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What is This?

Grappling with Smart City Politics in an Era of Market Triumphalism

David Gibbs, Rob Krueger and Gordon MacLeod

New 'sustainable' urban imaginaries are increasingly taking root in cities and regions around the world. Some notable representative examples of these include: new urbanism (Calthorpe, 1993), compact urban development (Urban Task Force, 2005) and smart growth (Flint, 2006). Proponents of these approaches argue that they are ostensibly built around a new consensus between the planning organisations at various scales, private developers, environmentalists and other relevant non-governmental interests, such as affordable housing advocates. In some sense, then, it might plausibly be argued that these new urban imaginaries transcend the parochial interests that ordinarily punctuate traditional urban and regional politics. Why might this be the case? Proponents of these imaginaries would contend that it is partly due to the fact that smart growth and new urbanist developments are designed to incorporate the tripartite vision of urban sustainability—economic prosperity, ecological integrity and social equity. Moreover, these approaches not only rely on grand visions of future urban utopias; they also incorporate the rhetoric of 'practical' visions and plain 'common sense' language, in the process broadening their appeal to contemporary policy agendas across the global landscape.

And yet at the same time as governments, planners, environmentalists and private interests are actively calling for these new urban development imaginaries—which can be viewed to encourage a revitalised role for more comprehensive and 'collaborative' planning—a discourse of market triumphalism has been continuing to sweep its way through different spatial scales of government. States—local, regional and national—seem to be rolling back their own authority and rolling out market-based approaches to urban development—what (Peck, 2004) has referred to as 'state-authored market fundamentalism'. Some of the most notable impacts of this neoliberal

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urbanism (Wilson, 2004) would seem to run counter to the principles of 'smart growth–new urbanist' development—not least those relating to ecological sustainability and social equity—resulting in urban regions being further stretched through untrammelled suburban and exurban sprawl and the formation of private-sector-led edge cities, alongside a splintered patchwork of privatised housing enclaves, all leading to unavoidable increases in automobile travel and a related erosion of public space and the public realm (Wolch *et al.*, 2004). This neoliberal urbanism also appears to be embedding in erstwhile 'statist' districts of the city, not least through the third-wave gentrification of social housing (Hackworth and Moriah, 2006). Notably, it is also fostering heightened social inequalities and an intense 'enclosure' of cities in the global South, as highlighted in recent work by Mike Davis (2006) and Loic Wacquant (2006). Crucially, this is also a landscape that implicates the decision-making of planners, albeit they themselves are increasingly subjectified with 'entrepreneurial' values (Sandercock and Lysiottis, 1998).

Our own particular interest here is whether the aspirational discourses of the smart growth and new urban imaginaries compete with, or are complementary to, neoliberal urban discourses. What are the implications of situating the holy trinity of sustainability alongside the market? Can the seemingly unimpeachable logic of market efficiency realise the vision of these 'new urbanist' utopias? At the very least, the latter imply either a departure from, or at least some compromise of, a market-fundamentalist neoliberal urban landscape and its vernacular (While *et al.*, 2010). Yet, a reading of much of the contemporary planning literature would suggest that urban-regional sustainability in an age of market triumphalism is simply a matter of

getting both the design process and the economics 'right'—a matter of searching for 'what works' rather than agonising over theoretical concerns (Beatley and Collins, 2000; Brand, 2007). Despite the faltering nature of the financial system following the sub-prime mortgage crisis and subsequent credit crunch and global recession, this has only served to intensify the open-ended nature of such possibilities, rather than lead to a fundamental questioning of market-based approaches.

This Special Issue aims to interrogate these issues critically and to bring a more systematic and sustained critical analysis to debates around the new imaginaries of new urbanism and smart growth: for too long they have been analysed at a distance from the political economy of neoliberalisation (and, perhaps, now post-neoliberalisation). The collection of papers in this Special Issue offers a direct engagement with the extant politics associated with the economic, social and environment dimensions found in these new urban imaginaries.

The first three papers in this Special Issue, those by Kate Shaw Andrew Goetz, and Gordon MacLeod, establish how urban spatial development is constituted and reconstituted over time through the vagaries of situated urban social hierarchies, political cultures and economic bases (see Wilson, 2004). These analyses are welcome in the literature because they illustrate how the 'smart' city, with its requirement for broader public goods in the context of market triumphalism, negotiates between the economic 'imperatives' of developers and social and environmental demands of the 'smart' city. For example, Shaw (2013), drawing on the case of Melbourne's dockland redevelopment, shows that multiple narratives of urban redevelopment were in deployed over the 20-year history of the project. In each case, a form of sustainable development was employed to help

