions on the principle of ascending time spiral, i.e., calls for global changes in the urban sphere will repeat over and over. It would not be realistic to expect the forms of social organization in some of the former socialist countries to be in perfect harmony with the requested capitalist postindustrialization. It is very likely that the discrepancy will be most evident in the sphere of the cultural urban transformation. Just like any globalism in the social or ecological sphere, Europe will have to grant legality to the cities east and south of the Alps for a number of specific characteristics. On the other side, these cities will have to realize that in a long run, they have nothing to regret about. In order to become a full-fledged member of the European urban network, Belgrade does not have to strive to adopt the cosmopolitanism of Amsterdam or Brussels. Conversely, Bucharest may not try to regain its image of "Little Paris" without having to share the teletopic vision of future with Paris itself.
To be in tune with the "contemporary" forms of transformation, the "non-Western" cities are expected to transform into full-fledged members of the European urban network practically overnight, i.e., in a period which is too short when compared with the period that gave them their present social profile. In this context, there exists at least four major problems: (a) Their spiritual transformation into the cosmopolitan environment that would be attractive to the modern man will not be feasible for an extended period because of the non-cosmopolitan heritage bestowed on them by the past half century, (b) Time is required for their institutions, economies, and finally, citizens to establish a continual active relationship with the process of dynamic urban changes (the so-called "continual urban progress"), (c) A need for establishing a stable urban network: each city within the network should have a clearly defined regional role and a stable and differentiated economic position, (d) A need for defining a new model of urbanization which would replace the worn out patterns of unbridled demographic and territorial expansion.

Any of the possible concepts of urban development in the Eastern and/or Central European context must necessarily involve information of political processes which are going to rule the fate of the people and the territory. A possibility of adhering to indigenous cultural and historical models is bound to be an accepted direction of urban development. Endeavors to rapidly adopt Western European urban models will be limited by the pace of social transformations. The city is phenomenon which changes much slower than it is the case with global social or technological transformations. Urban changes take a roundabout way. Considering the European integrating process, what may be expected to happen to the city which we have recognized up to yesterday as Eastern European city?

The first prerequisite for a possible future of the "non-Western European cities" is to solve major conflicts which determine their present situation. Most conflicts results from the typical lack of political foresight and willingness of people (including urban planners and decision makers) to take an active part in solving these problems.

To be able to face the European challenge of integration in and harmonization with its urban network, "non-Western" European cities must solve the problem of their internationalization. Is it possible at all, and if it is, what degree of internationalization is needed for their future prosperity? Extreme policies of self-sufficiency and ethnocentrism, which have led to their provincialization, have been devised at the expense of traditional culture which has been a predominantly positive potential of these cities. Hopefully, this attitude is very likely to be quickly abandoned. It is clear that internationalization is an inevitable part of the scenario inherent to the development of western cities. To take part in such a scenario "non-Western" European cities should respond positively to question like the following ones: are we ready to become an integral part of the world? Are we capable of attaining a position which will be accepted by the world? Although the components of this scenario of possible urban development seem to be a series of general statements, the fact remains that many cities in yesterday's Eastern Europe pass through an imitative phase misinterpreted international forms by organizing uneconomic and culturally debatable events.

Some western models of future urban development insist on communicational performances of the city. This scenario has recently attracted much attention because of revolutionary communication technologies play a fundamental role in urban transformations. Unaccustomed to the challenge of the information future, inhabitants of the yesterday's Eastern European city are skeptics whose experience says that novelty does not necessarily imply improvement.

The negative effects of a long-continued indoctrination of urban planners, decision makers, even scientists, may be seen on the fronts of practically all large and medium-sized yesterday's Eastern European cities. From the advent of modern trends in architecture and urban planning, i.e., for some six decades, the urban entity in its material and spiritual sense has been steadily corrupted. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that reconstruction will be an important direction of future urban development. The following prerequisites are needed for this to happen: evolution of political consciousness until the concept of "former socialist city" is recognized as an ideological blunder, evolution in attitudes of urban planners who must accept that city is no mere agglomeration of houses, rediscovery and reaffirmation of the lost architectural and planning context founded on regional values, and finally, decades of patient waiting to perceive improvement in the material and spiritual qualities of the city.

