Challenges of teaching sustainable urbanism

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ABSTRACT

In order to present core issues usually addressed under sustainable urbanism, the paper makes a broad scanning of a number of relevant documents dealing with sustainable development. A wider selection has been made reflecting the major segments of the EU policy in this area, the standpoints of professional bodies on sustainable cities and of educational association of planning on issues of sustainable development. This overview has been complemented with the strategy of UNESCO on teaching and learning for a sustainable future. The overview shows a continuous increase of sensitivity towards spatial/urban issues which could be dealt with in a successful way only by urban planners who could supply innovative solutions based on a participatory and inclusive process of planning. Higher education institutions in the field of urban planning must respond adequately to these challenges by strengthening their disciplinary profiles and expertise on which to build their interdisciplinary interconnectedness with other disciplines in the arena of sustainability. In this process, the approaches chosen in teaching sustainable urbanism will be of great importance as they will influence the learners and prepare them to react to the ever changing circumstances of everyday life. The paper proposes a conceptual framework of sustainable urbanism and suggests a number of approaches to teaching and learning that could respond to this challenge.

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1. Introduction

The heritage of teaching urbanism in many schools in Europe and especially in Southeast Europe has a long and rather stubborn tradition. Originating from the German tradition of connecting urban planning to technical disciplines, the teaching of urbanism has been dominantly, and in some places exclusively, connected to higher education in architecture. Efforts that have been made to respond to the growing pressure of interdisciplinarity have mainly been accommodated by tangential inclusion of disciplines in social sciences leaving unhindered the leading role of architectural knowledge as represented through urban design or townscape issues and a lasting preoccupation with building codes and rules to the extent to which they influence architectural "freedom of expression".[1] Despite the fact that this statement is a slight exaggeration of the real situation, it does help in understanding the fact that issues concerning sustainable development have entered higher education and the social agenda in general primarily through other fields of instruction and especially through the civil sector. Schools of architecture have found themselves more comfortable in situations in which their segment of 'responsibility' for sustainable development has been reduced to technical issues of building fabric, improvement of energy efficiency in building and similar issues, rather than related to issues that reflect the wider aspects of sustainability.

Indeed, this situation cannot be detached from the wider social condition in which sustainable development has been accepted only as a priority that stands high on political agendas, but very low on agendas of daily conduct. Issues of sustainable development can relevantly survive in the field of higher education only if viewed within the context of societal values and priorities. Although an issue of global importance, sustainable development is highly influenced by local cultural contexts and they must be taken into consideration when discussing issues of teaching sustainable development in general and sustainable urbanism in particular. As E. Dimitrova has put it, this process "...would require inventive and flexible approaches in the academic field rather than a linear process of planning, monitoring and quantitative evaluation of results" [10].

However, it would be wrong to assume the current situation of higher education in urbanism and its legacy in Southeast Europe, as totally inadequate to respond to the challenge of sustainable development. The higher education in urban planning in Europe in general, in the second half of the 20th century has been constantly drifting between the 'spatial' and 'a-spatial' shores. If we hold true the prediction of P.R. Berke et al. that the key issue of planning in

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 [1] For an in-depth discussion see: [11].

the future would be the reconciliation of the diverging demands of rationality, participation and design, then we are heading towards the difficult task of "integrating rationality, consensus building and visionary design" [5] as the core of teaching urbanism in general and especially of sustainable urbanism.

If we accept this view as relevant, then the core questions in our case are what issues need to be addressed in order to teach sustainable urbanism, what approach would be most appropriate and what challenges need to be faced in this process. Before we try to answer these questions, we will take a look at relevant documents accepted at international level that might inform our thinking and our approach.

2. How sustainable development of cities is percieved

In order to identify the core issues and viewpoints connected to sustainable development of cities we will make a brief overview of significant documents that have been adopted at international level. A wider selection has been made in order to reflect the EU policy in this area, the standpoints on sustainable cities and urbanism of professional bodies and educational associations of planning and the strategy of UNESCO towards teaching and learning for a sustainable future.

