Chapter 1.2
Local Commitment:
An Approach to Sustainable Neighbourhood Renewal?

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ABSTRACT

This contribution concerns the planning process applicable to sustainable urban neighbourhoods whose increasing number in Europe appears to be changing the framework of urban development. Having briefly presented the main characteristics of sustainable neighbourhoods in Europe, this chapter then specifically concentrates on sustainable urban neighbourhoods resulting from an ecological rehabilitation process in the city of Albertslund, in Denmark. While these rehabilitation experiments remain anecdotal when compared with new sustainable districts, they nevertheless represent a far greater structuring potential for cities. Our hypothesis is that the implementation of sustainable development renews local planning practices. We shall also see how these districts attempt to overcome a major contradiction inherent in new eco-neighbourhoods by combining a search for eco-technological performances with the incorporation of more social and cultural challenges. Our research suggests that the local actions of inhabitants can play an important role in making sustainable development work.

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable neighbourhoods, increasingly numerous throughout Europe, are well-placed to question the urban planning principles applied in Europe over the last 40 years. The fact is that the framework of a post-modernity that is insensitive to the cost of ecological and social externalities is no longer shared by all urban players. An increasing number of towns are seeking to implement a sustainable development that is firmly anchored to the territory which, to this end, is considered to be a substrate rather than simply a support. Ecological performance and the prowess of eco-

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technologies have been overlaid on these urban sustainable development policies. However, this new trend, which could be qualified as sustainable urbanism, is being developed between political responses and eco-technological responses. That means, these eco-technologies are the source of remarkable advances in neighbourhood planning, but nevertheless they remain anecdotal when faced with today's urban challenges. Moreover, there are contradictions inherent in these so-called sustainable neighbourhoods. These contradictions are linked to a search for competitiveness and environmental performance levels - aspects which are often to the detriment of social and cultural issues - and, in any case, only partially meet global ecological challenges (global warming in one example).

While there are a large number of sustainable neighbourhoods in Europe that act as showcases for new technologies, the challenge facing sustainable urbanism is not so much the construction of these pilot buildings, but rather the improvement of existing buildings. Consequently, this contribution shall be focusing on *built* neighbourhoods that have undertaken a sustainable planning process, considering that their commitment to sustainable planning is a fundamental challenge given long-term sustainability and climate change goals. However, these sustainable development processes are not yet well understood and this is why newly built or planned sustainable neighbourhoods are now being increasingly studied and analysed.

In this chapter, it will first be presented the European context of the planning processes that have defined themselves as sustainable neighbourhood planning and involved the use of eco-technologies. Then, based on the case of Albertslund's rehabilitation in Denmark, a series of questions will be investigated. The main hypothesis is that sustainable development renews local planning practices, both in the ways they are assembled (new system of actors) and in their sectorial contents (introduction of new themes like climate change, use of environmental technologies, and articulation of local and global scale). More specifically, the new place that may be given to local communities in the sustainable neighbourhood planning process renews the articulation between the environmental dimension and the social dimension of sustainability (Church & Young, 2000). In other words, the environmental aspects of sustainable development, especially those that are technical, appear so far to have been the main gateway to sustainable neighbourhood planning projects. Nevertheless, while eco-technologies may be a vital key in the development of sustainable communities, there are also other aspects that bear examining. Consequently, the changing place and role of the inhabitants in these development processes leads to an integration of these two dimensions and bear witness to the new ways of approaching the planning project.

The field investigations presented in this chapter suggest that getting involved in a practical local project, the introduction and use of eco-technologies for example, is often a vital first step in the development of active citizenship and environmental awareness. Consequently, the research suggests that local action can play an important part in making sustainable development work.

SUSTAINABLE NEIGHBORHOODS IN EUROPE: AN OVERVIEW

There are different kinds and forms of sustainable neighbourhoods around the world. They are diverse in scale, focus and implementation. Although there is no claim here for exhaustivity, the examples quoted reflect the variety of available sources. Some of them have been particularly useful, as the EU-funded project on "New Sustainable Settlements" (EA.UE, 1997), the Barton & Kleiner research on "Innovative Eco-Neighbourhood projects" (Barton & Kleiner, 2000), the survey on European Sustainable Experiment (ARENE, 2005) and the approach of sustainable urbanism