

# Urban development and sustainable management

The debate over sustainable development is constantly present in the media. We have gone too far, too fast, without looking back, without worrying about the indelible marks left all around us. Anxiety and guilt are on the increase as more studies come out with scientists raising their concerns about the consequences of our polluting and the breakdown of the ecological balance. We are all caught red handed committing an ecological offense. Suspicions, fears ... how do we get out?

We are frightened by the announcement of dramatic climate change, focused on the given definition of sustainable development, rushing into the search for technical solutions without precisely measuring the scope of the problem and trying to perceive or reveal its different dimensions. Which environment are we talking about? Are natural balances separable from cultural and social balances? Can we work for sustainable development while ignoring the culture, the way of life of inhabitants and their capacity to adjust quickly? Which conception do the inhabitants have of their own environment? Which mode of urbanization should be applied to cities and greater metropolitan areas where the majority of the world's population lives?

- **Urban environments**

In the last few months, humankind passed a historical landmark. In the world, there are now more people living in cities than people living in the country. This trend will continue into the coming decades. By 2050, this rate could be as high as 65%. Today, the population of the greater metropolitan areas increases an average of 1.25 million inhabitants per week<sup>1</sup>.

For a long time, city life had a better image than country life. The myth endures, but a painful reality exists. Cities are mainly developing on the peripheries, where

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<sup>1</sup> Report 2006-2007 on the state of the Cities in the World, published by UN/HABITAT.

an increasingly dense population resides. The suburban sprawl of Western towns is getting worse and the number of slums in “developing countries” is on the rise. The population is growing in an urban environment often built up according to land-property and political opportunities without any global vision of the city, its evolution or any thoughts about the related social and cultural consequences.

- **Slums**

The proliferation of slums along the periphery of big cities in so-called “developing countries”, such as Calcutta, Delhi, Mexico or Lagos, is a source of serious concern. Today, shantytowns accommodate one billion people in the world, and in 2020, it will reach two billion. These areas often represent the base from which newcomers from the countryside can access cities. The most destitute populations remain there, at the margin of “the rich districts”. Slums pale in comparison to the economic growth concentrated in city centers. An absence of basic hygiene coexists with nearby luxury and over consumption.

Many inhabitants of these zones have no hope of climbing the social ladder that would allow them to one-day access the rich districts. As a result, they tend to revolt and join the most radical extremist movements that find fertile ground in these poor districts.

The gap is growing between two types of ghettos, one for the poor and one for the rich. This territorial division results in a tragic social division. The balance is even more difficult to find because two extreme categories are at stake. Can we talk about sustainable development without, in the first place, defusing these social bombs that risk exploding in our face?

- **Large areas of densely-populated housing**

The problem does not only involve shanty towns. Large areas of densely-populated housing and high-rise apartments were recently built in the suburbs of Shanghai, Beijing<sup>2</sup> and other parts of the world. A good part of the Chinese population ends up living there. Even though they benefit from the country's

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<sup>2</sup> (or the high number of other big cities in expansion all over the world)

economic growth, they are also forced to live at odds with their culture and their traditional ways of life. The generation which went through difficult decades finds a modern and individualistic comfort produced by the tremendous economic rise of the country... but at what cost? Will their single child, usually overprotected, spoiled and ignorant of the privation their parents and grand-parents went through, accept to live under such circumstances? Even if these high-rise apartments were to be in compliance with environmental norms, it is possible that they will be destroyed in less than 30 years. The truth is that they are neither socially nor culturally sustainable.

It is obvious that high-rises, in China or elsewhere, only represent one stage in the social and cultural mutations that we are witnessing today. Isn't it time to handle these different stages of the fast transformation of living in accordance with the precepts of sustainable development?

- **The spread of urban areas**

At a national level, what will become of these high-rises that do not comply with the ecological standard and that are invading certain peripheral parts of the Parisian region? Even though these houses comply with HEQ norms (High Environment Quality), are they nevertheless sustainable? What kind of life does this spread of urban development offer to future generations? The babies of the young couples currently settling in these districts will grow up one day. What will their pastimes be when they become teenagers? Are we not repeating the mistakes made with the high-rise apartments built during the Glorious Thirty, the thirty years following the end of the Second World War in France ?

Priority to the individualistic dream, with no emphasis on community, has triggered despair in a great number of post World War II suburbs. This is particularly true for the American suburbs built during those prosperous years.

The spread of urban areas has tragic consequences in terms of energy consumption, but also has social and cultural consequences for the inhabitants. Can we talk about sustainable development without trying to understand the

phenomena which led us to such aberrations with regards to our architectural and urban culture?

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### **A culturally and socially sustainable development**

Sustainable development as a concept, comprising the balance between economic growth and the ecosystem, is based on three pillars: the economic, the environmental, and the social.

The notions of good governance and culture – since 2002 – are also involved in defining sustainable development. However, is the definition of this concept now finalized? Are there other pillars to add? Does the concept have to be regularly reinforced?

My architectural education at the Ecole de Chaillot taught me that a successive adding of stays to a structure reveals an error of appreciation or, more precisely, a diagnostic error.

It is difficult to resolve a problem that is not precisely defined. Today, it is necessary to stand back and rethink the whole concept. The concept of sustainable development triggers a global approach. The sectorial approach, dominated by natural imbalances, goes against the comprehension of sustainable development and its credibility. Without minimizing ecological urgency, it is a priority to also focus on the cultural and social dimensions when one approaches sustainable development applied to cities and territories.

### **The inhabitants at the heart of the process**

The tragic consequences of the loss of a strategic vision, and the absence of a sustainable idea of urban development, force us to react quickly. The expected changes may come when we understand that the functional/technical approach and the cultural/social approach which, for too long, have been in opposition are, in fact, complementary.

The implementation of transversal and pluridisciplinary actions is conditioned by the finding of a balance. In this perspective, urban decision-makers and professionals should, in the first place, find solutions to ease the tensions caused by the fast spreading of high-rise apartments at a global level.

These solutions imply:

- taking better account of the cultural and social functions of districts and delimited territories, as they allow social bindings and melting;
- the acknowledgement of the inhabitant's attachment to the way of life that they shape, to the human relationships that they live and to the inheritance that they represent.<sup>3</sup>

The inhabitants are the heart of the process. Taking into account the impact of cultural and social development, as well as architectural types, means listening to inhabitants, and their participation in the decision-making process. In this context, without any demagoguery, it can be more useful to make decisions *with* the inhabitants rather than *for* the inhabitants. The examples of the villages of Plourin-les-Morlaix<sup>4</sup> in France and of Lizhuang<sup>5</sup> in China should be highlighted as their results illustrate the great value of this reasoning. How can we benefit from these two successful, local scale examples to tackle more complex issues across much bigger territories?

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<sup>3</sup> "Historic districts for all, a social and human approach for sustainable revitalization", brochure produced by the UNESCO Division of the Social Sciences, Research and Policies 2008.

<sup>4</sup> « Du temps à l'oeuvre citoyen » Philippe Madec, Plourin-lès-Morlaix 1991-2004, Jean-Michel Place edition.

<sup>5</sup> Studies done in 2006-2007 in Lizhuang, Yibin, Sichuan Province, Institute for Project, Tongji University (Shanghai).