Book Review

Rethinking Sustainable Cities: Accessible, green and fair

Edited by David Simon

Contributing authors: Henrietta Palmer, Susan Parnell, David Simon and James Waters

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Mary Gearey*

University of Brighton

Urbanisation, as the dominant population trend across the globe, has provided a continued focus for Sustainability scholars over the last thirty years, spearheaded by the hugely influential 1989 Brundtland Report. Highlighting the link between expanding city spaces and both the challenges and opportunities they bring to Sustainable Development goals, the Report enabled a global forum to develop leading to the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals and, latterly, the Sustainable Development Goals. Central within this contemporary Sustainability vision is the recognition that cities are pivotal in shaping and implementing Sustainability principles.

The Sustainable Cities literature has tended to fall into two camps; the first focusing on contemporary issues of social justice and 'rights to the city', particularly orientated towards the challenges to Development models that rapid but regionally uneven urbanisation brings; the second focusing on the ergonomic possibilities enabled by networked infrastructures, highlighting the emancipatory potential that living in smaller, denser, socio-technologically connected city spaces can provide for all citizens. Both sub-genres provide insights into the new realities of late modern, post-Fordist global urbanisation. Against the showcasing of Bio-cities and Eco-cities, hallmarked by careful urban design, sit the realities of unplanned, unregulated, urban sprawl for many citizens of the global South.

According to the UN-Habitat's 2009 report 'Planning Sustainable Cities', global urbanisation will continue to be asymmetrically shaped, with more developed regions seeing some cities shrinking matched by the expansion of mega and hyper cities, with populations of over 20 million residents. Within lower and middle income countries the trend is towards rapidly expanding urban areas of up to 250,000 citizens, often comprised of informal settlements. Put succinctly, those areas already made vulnerable by rapid population shifts will also be those areas most adversely affected by climate change impacts, currently without the capacity to plan for, manage or mitigate these impacts.

It is within this milieu that 'Rethinking Sustainable Cities: Accessible, green and fair' makes its contribution to the literature. Drawn from the theoretical and empirical work being undertaken on behalf of the Mistra Urban Futures (MUF) project, this slim, 'compact' work is aimed at providing supporting evidence and guidance for policy makers, practitioners and educators involved with Sustainable Urbanism. Stating right from the outset the importance of cities for both regional wealth generation and for human well-being, Simon et al, clearly signal that these particular forms of human dwelling are the sites within which Sustainable Development as a process, project and global schematic, will succeed or fail. The authors argue over five chapters that these 'three key dimensions' – accessibility, greenness and fairness – are pivotal to enabling Sustainable Cities. Drawing together theoretical and empirical evidence from across the globe, the authors' ultimate aim is to advance an integrated and coherent understanding of sustainable urbanism at multiple governance scales.

This is a commendable undertaking for a relatively slim volume of work. The first chapter, 'accessible cities' provides a thorough overview of urban density concepts, to highlight the limitations that only focusing on density brings to the Sustainable Urbanism literature. Instead Waters argues here that engaging with accessibility issues enables a much more grounded understanding of implementing and supporting sustainable urban livelihoods. Addressing service hubs, transport systems, housing, power and justice public spaces and socio-cultural needs, the chapter reflects upon what aspects of accessibility are crucial for thriving city spaces. The author works outwards from the perspective that: 'Accessibility refers to the ability of individuals to participate in necessary or desired activities for the wellbeing of humanity'. This challenging definition is not further justified or explored. Although the author acknowledges that accessibility discussions tend towards normativity, underpinned by the notion of creating the conditions for the 'ideal' citizen, this is not explored further. This oversight is no doubt one of the compromises of addressing expansive thematics within a short book format.

The second chapter, 'green cities' feels on surer footing, with an engaging overview of debates around green infrastructure (GI), nature based solutions (NBS) and the current urban planning/urban designing move towards renaturing cities. Simon clearly outlines here the connectivity between human wellbeing and climate change mitigation strategies that are combined within GI and NBS approaches, He provides an erudite analysis of the tensions created through urban planning and landscape architecture which seek to 'design in' sustainability solutions that complement socio-cultural trends, and those that seek to centrally plan and circumscribe what citizens can and should perform in terms of their civic responsibilities.

Chapter three's emphasis on 'fairness' continues this thematic with its emphasis on the political environment and the components which both support and hinder equality of opportunity for city citizens. Returning to refrains from the opening chapter, there are clear

overlaps between issues addressed between accessibility and fairness, though within this chapter there is more political analysis concerning the inherent structures which make 'fairness' such a slippery concept and a challenging component to integrate within sustainable urbanisation.

The book's final chapter brings together practical recommendations for supporting sustainable urbanism. This is the pivotal part of the book, based on empirical work undertaken globally through the MISTRA project, providing tangible, pragmatic steps which can be taken by policy makers, activists and educators to operationalise sustainability. Readers would have benefitted greatly from the use of case study examples here, to enable practitioners at all levels to reflect on their own approach and urban context.

One of the drawbacks of asking contributing authors to focus on specific aspects of sustainable urbanism is that there is an almost unavoidable reworking of similar concepts across the three core chapters. Added to this, there is no clearly stated working definition of 'sustainable', or even, 'wellbeing' utilised by the authors. These omissions mean that the reader is left unclear as to what mode of 'sustainability' is being advocated by the authors. There are, of course, different scholarly perspectives on the forms that 'sustainable urbanisation' can take, from proponents of the 'business as usual' approach, with a global commitment to continued economic expansion, through to alternative approaches which posit 'sufficiency', 'buen vivir' and 'decroissance', as expounded by the Degrowth movement and currently championed across a number of global cities. Without an exploration of these contending perspectives early on, the book could be argued to be monochromatic in its outlook. In conclusion, this is a book to whet the appetite rather than provide an in-depth interrogation of Sustainable Urbanisation. It is a welcome addition to the current literature and should be commended for its felicity in welcoming the reader to reimagine the cities of our present and near future within Sustainable Urbanism framings.

*Correspondence address:

Dr Mary Gearey, Research Fellow, School of Environment and Technology, University of Brighton, Cockcroft Building, Lewes Road, Brighton, BN1 4GJ, UK. Email: M.gearey@brighton.ac.uk