

ARE SUSTAINABLE NEIGHBOURHOODS "WALKABLE" NEIGHBOURHOODS ?

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Many countries, have implemented new types of developments based on ecological concepts. Amongst the more famous, Vauban neighbourhood in Germany and Bedzed in the UK, considered as a model, are visited by people coming from many other countries. These neighbourhoods are supposed to be inspired by the principles of sustainable development, as defined by the Brundtland report, and to take into account the three main orientations: social equity, economical dynamics and environmental protection.

Mobility is an important component of these orientations. Walking, cycling and public transport contribute to improve the quality of life of populations with low car-ownership rate, are useful to enhance shop keeping and trade and to produce less carbon. The first attempts to build sustainable neighbourhoods, circa 1990, used to give a priority to the limitation of car use. They were called "car free neighbourhoods" or "car poor neighbourhoods".

In France, some interesting developments have been implemented, for example, in Grenoble (former barracks of Bonne), in Lyon (former harbour at the confluence of Rhône and Saône rivers). These experiments are successful, in terms of sustainable development, thank to their location inside big cities having a good transport network and their important surface which allows designing a real mixed use neighbourhood. Recently however, a lot of projects have been launched by small or midsize communities without a good understanding of the concept.

Building an "ecological" neighbourhood is "fashionable", necessary to efficient campaigning for local elections, useful for urban marketing, enjoyable for the population, but nobody knows exactly which objectives are to be reached. Developers do not want to program fewer parking spaces in order to prevent commercial risks. Stake holders consider car control as unpopular. Inhabitants are still sensitive to the symbolic meaning of the car, even if they use it only once a week.

The concept is depreciating and the developments are becoming more business oriented. The press insists on greenery and energy saving in construction. Saving energy makes money for building industry and saves money of the inhabitants. At the contrary, car industry is an important part of the economy of developed countries and very protected on this account.

Many of these new neighbourhoods are no longer walkable neighbourhoods, but just green neighbourhoods. It is important that citizen groups can be aware of this possible negative evolution and advocate, where necessary, to go back to the original concept of car-free or car-poor neighbourhood.

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Many countries, especially in Northern Europe, have implemented new types of developments based on ecological concepts. Amongst the more famous, Vauban neighbourhood in Germany and Bedzed in the UK, considered as a model, are visited by people coming from many other countries. These neighbourhoods were supposed to be inspired by and take into account in their design and operation the principles of sustainable development, as defined by the Brundtland report: social equity, economical dynamics and environmental protection.

Mobility is an important component of these three orientations. People- and environment-friendly mobility and public transport contribute to improve and maintain a good quality of life for populations with low car-ownership rates; they are useful to enhance shop-keeping and trade and to produce less carbon monoxide. In addition, walking and cycling are important for keeping people in good health and help governments to save money on health care. The first attempts to build sustainable neighbourhoods, circa 1990, used to give a priority to the limitation of car use. They were called "car-free neighbourhoods" or "car-poor neighbourhoods".

In France, some interesting developments have been implemented, generally in big cities. Recently however, many projects have been launched by small or medium-size communities without a good understanding of the initial car-free ecological concept.

Opportunities and know-how in big cities

Ecological projects are developing, for example, in Lyon (former harbour at the confluence of Rhône and Saône), in Strasbourg (former harbour on the Rhine at the border of Germany), in Lille (former textile factories), in several sites in the suburbs of Paris (former docks of department stores in Ile-Saint-Denis, docks of Saint-Ouen)... These projects benefit of long studies and take into account friendly mobility and plan a low rate of parking places.

In Grenoble, the former barracks of Bonne, 8,5 hectares emptied since 1994, have been changed into a mixed use neighbourhood including housing, schools, commercial centre, two parks... All the buildings are designed to save energy. A tramway line serves the neighbourhood. This development is the first "eco-quartier" which has been completed and which is now inhabited. It is also one of the best projects which are being implemented in France and has been rewarded by the Ministry of Ecology in the frame of a national action. Our team is working in the same frame on a mission aiming to diffuse the sustainable development concepts among local stakeholders.

These urban experiments are successful, in terms of sustainable development, thanks to their location inside cities having an efficient public transport network and often cycling and walking facilities. Their important surface allows designing a real mixed use neighbourhood. They take advantage of brown fields which are often located in cities or in their near outskirts.

The good quality of these projects is also linked with the number and the high level of skills of the technicians working for the communities. They are able to produce a good program, to choose good planners and architects and to support them. They can play an important part in teaching the elected representatives, who have not always the convenient background.

In addition, these cities are richer than small or medium size cities, even if they have more expenses. Their staffs know where they can get financial helps and how they can get it; they are able to advertise about the project and use the press, if necessary.

Few supports and no money in small cities and villages

In small cities, the elected representatives have few help and no money. However, they need to let people build new houses to keep young people living in the city or in the village. They try to do their best, but it is not easy to change the habits and the traditional patterns.

The objective of energy saving is emphasised: wooden and well insulated houses with solar panels on the roof. Sometimes, rain water is collected and treated through an ecological network of ditches leading to a pond. In many sites, trees are planted.

The projects consists generally in building single houses inside large gardens, for families with young children, and does not take into account either aging people, students or social housing. The program is not mixed use oriented because many communities intending to extend their surface have a residential vocation. Facilities exist generally in the old centre and the lack of money makes difficult to build a new school or a small shopping centre.