2.1. The EU policy on sustainable cities

The policy of EU on developing sustainable human settlements has a long history and an ever growing number of documents that address the issue in a wide scope between general policies and specific tasks. An early document following after the Earth Summit of 1992, as is the Aalborg Charter [1] primarily dealt with general aspects of sustainability and recognised European cities and towns as 'key players in the process of changing lifestyles, production, consumption and spatial patterns'. It uses an early version of the key trilogy of 'social justice, sustainable economies, and environmental sustainability' as the basis of sustainable development, but extensively involves itself in detecting the areas of primary importance, defining the concept of sustainability as "a creative, local, balance-seeking process which extends into all areas of local decision making" [1], recognising citizens as key actors, the involvement of community, local self-governance, while at the same time introducing the concept of resolving problems by negotiating outwards. At the level of urban spatial development it mentions sustainable land-use patterns and sustainable urban mobility, but the repertoire of issues mentioned is basically connected to reduction of the need for excess mobility.

Later documents are more specifically oriented towards separate spatial issues and the instruments for reaching the goal of sustainable cities. Such documents are, for example, the Leipzig Charter and the Toledo Declaration. In 2007, the Leipzig Charter [19] stated that in order to fulfil their social and economic roles, cities must "succeed in maintaining the social balance within and among them, ensuring their cultural diversity and establishing high quality in the fields of urban design, architecture and environment" [19]. The charter recognises the importance of greater use of integrated urban development policy approaches in the areas of creation of quality public spaces and modernisation of infrastructure networks, while improving energy efficiency. Special emphasis has been put on the improvement of the condition of deprived neighbourhoods including both their physical and social and economic environment and the provision of efficient and affordable urban transport.

In the period of three years between the Leipzig Charter and the Toledo Declaration, a number of related documents were adopted, among them the Marseille Statement [21] which reaffirmed and complemented the Leipzig Charter in the light of the financial, economic and social crisis. The Statement expressed the view that "cities will have to deal with the tensions and risks of fragmentation (. . .) while simultaneously searching for excellence, integrating new sections of the population and showing solidarity with the most vulnerable people" [21] emphasising that sustainable and inclusive urban development can only be achieved with a multi-sectoral, integrated approach.

In 2010, the Europe 2020 [12] strategy complemented the three main objectives of the European sustainable development strategy outlined in the Leipzig Charter – economic prosperity, social equity and cohesion and environmental protection with the objectives of smart growth, sustainable growth and inclusive growth.

In the same year the Toledo Declaration [29] tried to address simultaneously the current urban challenges and the need to consolidate a European urban agenda in the future. The Toledo Reference Document [30] on integrated urban regeneration and its strategic potential for a smarter, more sustainable and socially inclusive urban development in Europe mentioned three areas of special importance: cities and cultural heritage, building rehabilitation and revaluing deteriorated public spaces, while providing new open spaces.

It bases the importance of the 'cities and heritage' issue on the fact that they are crucial in keeping alive the collective memory of the European city model. The Declaration underlines the fact that "besides protecting the heritage from a physical point of view, it is often necessary to guarantee its inhabitability and attractiveness in order to keep it really alive" [30].

The issue of building rehabilitation, although primarily concerned with architectural improvement of the existing built stock in terms of energy-efficiency, accessibility, upgraded standard of living, etc. also has wider urban (design) implications as it would promote diversity and identity, primarily of large housing estates and adapt the residential typologies to the emerging demographic patterns in Europe.

The third area noted as revaluing of deteriorated public spaces and providing new open spaces, together with afore mentioned protection or requalification of the built stock was expected to "contribute not only towards the improvement of the urban scene, landscape and place quality of many of our cities' urban fabrics, (. . .) but also to increase their attractiveness and the local residents' identification with the urban environment and their community" [30].

The follow-up of the Leipzig Charter presented in the report 5 Years after the Leipzig Charter – Integrated Urban Development as a Prerequisite for a Sustainable City [34] states that "approaches to integrated urban (district) development have increasingly become a guiding principle (. . .) either as part of national programmes and/or (as) local strategies for a holistic development of urban areas" [34], while the future challenges for European cities "will consist of finding more integrated courses of action in many topics of urban (district) development despite increasingly limited financial resources" [34].

The overview of relevant documents shows a constant increase of interest in the built environment of European cities as part of their sustainable development, which has been given equal importance with issues that have been held of primary importance in earlier documents such as social justice, sustainable economies and environmental issues. From an initial state when only discrete issues of sustainable land use patterns and reducing excess mobility have been considered, attention has been shifted towards more integrated urban development approaches. The more recent documents outline areas of major concern and action that are instrumental for the teaching of sustainable urbanism such as issues of neighbourhoods, public spaces, revaluing of existing urban spaces, providing of more open spaces, etc. An important