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Introduction to the Special Issue: ‘Green Cities’ as urban models – contributing to new urban agendas, but how?

In this unprecedented era of increasing urbanization, and in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Paris Agreement, and other global development agreements and frameworks, *we have reached a critical point in understanding that cities can be the source of solutions to, rather than the cause of, the challenges that our world is facing today.* If well-planned and well-managed, urbanization can be a powerful tool for sustainable development for both developing and developed countries.

Foreword to the New Urban Agenda, (UN HABITAT, 2017, p.IV, added *emphases*).

The quote above taken from the foreword to the UN’s *New Urban Agenda* (NUA) adopted in 2016 epitomises how, in the ‘urban century’, there is an increasing recognition that the sustainable planning and development of cities is no longer solely a matter of local, regional and national concern. What happens in cities in the remainder of this century will impact more widely on a host of international and global agendas, notably those relating to ‘green’ challenges such as responding to the climate emergency, biodiversity, resource use, public health (e.g. addressing air pollution), and, promoting greater environmental justice. Reflecting this, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11 of the UN’s *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (UN, 2015, p.26), focuses on making ‘cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable’, whilst many of the other goals will require particular attention to how urban places develop if they are to be achieved. Part 1 of the NUA - The Quito Declaration on Sustainable Cities and Human Settlements for All emphasises in its title the social goal that sustainable cities and human settlements should be ‘for all’. Part 2, the Quito Implementation Plan for the New Urban Agenda, also reflects the three dimensions of sustainability including promoting ‘*Environmentally sustainable and resilient urban development*’. The signatories recognise that ‘cities and human settlements face unprecedented threats from unsustainable consumption and production patterns, loss of biodiversity, pressure on ecosystems, pollution, natural and human-made disasters, and climate change and its related risks, undermining the efforts to end poverty in all its forms and dimensions and to achieve sustainable development’ (UN HABITAT, 2017, p.18). The wider significance of what happens in cities is again emphasised with the document stating that:

‘Given cities’ demographic trends and their central role in the global economy, in the mitigation and adaptation efforts related to climate change, and in the use of resources and ecosystems, the way they are planned, financed, developed, built, governed and managed has a direct impact on sustainability and resilience well beyond urban boundaries’.

Other UN initiatives such as the International Guidelines on Urban and Territorial Planning (UN HABITAT, 2015, p.20) similarly state:

‘Urban and territorial planning contributes to increased human security by strengthening environmental and socioeconomic resilience, enhancing mitigation of, and adaptation to, climate change and improving the management of natural and environmental hazards and risks’

The role of planning in responding to such agendas is therefore widely stated and accepted, though more detailed guidance on the forms, or models of planning, which may help foster progress across these agendas is, arguably, less articulated beyond exhortations to promote ‘resilient and sustainable cities and human settlements’ (UN HABITAT, 2017, p.5). Yet as noted by Leducq and Scarwell in this issue, there are a large number of overlapping concepts circulating internationally which address the theme of ‘green’ urbanisation including the resilient city, green city, low-carbon city, biodiver-city, ecomobile city, resource efficient city, healthy city, and sustainable city.

Informed by the context outlined above and, in the context of the EU, the promotion since 2010 of the European Green Capital Award (EGCA) under the precept of ‘Green Cities Fit for Life’, in 2015 and 2016 the French and British Planning Studies Group organised two seminars on the theme of green cities as policy models. The first was held in Bristol, European Green Capital 2015, and organised jointly by University of the West of England and Bristol University on the theme of ‘European Green Cities: building urban resilience and sustainability in an era of austerity’. In 2016 a second seminar took place in, Nantes, European Green Capital 2013, on the theme of ‘Urban models, ‘best practices’ and policy transfer: exploring the legacies of European Green Capitals’ and was organised by The Ecole Nationale Supérieure d’Architecture de Nantes and the Université de Nantes. This special issue emerges from the debates and a selection of the papers given at these two events. The European Commission (n.d.) observes that the EGCA ‘is given each year to a city, which is leading the way in environmentally friendly urban living and which can thus act as a role-model to inspire other cities’. It also notes that ‘Cities differ enormously and sharing concrete examples of what a European Green Capital can look like is essential if further progress is to be made’ (European Commission, n.d.). One goal of this issue is to make a small contribution to these processes of sharing experiences of being an EGC and the implementation of green city models. The circulation of urban policy models and “best practices” surrounding the concept of the Green City has already been explored in the case of Nantes and other cities (Devisme and Dumont, 2011). Béal, Epstein and Pinson (2015) argue that the increasing mobility of practices, knowledge and initiatives in urban policies cannot be explained only by the local and transnational dynamics of urban policy-making. In the case of France, for example, they point to the restructuring of the State, in which the State strengthens its capacity to steer ‘at a distance’ urban policies through the encouragement of best practice models such as green cities or ecoquartiers. A wider context for the papers presented are the debates on policy transfer which have long been a concern of planning scholars (Ward, 2000; Masser, 194; Healey, 2013; Leducq et al., 2018), then explored by political scientists (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000; Dolowitz et Al., 2000), and latterly re-branded as ‘policy mobilities’ by human geographers (Cochrane and Ward, 2012; McCann and Ward, 2011). Informed by this contextual and conceptual background, the selection of articles presented here explore the application of the ‘Green City’ as an urban policy model in different national contexts, reflecting on how far labels and awards such as the EGC, and the circulation of international concepts and ‘exemplars’ of the ‘green city’, shape (or fail to) material practices of urban planning and governance towards more sustainable trajectories.