legitimise the project. Through her examination of four stylised periods, Shaw illustrates the various narratives that proponents of the redevelopment deployed to legitimise the project and its trajectory. These shifted from free market sustainability narratives to those around the creative city and, finally, a narrative to address a post-economic crisis context. Each period sought to take on previous failures to rescue the development. The paper by Andrew Goetz (2013) examines the shift from a development trajectory of sprawl along Colorado's front range, to one that is ostensibly more sustainable and that takes advantage of Denver's unique opportunities, such as infill development from the closure and redevelopment of Stapleton International Airport, as well as an extensive 122-mile light rail system which seeks to get Denver's residents out of their private cars and onto mass transit. To encourage a 'smarter' approach to urban design and development, Denver established a voluntary 'urban growth boundary'—in contrast to Portland's mandated urban growth boundary (see Huber and Currie, 2007). The action has led to some significant redevelopment projects in Denver's urban core, yet, at the same time, has enabled sprawl at the urban—even suburban—fringe. The Denver case represents an interesting case study because it simultaneously embodies two paradigms of urban design: low-density, auto-dependent development and high-density, public-transit-oriented development. Thus, for Goetz, the Denver case shows that smart growth has resulted in tangible change, unlike other periods of land use control, but is far from representing a 'bold new horizon'. It is this uneasy juxtaposition of voluntary agreements, unique opportunities, and convention that has driven Denver's patchwork of recent development. Goetz argues that, despite its flaws, smart growth has been more successful than earlier land use regulation because it has brought developers (at least partially) into the sustainable design fold. Finally, Gordon MacLeod (2013) examines the adoption of smart growth and new urbanist principles in Scotland. MacLeod seeks to bring into sharper focus the political economic factors, such as institutions and growth coalitions, that shape these development processes. MacLeod links the emergence of these developments to Scotland's rapid regional growth in the early 2000s. For MacLeod, these developments are as much about power and politics as they are about good design. For example, with a nod towards the emergent 'policy mobility' literature, MacLeod shows how one of the new urbanist progenitors, Andres Duany, came to Scotland and waxed lyrical about that country's willingness to change and to bend to what he sees as the new urban design imperatives of the 21st century.

The next three papers examine some conceptual aspects of the 'smart' city. Concepts such as 'sustainability' and the 'institutional' fix have been grafted on to urban regime and development theory for the larger part of a decade. These three papers illustrate not just the efficacy of these concepts, but the politics of how they are achieved and the process through which they emerge. Eliot Tretter (2013) applies urban regime theory to a case study of Austin, Texas. Tretter's empirical findings support the growing perspective that the new 'smart' city, while being more environmentally friendly, cannot achieve the 'triple win' that is so often claimed by such efforts. Indeed, Tretter argues that, while Austin has accrued environmental benefits from its turn to smart growth, the (social) losers are the homeless in Austin's city centre, as well as other, perceived 'undesirables' (see also Krueger 2007; Gibbs and Krueger, 2007; Pearsall *et al.*, 2012). Tretter's conceptual contribution lies in the notion of the 'green regime'. He argues that

conventional regime theory cannot account for all of the political machinations of the 'smart' city. In particular, he argues that urban regime theory (see Stone, 1989; Molotch, 1976) cannot account for the compromise that occurred between that city's development community and local environmentalists. For Tretter, environmentalists and neighbourhood groups supported bigger, more compact and more intensive development in city centres because it diverted development away from suburban green space. Because of this compromise, Tretter further argues, the anti-growth coalition did not undermine the growth agenda, but instead made significant contributions to creating the conditions for subsequent rounds of capital accumulation. This evolution, Tretter explains, cannot be understood by growth machine theory because of the redistribution of negative externalities from 'non-human species' onto humans, particularly homeless people.

Marit Rosol's (2013) paper takes the concept of hegemony and applies it to Vancouver's political elite-led approach to local and regional sustainable development. Building from the notion that the 'smart' city is an engine of economic opportunity, Vancouver's political elite sought to capture some of these benefits to improve further its 'green city' brand. By appealing to the concept of sustainability, and its promise of triple-win scenarios, Vancouver elites sought to legitimise an effort to increase intensive densification in the city. Rosol argues that, because they applied the discourse of smart growth, elites did not have to win the density–livability battle that plagues other cities, because the city's environmental proponents never really questioned the larger discourse, even though they were uncomfortable with the EcoDensity concept of Vancouver's elites. Through the course of this analysis, Rosol elucidates the process of the 'sustainability fix', under

the guise of hegemonic practices, capturing the fine-grained politics of negotiating development tensions.

Finally, in this second set of papers, Pow and Neo (2013) look at the eco-city concept as it was played out in China's Dongtan eco-city project, near Shanghai. In particular, these authors show how ecotopias are 'imagineered' as social-technical systems. Rather than just providing a 'fix', this paper argues that the Dongtan eco-city represents a new convergence in the imaginary of the city and more broadly a 'socio-technical' lifeworld. For example, Pow and Neo show how the British engineering firm Arup 'designed' an environmentally sustainable city and, in the process, put forth a new view that the relationship between city and nature can be ecologically harmonious and economically virtuous. While these plans are attractive on paper and thus represent an interesting new 'imaginary', they fail in their application to bring about sustainable outcomes.