The main problem is that there is no public transport and, in many cases, the number of inhabitants will ever make it impossible. The development is designed for people with a high level of car-ownership rate. The design of the lay-out is often very poor: a simple grid, without identity or imagination. Except streets, there is no public space, where people can meet and children play.

In the worse case, these developments are located far from the built area, among the fields, consuming agricultural land. The use of car is necessary for every kind of trip, which is not an urge either on walking or in organising social life.

Mid-size cities have often the same type of problems as small cities, but they can sometimes benefit of brown fields or of a good level of income. The difference is essentially made by the governance mode of the stakeholders and their objectives.

Trying to contain urban sprawl

In many cases, these new developments are not only non-walkable neighbourhood but encourage land consumption. Sustainable neighbourhoods are a part of the political agenda to produce less carbon monoxide through containing urban sprawl. Regarding walking, urban sprawl is one of the factors preventing people to walk; this pattern has been created by car use. If cars are necessary for people living out of cities, car practice cannot be encouraged

In communities launching economic activities development projects, supposed to be ecologically designed ("ecoparc"), the same misuse can be observed.

Instead of reusing brown fields, some of these projects are located on agricultural lands. It seems that the land consumption needs of the new programs are so huge that the surface of the former factories is not convenient. In addition, the price of clearing the ground pollution makes that this kind of location is rejected, however inside or close to the city.

Urban management has to face new and numerous challenges. On the one hand, urbanization spreading out in the outskirts of cities, consuming natural ground, increasing individual motorized mobility and pollution, and spoiling the landscape, had to be controlled. On the other hand, in cities, neighbourhoods specialize and produce a social and spatial segregation. The goal is to give back coherence and attractiveness to existing urban centres.

Ten years ago in France, it appeared necessary to enlarge the purpose of land management towards a project process and a city design approach. The law voted in December 2000 ("Solidarite et Renouvellement Urbains" - SRU) obliged authorities to build inside existing urban areas and abolished some taxes in order to facilitate a back-to-centres movement.

The SRU law had four main objectives:

- to reinforce the coherence of urban policies in different fields,
- to strengthen integration policies in the suburbs,
- to implement mobility plans contributing to a sustainable development,
- to offer more diverse and quality housing.

According to the last three censuses, the flight of families towards suburban areas, or villages, was significant and goes on. In 1999, maps made by INSEE showed that cities were progressively surrounded by a third or a fourth belt which did not exist before. In addition:

- over twenty years, the surface area of cities increased by 25%,
- suburban areas represented 22% of the total in 1990 and 33% in 1999,
- between 1990 and 1999, 5000 rural towns and villages were integrated in the administrative limits of urban communities.

In 2009, 35% of the French population lives in suburbs. Some data seem to show that villages and small rural towns are reinforcing their position. Other sources seem to assess that urban sprawl continues at the same rate.

Walking and the shape of the city

The slogan "rebuilding the city on the city" has been heard for years. Everybody agrees with the principle but few people think it is their own problem: the NIMBY effect, the myth of "the small house in the country", the rural origins of many people living in cities...

Inhabitants, but also numerous stakeholders, frequently confuse density and urban form.

France is traditionally a rural country where cities are still considered by some people as bad places, polluted and dangerous. A large part of the territory, (mountain regions of Massif Central, Alps and Pyrenees) is sparsely populated which gives to many people the feeling that there is a huge potential for building and that urban sprawl is not a problem.

The word "density", in France, is linked in people's minds to the developments of the years 60 – 70, so called "grands ensembles" (which are in fact low density areas). Press and TV are partly responsible for the confusion between density and social problems: they enjoy reporting violence and crime happening in these neighbourhoods, more than informing

against poverty, unemployment or enhancing positive actions like creation of jobs or citizen groups' initiatives.

Incentives to walk will be of no use if the organisation of built areas, at a large scale, is not studied to reinforce a network of urban poles, characterized by a good density in housing and the offer of shops, services and public facilities. New developments implemented close to these centres could be really sustainable and walkable.

Without this framework of urban centres, the implementation of a public transport network is not possible: serving large zones of detached houses is not profitable because the number of clients is too low. At the contrary, serving a network of relatively dense poles is acceptable for the firms. The polycentric city makes possible the practice of two complementary mobility modes: walking and public transport. This pattern is recommended by the European Union.

A need to advocate on going back to the original concept

Building an ecological neighbourhood now seems fashionable for an elected representative, necessary even to efficient campaigning for local elections, useful for urban marketing, enjoyable for the population, but nobody knows exactly any more which objectives are to be reached. Developers do not want to program fewer parking spaces in order to prevent commercial risks. Stakeholders consider car control as unpopular. Inhabitants are still sensitive to the symbolic meaning of the car, even if they use it only once a week.

The concept in itself is depreciating and developments are becoming more business-oriented. The professional press insists on "greenery" and energy saving in construction. On the one hand, saving energy makes money for the building industry and is supposed to save money for the inhabitants. On the other hand, the car industry is an important part of the economy of developed countries, and even in emerging economies, and is very much protected on that account.

Some of these neighbourhoods are no longer walkable neighbourhoods as should be expected, and can hardly be called sustainable. They often are just pleasant green neighbourhoods, mostly for middle-class or upper-class categories of people. It is important that citizen groups be aware of this often negative evolution and advocate, where necessary, to go back to the original concept of car-free or car-poor neighbourhoods. In these site good and pleasant living is no longer based on car practice, but built for people from varying social origins and oriented on ecological, economical and equality concepts.

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