It is a grave fact that the networks of urban centers in Central and Eastern Europe reflect a situation in which the territory is sharply divided between the center and the periphery. This is a consequence of the political idea that people, assets and territory are efficiently controlled by methods and techniques of strict centralization. To be rational, the city should accept to operate within a decentralized regional network. To realize this model, it is necessary to reconsider and transform the ruling political doctrines and to decentralize the political power to equitably distributed regional centers. In other words, it implies a rationalization of management. When talking of concentration, it is essential to keep in mind that this is not a mere physical concentration of people and assets although the area its visible expression. We shall mention only two out of several important components of concentration. These two components, which are important for the urban system of Eastern Europe, may govern the development of regions in a wide vicinity of an urban center. The first is on the concentration of status and power, i.e., politics, management and information. The second component is the cultural concentration which may be a powerful tool in developed and underdeveloped regions alike. Only after those two categories there comes the physical concentration as a technically and technologically preferable framework of the urban way of life.

The reviewed hypotheses of future urban development of the Eastern and Central European city obviously follow a line of indisputable changes of the currently prevailing mental processes and make room for a more social approach to sustainable development. What could be the effects of the transformation of an urban society if ideas about this are derived from environments which do not understand the cultural context of the community?
If it can be considered that the idea of social transformation, as the framework for sustainable development, has been ostracized on the supranational level (as in the case of the European Union or in any other case when there is a formal equalization of cultural regions for the purpose of economic and political unification and integration), the effects for different areas of these regions vary quite extensively, but they are always very significant and inevitably painful. All the effects manifest themselves on several common levels:

1) Changes in the economic structure

One of the basic assumptions for realizing the concept of sustainable development concerns adapting the economic structure of society to greater efficiency and utilization of resource potentials, in all of its segments. As a rule, an urban society is an aggregate which most quickly, powerfully and extremely sensitively reacts to every outer and inner demand for social change. Finally, all the elements of the economic performance of a society such as production, consumption and ecological conditions derive to a great extent from the demands of the urban environment. Urban systems and cities in Third World and East European countries are very telling examples of the extent to which supranational demands for an egalitarian application of the liberal capitalism and market economy model strongly affect the reshaping of traditional cultural models of urban living, the urban and urbanistic identity of the community. The economic models of the western world, often to imaginary levels and forms of well being, follow along paths which irremediably undermine the distinctive traits of autochthonous urban (and not only urban) cultures. Economic efficiency and progressive economic growth need not necessarily be a prerequisite for the culturally and urban sustainable development of a community.

2) Changes in the social structure

The social structure of society is one of its most dynamic factors and, at the same time, exponent of the greatest number of traits of a society. Despite of this fact, the stability of a society is also measured by the steadiness of its social structure. When external demands are made for social change, this automatically also calls for such changes in a society's social structure which are profiled in a long term process. It could be claimed that the "urban profiles" of most of urban centers in Europe (in all its regions) were developed over a long period of time. In addition to this, in each European country the dominant segment of the social structure is constituted by the middle-class layer of society. This is the layer toward which the social challenges are addressed and, at the same time, it is a "transformer" toward the other layers of society. The quantitative and qualitative challenges of sustainable development in the spheres of production, consumption and utilization of space are most extensively realized in this middle layer. The spaces and functions of every city are, in the largest number of cases, adapted to the requirements and demands of this layer: housing (manifested as the distribution of forms of housing, the structure and quality of houses), the network of institutions (education, health, culture, administration), employment positions, transportation infrastructure (for this is the layer from which greatest number of the work force is recruited and which has a need for daily mass migrations within the city or area), outdoor and indoor spaces for recreation, and so on. It is clear that demands for social change induce changes in the way of life of these most numerous portions of urban society. In periods of widespread social transition, such as, in the 90s, the countries of former Eastern and partly Central Europe are undergoing, this erosion of social structure is the best visible. Whole social layers are disappearing (primarily the middle class), and some new ones are taking shape, which will eventually play a dominant role in contouring the urban profile of the whole society. The decomposition of a society's social structure need not necessarily also imply advancement toward a better form of community, since a society's traditional social structure is an essential factor of its stability. When a system of values has been established, and when, in the meantime, another one is not developed through evolution, what then happens is that the gaps created by transition are filled by an ad hoc system. The sudden entrance of a market economy and market thinking into the everyday life of urban societies in transition is causing gaps in their social structure. One of the most important effects is that traditional forms of urbanity are being decomposed at the same time.