The first paper by Nurse and North explores the European Green Capital Award (EGCA) and whether it is a lever of environmental urbanism, or simply another addition to the ‘toolbox’ of entrepreneurial urban development. It reviews the experience of the first tranche of cities to be awarded the title of European Green Capital (EGC) in the period 2010 – 2016 and identifies two mains ‘types’ of city – the ‘Idealised Green City’ and the ‘Aspiring Green City’ amongst

the holders and a third type which embodies characteristics of both. They conclude that the experience of the early EGCs presents a number of transferrable lessons, both for those seeking to host the award, and for the running of the award itself, but that creating a lasting legacy and meeting initial objectives can remain a challenge.

The second paper by Demaziere explores the examples of the first two EGCs – Stockholm (2010) and Hamburg (2011) in more detail. It explores two main themes. Firstly, any relationships between past policy programmes that improved environmental quality and more recent efforts to promote the cities places as green environmental forerunners of urban sustainability. Secondly, whether local environmental policy-making is in practice affected by green place-branding and notably if the EGC label consolidated the local environmental agenda, or was simply used to lever further economic growth. It concludes that the local governments and growth coalitions of Hamburg and Stockholm were able to incorporate selective environmental concerns to increase public attention, mobilise firms, and develop new public-private partnerships so as to profit from the economic benefits that accompany enhanced green technology exports or greater ecotourism.

The third paper by Hall and Ersoy considers the UK's, 2015, EGC, Bristol. Specifically, it applies the theoretical lens of reflexive governance to assess to what extent the Bristol Green Capital Partnership (BGCP) represents an exemplar of sustainable urban development. It explores the evolution of the BGCP since 2008, and the pivotal role it has played in animating the environmental debate within Bristol, especially in the European Green Capital programme (2015). The authors conclude that the BGCP represents a 'bounded' example of reflexive governance; one that exhibits advanced forms deliberation and coproduction but, ultimately, addresses too narrow a constituency of environmental business and green activist interests. The paper also points to the importance of context and path-dependency, notably the role that decades of green activism in the city since the 1960s has played in setting the context for the more recent green capital narrative.

The fourth paper by Griggs and Howarth considers 'two images' of France's, 2013, EGC, Nantes, as a 'green model' of urban planning and governance – the 'collaborative city' versus the 'slow city'. It examines how this EGC came to be involved in plans for a new international airport at Notre-Dame-des-Landes. The paper analyses discourses to illustrate how the highly politicised struggle against the airport revealed the limits of the 'Nantes model' of urban sustainability and collaboration, giving rise to a counter model, which it provisionally characterises as the 'slow city'. Though the struggle against the airport can be understood as a rural social movement, the authors also show how, set within a city regional context, its ideals and logics have been progressively displaced to Nantes itself, disclosing new images and possibilities for urban governance.

The fifth paper by Leducq and Scarwell considers green city models as an internationally circulating urban strategy and explores how their influence and implementation reflects an interaction between, or 'hybridisation' of, international practices and local assemblages. An empirical exploration of the South-East Asian city of Hanoi provides an opportunity to analyse how the green city model circulates and takes root locally as a planning strategy in a large metropolis in the Global South in the face of vast sustainability challenges. While the green city is being promoted to meet new urban challenges, its adopting oscillates between international benchmarks of good practice and local know-how. Hanoi is not content to merely look elsewhere for proven urban models but aims to produce its own model with a particular type of urbanisation based on both international and local practices.

The papers collectively raise a number of themes and suggest avenues for further research.

- The UN's NUA and 2030 SDGs place emphasis on the role of cities in meeting wider sustainability goals. Within this context the 'Green City' as a model which exists alongside a plethora of other models like the smart city, the just city and themes like 'the right to the city'. The emphasis in such international goal-setting for planning still appears in many cases to prioritise economic growth and social equality (e.g. in a list of envisaged attributes for cities and human settlements in the NUA that range from a – h the two environmentally focussed ones come in as g and h). Where does the 'green city' fit, is it just a sub-component of the sustainable city? More widely can planning deliver all it is asked to? What ultimately is the relative role of the state and bodies like the EU and the UN in promoting or disseminating green urban models? Are there universal models, or must the approach always be tailored to local circumstances through processes of 'hybridisation' (e.g. as in Hanoi)? How can cities be encouraged to learn from the most relevant 'exemplars' to their own situations and contexts, as opposed to more well-known (i.e. Marketed? Labelled?) cases?
- The papers presented often show interactions between entrepreneurialism and green actions; with themes like how 'genuine' the Green agenda is in the different cities and how much a process of "labelisation" and branding with competitive purposes occurs; the papers take some different stances with some authors being much more sceptical about the possibilities for synergies across these domains of sustainability; the social aspect is also present in some papers alongside the competitiveness/growth and sustainability/green themes.
- What can we learn from thinking comparatively? The examples covered show some common themes, but also the continued important of context and path dependencies – Stockholm has a different trajectory to Hamburg, Nantes, Bristol and Hanoi etc. Is there a lesson about 'exemplars'? Some of the cities covered are 'famous' examples like Nantes, Stockholm and Bristol, but are they actually doing something really different which could be considered to be best practice, or are they just better at 'labelling and branding'? The 'inside story' from Bristol and Nantes, for example, presents a more nuanced view than their frequent portrayal as exemplars (at least in their respective national contexts). If comparisons are to be made, on what basis – e.g. using 'technocratic' indicators of material conditions (air quality; % of green space; metres of cycle lane per capita etc.); or more qualitative measures/interpretations of the quality, or legitimacy, of governance for urban sustainability? What is 'urban greenness' ultimately about?

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