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Addressing the Challenges of Tomorrow

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Sustainable Cities: Addressing the Challenges of Tomorrow

Mendel Giezen

The Sustainable Cities Thematic Group has only recently been established. The motivation for doing so was the fact that the AESOP conference tracks have, in the past, paid limited attention to sustainability, even though it is a key topic in many fields. For instance, at the Prague conference in 2015, there were no tracks directly related to sustainability or even resilience. Closest came the title of track 5: Legal Environment for Effective (Good) Governance and Efficient (Sustainable) Use of Land. Sustainability is here the afterthought to efficiency, while it should be the other way around. This is problematic because it is a crucial topic for planners. It is especially crucial for urban planners because cities are – at the same time – the cause of, the victim of, and the solution to issues such as climate change. As the world becomes ever more urbanized, the city has become the place where the problems of climate change have their greatest economic and social impact. For instance, damage from flooding is exponentially exacerbated by the density of population and economic activity. Every year there are more reports of flooding in both the global north (for example, the UK) and the global south (for example, Bangladesh), while at the same time large conurbations such as Los Angeles and Santiago have ever-worsening drought issues. Cities consume a lot of resources and are responsible for a large amount of CO₂ emissions. Yet this also means that cities are crucial places to focus on when looking for sustainable development, and urban planning plays a big role in addressing these issues. Therefore, sustainable cities should also be a key focus of planning research and for this reason I started the AESOP Sustainable Cities Thematic Group. Hopefully, over the next few years, we can grow further and become a prominent group within the planning community.

In general, there are two main fields in relation to climate change: mitigation and adaptation. The first refers to reducing cities' greenhouse emissions and resource usage. As previously mentioned, cities are the main consumers of resources and emitters of greenhouse gasses due to the concentration of economic activity and population. As agreed upon at the last Conference of the Parties in Paris, the world should aim to limit the global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees centigrade. And across the world, cities are taking up the gauntlet, presenting ambitious energy plans. The second field of climate adaptation aims to prepare cities for the consequences of climate change such as extreme weather events. The aim is to create resilient cities that can keep functioning in extreme weather events caused by climate change. These could be floods, but also droughts. Initiatives such as 100 Resilient Cities by

the Rockefeller Initiative show that there is a global sense of urgency in addressing these issues and that it affects both the North and the South. As the late Ulrich Beck argued, climate change is a cosmopolitan event that unites people across the world (Beck et al., 2013).

This seems like a simple distinction and is often related to specific issues such as energy and water. Yet in practice there are many initiatives and concepts that transverse this distinction. For instance, the now buoyant concept of urban metabolism deals with both issues of energy (mitigation) and water (adaptation). A classical metabolism study done by Peter Baccini (1997) analyses the flows of water, energy, construction materials, and biomass. Villarroel Walker et al. (2014) talk about the energy-water-food nexus and show that the different issues are closely related when seen from the perspective of urban metabolism. In a small piece for the University of Amsterdam, Giezen and Roemers (2015) argue why urban planners are especially well equipped to deal with issues of sustainability and with urban metabolism in particular. It is a discipline that teaches its students to bridge sectorial interests. It is a discipline that is focused on bringing together different stakeholders to make a difference and to steer spatial development. It is a discipline that integrates knowledge and action. And as the issues of climate change need to be addressed through interdisciplinary approaches, urban planners have the potential to be at the center of the solutions to the key urban challenge of the 21st century.

As an example of the interdisciplinary focus in sustainable urban development, Table 1 shows a non-exhaustive table of cross-linkages of concepts and issues that is worked on within the planning community. It indicates a large crossover of issues within the concepts. While there is a need for specific groups for particular concepts or issues, the interlinkages characteristic of sustainable development also need to be addressed within AESOP. The Sustainable Cities Thematic Group wants to give these interlinkages a forum. Members can organize themselves as they want and we can get together in discussions about topics or concepts. This possibility of cross-pollination is the added value of this thematic group. The need to address these multiple issues also becomes clear from the recently determined sustainable development goals. For instance, goal 11 "Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable" (United Nations, 2015) shows that there is also a large social aspect to issues of resilience and sustainability. While academics like to have their well-delineated fields of research, many of the key future issues of cities re-

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	Urban Metabolism	Adaptive Capacity	Smart Cities	Resilience	Urban Healthy Living	Environmental Justice
Water	x	x	x	x	x	x
Energy	x	x	x	x	x	x
Air		x	x		x	x
Resources	x	x	x		x	x
Waste	x	x	x		x	x
Ecology	x	x		x	x	x

Tab. 1: Example of interrelation between concepts and issues.

quire the integration of different issues and different bodies of knowledge.

Activities

At the AESOP conference in Prague in 2015, the group had its first meeting. Although it took place before the actual opening of the conference there were about fifteen people involved. The discussions within the group again showed the wide range of interests, issues and concepts. The interpretation of what sustainable development actually means was also constructively discussed. As can be expected, there is a general consensus on what the topic entails, yet it is very difficult to find a delineation. However, the width and depth of the discussion demonstrated that there is a clear need to bring different perspectives within the AESOP community into contact with each other.

To bring this interaction and the group a step further, a two-day conference will be organized by the University of Amsterdam on 12–13 May 2016. There will be the opportunity to present, discuss and explore Sustainable Amsterdam through small talks by local organizations and institutions. We will also explore the city by bike. Participants will be grouped in two broad tracks: Climate Adaptation and Climate Mitigation. However, there is a lot of opportunity for cross-pollination of ideas. At future conferences, there might be more specific tracks related to particular concepts or issues. However, this first conference is aimed at establishing the community and learning from each other across fields. We invite you to come to this meeting to help us expand the Sustainable Cities Thematic Group and to determine the group's next actions. You can find more information and submit an abstract on the website: tjsc.strikingly.com.

Contact

The thematic group is currently coordinated by Mendel Giezen from the University of Amsterdam. For more information on the group or to register as a member, please email him at: m.giezen@uva.nl. There is also a LinkedIn page for the group so that you can connect to other members of the group easily: <https://www.linkedin.com/groups/8105481>. Please join the Sustainable Cities Thematic Group and put sustainability prominently on the agenda of the urban planning community.

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