

***Sustainability as a Privileged Distraction: Evaluating the Utility of  
Sustainable Development as a Paradigm in Urban Planning***

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The concept of sustainability is widely varied and oftentimes difficult to grasp, though the literature appears to agree on at least one aspect: sustainability's strength, in part, lies in the fact that it is a nearly impossible concept to disagree with on its face. Steven Hayward aptly writes, "No one is *for* a mode of life that would make future generations poorer, or for one that degrades our environment and thereby jeopardizes the health of future generations."<sup>1</sup> Certainly, sustainability has a similar grasp on our (Western) collective conscience; carrying reusable water bottles and shopping bags, recycling and composting, and buying organic and locally sourced foods has become both trendy and normative. Despite its wide-ranging facile acceptance, I argue here that sustainability is not a useful organizing principle in urban planning because, where planning finds strength in its variable nature, sustainability becomes distracting, myopic, and privileged. Sustainable development is certainly an important concept to incorporate into the planning field, but it must be done in a specific, careful, and place-based way. If used as a core organizing paradigm, the planning field risks getting lost in ignorant ambiguity and losing its effectiveness as a practice.

Sustainability and urban planning are similar in their notoriety for being amorphous and apparently all-encompassing. Scott Campbell points out that Aaron Wildavsky's 1973 quip, "If planning is everything, maybe it's nothing" may easily, if smugly, be applied to sustainability as well.<sup>2</sup> The planning field has long attempted to organize itself so as to be more clearly defined; the most recent of these organizational iterations appears to be sustainability and sustainable development. Many of the planning sub-disciplines have adopted this theme – one would not be hard-pressed to find literature on sustainable economic development, sustainable transportation

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<sup>1</sup> Steven F. Hayward, "A Sensible Environmentalism," *The Public Interest*, no. 151 (2003): 64-65.

<sup>2</sup> Scott D. Campbell, "The Planner's Triangle Revisited: Sustainability and the Evolution of a Planning Ideal That Can't Stand Still," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 82, no. 4 (2016): 395.

systems, and sustainable land use practices, among others – but it has done little to organize or provide meaning to the discipline as a whole. However, the planning field arguably does not need a centralizing paradigm in order to be effective and, in fact, draws strength from its variation and adaptability. Urban planning in one instance may mean designing a transit system expansion to improve a city’s accessibility and connectivity, and in another may entail guiding a city’s affordable housing initiative; it may at once require comprehensive and incremental planning strategies to envision long-term goals and effect progress in feasible steps. The urban planning field is strong in its variance and, when done well, in its ability to adapt to the place-based nature of the problem.

Sustainability is naturally woven into many of the core principles of planning: “The idea of sustainability is...sympathetic to prevalent beliefs among planners” and, in fact, “The planning profession may well claim that it has engaged in sustainability long before the term arose.”<sup>3</sup> To use it as a core organizational framework, however, is to risk encompassing the planning field in the powerful distraction and privilege that is embedded in sustainability in its current practice. A global push for sustainability—“frequent calls for ‘us’ to recognize ‘our’ responsibility for the environment”—expects underdeveloped and developing countries to sign on to efforts such as the Paris Climate Accord while ignoring that the responsibility for pollution and degradation falls most heavily on the developed world.<sup>4</sup> Hayward attempts to argue that “Because we will be wealthier and more technologically adept in several decades than we are today, the best climate-change policy might be to emphasize economic growth for the present rather than instituting the costly short-term measures.”<sup>5</sup> This notion that growth is essential for

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 394.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Marcuse, “Sustainability is Not Enough,” *Environment and Urbanization* 10, no. 2 (1998): 111.