3) Changes in the urban structure

The concept of urban sustainability in the described cultural context, exposed to the interpretation of architects and urban planners, is, at the same time, exposed to great temptation. Naturally, their sensibility for spatial structures is manifested to a greater extent than with other experts who are involved in the study of sustainable development. It can happen very easily that the feeling for the value of what has already been created and its cultural evaluation turn into spatial determinism.

Through the focus on social and urban reality of new social structures created by transition, in most of the large cities of the former political East, dramatic changes are taking place in their inherited urban structure. This means that the urban-morphological matrix, which is an important identification demarcation in the life of the most numerous layer of citizens (and of other inhabitants as well,) is being altered. New rules of the game in the planning and utilization of space are being adapted to the social layer which holds the levers of political and economic power. In this case, these two are most often overlapping. The face of the city which takes shape in such conditions results from the current redistribution of social wealth, which is passing into private hands. In countries of the former socialist order, this is what is termed "the selling of the state", in which speculations with urban real estate are the most attractive, that is, most profitable. Since the right to ownership is one of the fundamental values and impetuses for western democracies, this is what countries in transition are tending toward. This right, linked with organized urban regulations in a process of evolution (where the monetarization of society and administrative and legislative trends are concurrent), it is well known, has given rise to the recognizable and functionally differentiated cities of western society. Many cities in Western Europe are examples, in the general case, of "desirable and good" urban structures. It cannot, however, be expected that in the process of social transition such a transformation can take place without serious
effects for urbanality. The larger and medium size cities of the European east and a segment of them in its central region are today being deconstructed. Appearing on the scene is a great European wave of "Osmanization", which is rapidly erasing the marks of former times. The concept of sustainable development must be based on strategies which respect the patterns of urbanality originating in the long process of the historical constitution of the urban morphology. This does not mean that there should be an obligatory and required (nor is it possible) return to or insistence on "authentic" architectural forms, such as we have in Berlin today, which is attempting, at any cost, to return to the look it had in the 30s, by remodeling some of its central areas.

What shape can, in the simplest case, this attack on established values of urban culture take? For instance, in cities whose traditional centers of marketing are bazaars or open air markets (cities in the Mediterranean region or those in the East), when there is a new approach and insistence on large indoor markets, whose economic efficiency is measured by a quick turnover of money and a consumer mentality of the western type. Or, when in the construction of new traffic communications across old city centers, the network of historical urban patterns is disrupted. This also occurs when the construction of new housing projects (usually on the outskirts) establishes no organic link with the important morphological features of the urban past or when patterns established by tradition are not raised to an adequate semantic level.

Culture of space in the modern city begins with the culture of making decisions on spatial matters. Without doubt, the culture of urban space is created in the sphere of urban policy. This is nothing new. Each system strives to organize its relations (including spatial ones) in such a way that it is capable of successfully controlling it (2).

