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COMMENTARY ON:

Constructing an interdisciplinary concept of sustainable urban milieu

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The article by Nicole Mathieu invites us, or rather summons us, to take the sustainable urban development utopia seriously as a political and practical concept, and as a means to renew scientific practices. In the abundant literature dealing with urban sustainability, this strong and convincing position, which denounces opportunism as well as indifference to or rejection of the notion is quite refreshing. The author criticizes what is said and done in the name sustainable development and takes a stance to push forward scientific free thinking on the matter. The best way to summarize her scientific position may be « confrontation »: confrontation between theory and action as well as between disciplines.

In our eyes, the major contribution is the relation she establishes between sustainability and “inhabitability”. Sustainability is usually presented as an attempt to go beyond the apparent contradiction between ecology and economy (Levy 2007) but rarely as the problematic conciliation of ecology and society. In existing literature, the criticisms concerning the lack of consideration of the social pillar of sustainability are mostly based on the still top down views of governances and environmental inequalities (Theys, 2005). The originality here and in recent papers by the author is the importance given to the inhabitant as a major agent of the definition of what is (social) sustainability. The idea is to understand what a sustainable social milieu could be looked at through an “ordinary” perspective rather than to test on

inhabitants the possibilities to achieve an urban sustainability previously defined by experts.

As we said the position is refreshing. The recent Masdar city project, a flagship ecological city of 500,000 inhabitants in the United Arab Emiratesⁱ, is a caricatured example of what can be done in the name of sustainable urban development without any consideration of the inhabitants or citizens. This sustainable city project boasts a combination of the most advanced green technologies available today, and is projected to be world's first carbon-free, car-free and waste-free city. Whereas ecological performances are expected, social issues are left completely unanswered. This example is extreme but can illustrate a trend to consider that urban sustainability can « naturally » follow from ecological and technical performances. A common illusion is to believe that all can be achieved by environmental engineering and very neat prescriptions.

With respect to Masdar city, I would like to invite Nicole Mathieu to discuss the notion of (urban) utopia. There is something paradoxical in the view that although sustainable urban development is impossible to achieve in reality it is precisely because of its "unachievability", that it can be the means to renew our thoughts and actions. The recent history of urban planning shows us that (urban) utopias are dangerous for cities. The nineteenth century fear of the city produced the two great urban and utopian theories of the twentieth century: the Garden cities of Ebenezer Howard and the Functionalism as defined by Le Corbusier. They can be considered to be anti-urban because they offered no solutions for the existing city, which they rejected as chaotic and dangerous for living, but simply stood for rebuilding the city (Salomon Cavin, 2005). In short, the garden cities' model is that of the city « next to the city » while functionalism conceived a city « against the city » (Corboz, 1992) based on « tabula rasa ». Ultimately, those two theories were anti-urban in their definition but also in their consequences because they have contributed to the city blow-up (Berque, 1995).

So, inspired by an article by Ruth Glass (1989), I would like to ask Nicole Mathieu : could one not consider that the contemporary sustainable urban development utopia is a direct descendent of nineteenth century anti-urbanism? Can the sustainable urban development utopia offer concrete solutions to the problems of the existing city and their inhabitants? In other words, how to prevent urban denial (the non consideration of reality)? How can dogmatism be prevented? How can one prevent anti-empirical, unhistorical modes of utopian thought? I am aware that Nicole Mathieu's Manifesto in favor of sustainable urban development is precisely rejecting this type of dogmatism and the urban denial that followed urban utopias, but isn't this an intrinsic characteristic of utopias?

References:

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ⁱ <http://www.masdar.ae/en/home/index.aspx> (26.10.2009).