<sup>5</sup> Hayward, “A Sensible Environmentalism,” 69-70.

our ability to respond adequately to some far-off effects of climate change is incredibly narrowminded. Not only does it ignore the fact that the poorest parts of the world are disproportionately affected by the near-term effects of climate change, but it also baselessly assumes that when catastrophe eventually strikes, resources will be distributed equitably in order to manage such a situation.<sup>6</sup>

Sustainability may unite the globe in an ostensibly common cause, but a blanket acceptance of sustainability as good and desirable is dangerous in its ignorance of differentially privileged contexts. Marcuse points out, “Environmental sustainability seems at first blush to be the most ‘objective,’ the most inescapable...if humankind dies off, the game is over.”<sup>7</sup> In reality, however, sustainability is anything but objective. In the Western imagination, sustainability is most frequently conceptualized in an environmental context; innovations in clean and renewable energy, land preservation tactics, and public transit systems tend to characterize our sustainability framework. But what if sustainability meant maintenance of livelihood—access to food, clean water, and social opportunity—as it does for much of the Global South? What if climate change did not just mean a warmer summer or more rain, but the collapse of an entire informal settlement existing precariously upon a city’s topographically challenging edge?

The sweeping acceptance of sustainability suggests that “if we all simply recognized our common interests everything would be fine, we could end poverty, exploitation, segregation, inadequate housing, congestion, ugliness, abandonment and homelessness.”<sup>8</sup> Reality suggests that we have accepted sustainability as a usefully ambiguous concept. “No one who is interested in justice wants to sustain things the way they are now,” Marcuse (1998) explains; and further,

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Mendelsohn, Ariel Dinar, and Larry Williams, “The Distributional Impact of Climate Change on Rich and Poor Countries,” *Environment and Development Economics* 11, no. 2 (2006): 159.

<sup>7</sup> Marcuse, “Sustainability is Not Enough,” 104, 109.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

“sustainability taken as a goal in itself only benefits those who already have everything they want...focusing on environmental concerns, the problem for most of the world’s poor is not that their conditions cannot be sustained but that they should not be sustained.”<sup>9</sup> If the planning fields were to organize around sustainable development, they would risk turning a blind eye to all the ways in which it does not address the needs of those for whom sustainability is a daily struggle for survival, or for whom the simple act of maintaining current conditions is an injustice in itself.

It is important to note that the role of sustainability in the planning field has been closely examined. In particular, Scott Campbell’s “Planner’s Triangle” is instructive in its ability to “disassemble sustainability so one could analyze and critique it” and helps one recognize that a key component of understanding sustainability is breaking down the inherent conflicts between social justice, economic growth, and environmental protection.<sup>10</sup> Campbell further discusses the evolution and growth of sustainability in the field of urban planning, noting the infusion of the concept in the planning curriculum, the creation of city sustainability offices and plans, and a research field that is “prolific, decentralized, and unintentionally duplicative.”<sup>11</sup> Campbell notes that in the field’s scholarly work, it is no longer enough to simply explore or define the topic, but rather it must act as an orientation or starting point.<sup>12</sup>

With this understanding, “Sustainability becomes a central narrative and organizing logic for...wide ranging planning efforts” such as compact cities, green belts, transit-oriented developments, and walkable urbanism.<sup>13</sup> This academic understanding, however, does not necessarily translate to public practice. Sustainability remains distractingly large: one may

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>10</sup> Campbell, “The Planner’s Triangle Revisited,” 395.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 393.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 394.

dutifully recycle the coffee cup he buys every morning but remain attached to driving his SUV. As long as people have the power to rally against the planning interventions they deem overly intrusive and claim sustainable their recycling and infrequent use of public transit, sustainability as a core planning tenet is unproductive and often rooted in a privileged ability to ignore sustainability when it is not convenient or desirable. We must remain cognizant of the fact that the sustainability framework within which most are operating does not consider a careful analysis of the various conflicts embedded in the sustainable development paradigm, but rather buys into the inherent goodness of an ambiguous sustainability concept.

In light of the most recent report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, practicing sustainability may not feel like a privilege, but rather a frightening necessity to ward off doomsday predictions.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, sustainable development is immensely important and increasingly urgent; planners cannot and should not ignore sustainability entirely, but a superficial acceptance of sustainability as something fundamentally good and productive would be harmful to the planning practice. Instead, planners must carefully examine how sustainability can function within the practice to bolster place-based goals, and closely consider the meaning of sustainability in the context of privilege and livelihood.

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<sup>14</sup> “Summary for Policymakers of IPCC Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C approved by governments,” *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* online, last modified October 8, 2018, <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/sr15/>.

## References

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