Taken together, these three papers further reveal the contested meaning of the 'smart' city or the 'sustainable' city, especially when applied to real-world contexts, and not merely academic debates. They also show that being 'green' can be good for business and that, regardless of the conceptual moorings of 'neoliberal urbanism', broader discourses are needed to support this ensemble of social relations.

Much scholarship on urban sustainability has been focused on the local and regional scales, the scales at which the real debate over land use happen. The third set of papers in this Special Issue make us take pause at this analytical entry point. Yonn Dierwechter (2013) applies neo-Weberian state theory to examine the role of the nation-state in the production of the smart city. He employs Orren and Skowronek's (1996, 2004) concept of 'intercurrence' which suggests that different political orders and scales operate simultaneously to

organise action in time and space. For Dierwechter, this theoretical application affords us a view, among other things, that reveals smart growth's 'syncrectic' nature of being progressive *and* neoliberal, bureaucratic *and* activist, and radical *and* green.

In the second paper in this group, Hamil Pearsall (2013) uses the redevelopment of the Gowanus Canal in Brooklyn, New York, to show how a neighbourhood coalition used the national 'Superfund' law—the law that places standards for hazardous waste site clean-up on those parties responsible for despoiling them. Typically, activists have used remedies and policy instruments from the local scale when opposing a development. Pearsall's case shows how communities of resistance can use different state scales against each other. In this case, the Superfund law, which is a federal law that is delegated to states, was used to overrule a municipal government planning and redevelopment process.

The third paper of this set draws upon a case of suburban development in Riverside County, California. In this paper, Jonas *et al.* (2013) demonstrate how the Endangered Species Act of 1973 has been used to create development plans in Riverside's Coachella Valley. Moreover, despite the restrictions placed on development due to the presence of endangered species in the area, environmentalists, local elites and developers support the process because it brings federal infrastructure subsidies to the development projects that are approved.

The authors of the final set of papers—Herrschel, Jarvis and Bonnett, and Moore—look at the progressive potential of 'smart' city discourses. Herrschel (2013) seeks to develop the notion of 'smartness' as a mechanism for reconciling conflicting policy ideas and trajectories. He argues that cities, regions and city-regions are an excellent scale to bring the disparate concerns of smart growth together. In particular, 'smart city regionalism' can be a crucible for negotiations and compromises for the desirable applications of smart growth. He argues that this can potentially occur through Healey's (1997, 2003) notion of collaborative planning as a framework for capturing and effectively addressing the complex and diverse concerns of smart growth. Helen Jarvis and Alastair Bonnett (2013) examine the role of 'nostalgia' in creating the urban realities that we seek. They rescue the concept from its neo-traditional and conservative moorings—a simple yearning for the past and a sense of loss in the face of change (Jarvis and Bonnett, 2013)—to one that is a creative and constitutive component of a new urban vision. They take issue with architects such as Duany and Calthorpe who argue that good design can produce communities. Through empirical research, they reveal that it is the 'soft' infrastructures humans crave from community—trust, reciprocity, human attachment that are important—and rightfully accuse new urbanists of a neo-environmental determinism. Jarvis and Bonnett call for a closer look at the ordinary moments of social reproduction as the new guard of urban designers go about their work. Through the concept of nostalgia, Jarvis and Bonnett see a progressive, even radical, agenda emerge.

For Susan Moore (2013), who also looks at the architectural and design elements of new urbanism, there is little reason to be sanguine, and for many of the reasons Jarvis and Bonnett point out. Moore examines the concept of best practice in new urbanism in Toronto. She argues, similarly to Rosol (2013), that once the concept of 'best practice' and sustainable development are combined, there is an unquestioned compliance with the process (see Krueger and Buckingham, 2012). Moore unpacks and interrogates these issues to reveal that the best practice movement is bound up in ideology and socio-political rationalities.

She argues that we need to focus on the professional and real-world practices of new urbanism, and not the global policy relevance of the movement. In doing so, we will uncover how middle-way approaches are naturalised into our societal norms and necessarily delimit radical possibilities.

This Special Issue contributes to an on-going and vibrant debate about the visions, policies and governance of cities and regions around the world. Some of the key issues that arise from the set of papers in this edited collection revolve around the tensions between the extent to which smart growth and new urbanism represent progressive moves towards greater sustainability or a means to direct growth along particular pathways. As several of the authors indicate, much will revolve around the question of who sets the agenda and who has power in the city and region. While the smart growth agenda may have progressive potential, it is also in danger of being used as a means to discipline cities and their populations, reducing sustainability and the urban question to a technical discourse. As with sustainable development, smart growth and new urbanism can be used in malleable ways that support the views of those proponents with the power to shape urban futures. The contribution of the papers in this Special Issue has been to expose these tensions and to analyse such developments in a critical fashion. The dialogue here needs to continue and engage with broader urban development theory to explore how to accrue and equitably distribute the benefits of smart, sustainable cities.

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