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Wrapping it Up

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The four stories told in the previous pages defy any easy synthesis. The profound differences in context, resulting from unique historical paths and present contingencies, do not allow that. The varied perspectives and roles of the individual contributors (see their biographical notes) also add to the complexity. Furthermore, too much is still in progress for any attempt at pinning things down to have authority.

And yet, the common threads emerging are so powerful and so rich in implications that they deserve at least to be mentioned. To this I turn next, without any presumption of completeness or definitiveness, but just to nurture much-needed further reflection and debate:

- The first common thread is the nature of the crisis, and of the ensuing recession. It is not just financial or economic, but intersects more broadly and deeply with fundamental environmental issues (the sustainable development conundrum) and social issues (the mismatch between development modes and people's emerging needs and desires).
- Second is the centrality of the spatial dimension. The crisis and recession are tied to specific places, as are the potential answers to the problems they raise. Often, and perhaps paradoxically, these places are one and the same: cities.
- Third is the role of spatial planning. It has invariably, albeit in different ways and via different means, been a contributory factor to the crisis and recession. Sometimes this was not so much in the intentions but rather in the ways planning was practised, but often the intentions have also been questioned. Conversely, getting out of the crisis and recession also requires a radical reconsideration of spatial planning principles and practices.

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- Fourth is the future, and particularly in relation to the points above. The authors all point at possible directions. These are diverse and range in growing degrees of radicalism from learning from best practices elsewhere (Williams), to the re-affirmation of the principles of strategic planning (Wenban-Smith), to substantially more participative and cooperative ways of making plans and developments (Van der Kooij), to the espousing of emerging, alternative consumption demands and modes of production (Robiglio). As might be expected, greater radicalism means greater uncertainty about the outcome and about the ways to achieve it. On the other hand, we should consider whether the scope of this crisis and recession (on which all agree - see the first point) can be addressed with anything less than such radical answers.
- Fifth, and last, is the tone of the contributions. In spite of all their differences they also have two striking things in common: a sense of unprecedented urgency and a sense of unparalleled opportunity. As I already stated in the introductory note, we have not witnessed either for decades. The key question to the planning community is: are we up to this challenge? But perhaps before that: are we enough aware of it?