The problem of spatial planning of culture is of utmost importance for the strategy of urban sustainability. Urban cultural policy is much more than sporadic presentational "happenings" in the city space. What we are dealing with in this case is a new mode of thinking and the creation of cultural strategies that would, in the long run, enrich the lasting urban space with attributes of the cultural. Three directions of such a new mode of thinking are of special importance in the process of re-shaping the cultural climate of space: (a) the development of such free spaces in the city, which would enhance social interactions and the creation of "porous" borders between different parts of the city; (b) the encouragement of multiculturalism and inter-cultural permeation via space and (c) the development of cultural projects emphasizing the participation of citizens, as integral parts of the strategy of sustainable urban development (3).

4) Changes in living patterns

If the thesis that "urbanism manifests itself as a way of life" (L. Wirth) is correct, then the urbanity of any space is given by the patterns of its being lived through. Since patterns of living are exponents of certain cultural and social features of a society, changes in them also affect the acquired values of the community. Sustainable urban-cultural development has to take into account the actual differences which exist in various geographical and cultural-genetic zones. The patterns of urban living in a Mediterranean city and in one north of the Alps are essentially different. The homogenization of the "urban mass" of Europe (or of any other space characterized by differences) should not simply be a process of unification.

The urban identity of a community is an exceptionally valuable component of sustainable urban-cultural development. The wealth of a civilization is measured by the variety of its manifest forms; the wealth and vitality of an urban civilization is expressed by the multitude of its different forms of urbanity. The urban identity of a community can be expressed by the term city-making. Some of the fundamental elements of its complexity can be considered to be: the manner of social organization within the community (which can be inefficient in the economic sense, but is always typical), the temporality of the community, the characteristics of its urban structures (its urban morphology), the atmosphere of the city/community as a quality of its historical duration, a specific form of its social structure (which need not mean that it is also the desired one), the retaining of a certain type of social segregation and spatial differentiation (which cannot be obliterated by any model of social and urban development, and so, in the social concept of sustainable development one should not even insist on their elimination), etc.

The notion of maintaining a certain level of urban identity in a community is not, however, without dangers which are opposed to rational forms of social development. Some of the most important ones of these are: Romanization and emphasized exclusiveness of one's own culture; separation from other urban communities of the broader region or continent; withdrawal into the shell of a national state, that is to say, state-national egotism; the seeking of development patterns in nostalgic historicism, which transforms an idealized past into dogma; the dominance of political ideologies and religious exclusiveness which employ traditional values in order to promote conservativism, nationalism, ethnocentrism and intolerance. The spiritual categories which are the very essence of the urban identity of a community cannot be valued by material criteria, and should not be close to the growth of other authentic cultural values of another provenance. Sustainable urban-cultural development is in one of its essential aspects also urban pluralism. (This should not be equated with so-called multicultural society which, some believe, is the future of global development and which is, supposedly, the marker of the degree of a society's democracy). It is certain, however, that value relations in urban communities/cities, which are established only within the framework of given cultural patterns and the spiritual quality of the accumulated past, should not be closed to innovation (enriched) but also authentic cultural patterns. In any case, this is what constitutes the positive difference between, for instance, the southern, central and western regions of Europe.

Sustainable urban development by all means includes the preservation, promotion and development of cultural heritage, which resides in urban heritage. Cultural heritage abounds not only in material artifacts, but it also represents a range of layers of spiritual nature that are interwoven with man's immediate surroundings. What is needed when the development of the construct of sustainable urban development is concerned is an exceptionally
refined feeling that would make the urban and cultural heritages fit together. Here objective evaluation runs counter to the usually too intense local feelings for tradition. As always when the cultural component manifests itself as a creator of a wider idea, the danger of straying into passeism exists in this case, as well. It is not possible to expect that urban future can be developed without a rich urban-cultural heritage, which includes true respect for the cultural achievements of all groups. The way of life, modes and forms of constructional development, the use of space and communication between people in space and with space – all these represent the minimum of patterns that have to have a well-balanced relationship with what urban planners and creators of local and national development strategies consider important. The unity of the spirit and matter of urban spaces that is capable of enduring the challenges of time and of the existence of the same values in other places, regions and environments, represents a strong component of the overall sustainability of human communities.

References