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## Eco-districts: development and evaluation.

### A European case study.

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#### Abstract

Based on a comparative case study of Malmö Bo01 (Sweden), Barcelona Trinitat Nova (Spain), Bordeaux Ginko (France), and Docks de Saint Ouen (France), this paper shows that there are substantial differences in the practical interpretation of the term eco-district, and that the eco-district framework has evolved to suit different governmental systems and cultures. The four urban development projects arrive at similar outcomes and a common understanding of “urban sustainability”, yet their structures differ. Cities and city governments go above and beyond the national and international guidelines and tailor policies to meet their local priorities.

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#### 1. A shared definition of urban sustainability

According to the Larousse dictionary, “eco-district” designates an “urban development aiming to integrate the objectives of ‘sustainable development’ and focusing on energy, the environment and social life” [1]. It focuses on integrating environmental, social and economic goals. This fuzzy definition is illustrative of the lack of consensus around what an eco-district *is*. Two questions are of particular interest to my research: How eco-district is understood in the field in terms of urban design, community building, and social and economic welfare? And how is it defined in theoretical terms and operationalized practically?

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This paper examines the idea of “eco-district” as it has been constructed and transmitted in Europe. For the purpose of this research, an eco-district is an urban experiment, limited in terms of area and population. It aims at testing the city’s ability to develop a sustainable neighborhood in line with the recommendations of the Brundtland Report, published in 1987 and broadcasted at the United Nations Rio Conference in 1992. For Gro Harlem Brundtland and the World Commission on Environment and Development “sustainable development” should seek to “meet the needs and aspirations of the present without compromising the ability to meet those of the future” [2].

As globalization intensifies, cities are compelled to compete with each other in order to attract economic and human capital. Concomitantly, sustainability and livability have become key factors for residential and businesses location decisions. Cities are increasingly adopting new endeavors to further goals of sustainable development. In so doing they are pursuing sustainable development at the local level and the fulfillment of Local Agenda 21 goals [3] are now top priorities [4]. Since the 1933 Athens Charter, the European Union (EU) has been coordinating urban planning across countries and regions. Spearheading the movement, in 1994, the EU organized the first European conference of sustainable cities, during which all attendees signed the Aalborg Charter. The second conference resulted in the publication of “Sustainable European Cities” report, and in 1999, the European Union released a “framework for action for sustainable urban development” organized under four policy aims [5]:

- Strengthening economic prosperity and employment in towns and cities;
- Promoting equality, social inclusion and regeneration in urban areas;
- Protecting and improving the urban environment: towards local and global sustainability;
- Contributing to good urban governance and local empowerment.

In 2007, the Leipzig Charter emphasized the need for integrated planning strategies through coordinated actions. Since then, the EU has transitioned from policies aimed at mandating methodologies to an evidence-based framework, allowing concepts to be localized in implementation.

The European Union’s policy frameworks influence the way cities approach, develop and evaluate sustainable neighborhoods and eco-districts. Individual member countries must abide by EU laws but retain the power to legislate and produce their own body of laws. Cities are bound to both EU and national laws. Their regulatory capacities vary greatly based on the country’s structure, hence the broad variety of local programs and development projects. Nevertheless, many European cities now formally share similar visions and definition of sustainability. Achieving common sustainability goals is a challenge being taken up across communities, regions and in the work of many different disciplines and professions through the establishment of “eco-districts”.

Using a comparative case study methodology, the paper analyzes the consequences of the ‘eco-district’ framing in four European eco-districts: Malmö Bo01 (Sweden), Barcelona Trinitat Nova (Spain), Bordeaux Ginko (France), Docks de Saint Ouen (France). In order to understand how each eco-districts have developed and how they evolved, this research poses the following questions:

- What was the organizational structure and agency for design and implementation of each eco-district?
- How did the community receive the project? Did people and organizations advocate in favor of or against the project and how? Did the concept spread to other places? Was it inspired by other places? If so, how?
- Was the eco-district awarded recognized labels or certifications? Did eco-district have an impact on the neighbors? Other stakeholders?
- From a sustainability standpoint, how does the eco-district perform?

This paper highlights a common understanding of “urban sustainability” while witnessing the implementation of a great variety of urban developments labeled as “eco-districts”.

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