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Conference report

"Building Sustainable Cities" conference (18–19 April 2002, Venice) provides an important landmark on the direction of thinking on sustainable urban development. It also marks the turning point of a major European exercise, Building Environmental Quality Evaluation for Sustainability through Time (BEQUEST) from an EC-funded project into a self-directed, self-funded activity as a consequence of BEQUEST. More significantly, suggested a way forward for the research and practitioning communities.

BEQUEST created a forum for concerted research, training and practical actions in the sustainable assessment of the urban environment across Europe as well as defined the basis for common, integrated understanding by many disciplines and nationalities of sustainable urban development across social, economic, spatial, managerial, ecological/environmental and cultural/heritage issues. Some of the significant outputs of BEQUEST were a common, agreed framework for understanding the many facets of sustainable urban development. In addition, a prototype tool-kit was created for a diversity of policy makers, administrators and disciplines in the built environment to select and use a wide array of existing indicators for sustainability for actually mapping, assessing and understanding the implications of policy, strategy and specific projects in terms of sustainable urban development. This prototype tool-kit provided both a conceptual map for supporting the decision-making process and underpins this by the creation of how key domains relate to each other. The significance of BEQUEST and its legacy is in understanding and embracing the many scales of the built environment—from the macro (regional spatial, economic and social planning, legislation, etc.), to the meso (neighbourhood), to the micro (specific building and its components). The current European research funding programme, Framework 6, did not provide for continued funding for this project which has great potential for the implementation of a comprehensive sustainable built environment policy as well as develop the prototype tool for general use.

Soon 50% of the global population and 80% of the European population is expected to live in cities. A sense of urgency is further reinforced by research indicating that cities are spatially linked to and dependent upon a non-contiguous rural hinterland. Professor Peter Nijkamp described how many urban areas possess a higher environmental footprint than entire nations because a huge non-contiguous hinterland is used to support cities and urban regions. Many negative externalities created by cities are exported to the countryside through trade. Although trade often creates wealth and growth, it is not clear whether this wealth can be used to purchase improvements in sustainability or if trade contributes to ecological, social and economic deficits. The conclusion to be drawn policy and practical levels for creating sustainable development must focus on the integration between cities and their hinterlands.

The diversity and quality of papers at this conference indicates that the international research community has engaged with understanding the sustainable built environment at many levels and disciplines, including:

- modelling of a nation's housing stock;
- community participation in neighbourhood social, economic and environmental renewal;
- databases of construction components for practitioners and their clients;
- the concept of 'elegance' as a meta-criterion applied to environmental impact assessment provides a systematic, integrative model for assessing EIA quality, examining functionality and reviewing policy;
- examining/dis-aggregating user groups in cities (papers on both visitors to cities and local inhabitants' perceptions of different housing).

Active discussion at the conference recognised a lack of world-wide progress over the past 10 years (in policy, strategy and practical aspects) to embrace the sustainability challenges set out by the United Nations Rio Conference and the more recent Habitat Istanbul Conference. Given that improvements in energy consumption and efficiency over the past 30 years have been modest (factor 1 or less), how society can manage a change of a factor of 20 over the next generation? Professor Peter Brandon emphasized the lack of progress over time and that understanding time was the key issue to achieving change and maintaining the momentum of change over successive generations. Embracing change management is a key to meeting the pressing sustainability targets. Several questions emerged from this discussion to suggest:

- Whether comprehensive understanding of sustainability is necessary before practical actions can be

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taken? As a result, should more emphasis now be given to the implementation of change and change management?
- Shared aims, objectives, good practice are still missing between the different stakeholders in the built environment (politicians, city managers, officials, professionals, developers and users).
- Although the research community has provided critical assessment, indicators and solutions based on process/proceduralism, now more engagement is needed with policy makers, practitioners and the wider public on delivering a vision and a practical approach to implementing a sustainable built environment.
- The proliferation of a multitude of indicators allowed for critical assessment of many criteria which has informed knowledge of the built environment. However, the usability of a large set of criteria is recognised as inappropriate for policy makers and practitioners who require a smaller set of practical indicators which also need to include local and contextual indicators.
- The creation of sustainability agendas has often been 'top-down' in the past. What methods and targets allow for local communities to create and implement their own agendas?
- Can the research community successfully define time horizons and targets for several generations and reconcile this with economic models which have a 5-year limitation?

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