



PENN: CURRENT RESEARCH ON SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Consuburbanism

Sustainable Urban Development as if Culture and the Inherited Environment Really Mattered

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INTRODUCTION

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are an important benchmark and ideal. They are deeply significant and a hard-fought improvement on, and extension of, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The *New Urban Agenda* provides a roadmap for achieving the urban aspects of the SDGs, but where will that map lead? The SDGs and the *New Urban Agenda*, and the exhaustive process of generating and negotiating them, constitute a truly global discourse on sustainable development. The goals are rightly focused on the most urgent issues facing urban citizens—basic matters of life-support, in all its forms (food, clean water, income, education, etc.).

From my perspective as a planning scholar and heritage conservation practitioner, it's key that cultural and conservation considerations are embedded in the goals. And while I share the confidence of many observers that the 15-year process of mapping lines of progress toward meeting the SDGs will be productive, one must observe the marginal, tenuous nature of how cultural processes (including conservation) are included. One target (11.4) is not enough. (Arguably, a few other targets in Goal 11 address heritage and conservation as well—those regarding public space, integrative planning processes, retrofitting, and more: 11.3, 11.A, 11.B, and 11.C) (UN 2015). And the single indicator based on levels of spending in the sector will be extremely difficult to implement and quite partial in addressing the capacity of different states to integrate heritage conservation into sustainable development.

The *New Urban Agenda* outlines more extensive and practical channels for such integration (paragraphs 38, 45, 60, 97, 124, 125) (UN 2016). The role of cultural heritage is rendered in a slightly more complex vein. The first mention of cultural heritage invokes “leveraging,” speaks of cultural “infrastructures” not just sites, and acknowledges “soft” social benefits as well as tangible outcomes (paragraph 39). Later passages identify a series of urban strategies of integration (paragraph 97), and “include culture as a priority component” of urban strategies, though mostly in terms of protection not activation (124). The *New Urban Agenda* certifies that matters of cultural heritage—and therefore cultural values—have a seat at the table.

As a thought-exercise, this paper turns the usual ways of thinking about heritage conservation on their head. The point of departure is how to imagine urbanization (or a set of urbanization principles) that *centered* on conservation—as opposed to the modest protections, relatively unchecked destruction, and opportunistic consumption that is more or less countenanced by mainstream development thinking, practices, and institutions?

CENTERING ON URBAN CONSERVATION

Conservation is generally regarded as opposed to development—presenting an either/or choice between growth and change as opposed to stasis. This is too narrow a reading, based on narrow and outdated notions of what stands as progressive preservation philosophy. Urban conservation is a hybrid practice, weaving the goals of historic preservation and the means of urban planning to sustain both urban *functions* and cultural significance of urban *forms*. Examples abound, across the world, in which conservation and development decisions intertwine and result in thriving, meaningful places. One current concern of scholarship in preservation theory emphasizes the processes of change at the center of philosophy and practice, using the model of the cultural landscape to embody a way of looking at environmental qualities that embraces and elucidates change as an alternative to the preservation field's more traditional, curatorial notions of “arresting decay” (Avrami and Mason forthcoming; Mason 2006).

While a conservation-centered urbanization process may seem wildly unrealistic, consider the subtle power of looking differently at some of the core assumptions of urban conservation. They are not so radical—in fact, they make a good deal of common-sense.



Conservation is defined in the SDGs in broadest terms, relating to cultural as well as natural places, processes, and resources. This rightfully broad concept of conservation sets the stage for two traditions of implementing conservation as a planning/design practice and a regulatory scheme: first, the tradition of “wise use,” consumption that doesn’t outrun the capacity of systems to regenerate (elaborated in the late 19th century in terms of forest and other resources; later informing Brundtland Commission definition of sustainable development); second, the protective, curatorial notion of preserving from change those select assets, resources, places, artworks, or experiences that possess such great value that they are held back from consumption/exhaustion.

Both traditions are deployed for the benefit of future generations. Both definitions run against the grain of market economics (especially as amplified by globalization and neoliberalism), and require strategic decisions that align awkwardly with mainstream state and market institutions. Both highlight the difficult of quantifying and technically determining ideal outcomes—thus, they engender debates about prices and pricelessness, and require state regulation—or, as Garrett Hardin famously put it, “mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon” (Hardin 1968).¹

These two traditions have interesting, mostly parallel histories, stretching back to the 19th century (particularly in the U.S. context), in the writings of George Perkins Marsh and the creation of national parks. In the end, they are complementary in broad terms (though of course come in to conflict around specific sites, properties, or resources). How do these two conservation impulses combine in urban and metropolitan planning?

Urban conservation is a hybrid field combining planning, urban design and historic preservation and aimed at managing and designing growth and cultural memory in purposeful balance. Francoise Choay’s masterful history of monument and urban conservation, and Francesco Bandarin and Ron van Oers’s recent text on UNESCO’s Historic Urban Landscape Recommendation offer excellent overviews (Choay 2001; Bandarin and van Oers 2012). Conservation (or, in the United States, “preservation”) at an urban scale is not intended to museumify a small collection of buildings or districts. Rather, it is aimed at sustaining flows of cultural value along with other essential urban functions (including growth, contraction, succession, mobility, etc.) by identifying, regulating and designing around carefully considered tolerances of architectural and spatial change. The urban conservation model, unlike traditional conceptions of architectural or art conservation, values change—not just stasis. It aims, for instance, to accommodate new technologies and modes of transport and economic production while retaining the character and meaning of urban districts and whole settlements.

This is part of a renewed strand of preservation thinking, based equally in cultural landscape thinking and urban planning, focusing on preservation of functions, uses and meanings as well as the formal, material aspects of urban places (buildings, streets, and squares). (As noted below, this sort of urban conservation is not a new idea; it echoes some models advanced in the early 20th century, another moment of reckoning with the cultural complexities of urban growth.) Like sustainable urban development writ large, this requires practices that are holistic (and not only committed to their own mode’s expertise), and a shifting regime of nonprofit institutions, foundations, hybrid companies, and public-private partnerships to implement.

Though space dictates just brief mention, several examples could illustrate successful urban conservation in quite different historical moments:

- Gustavo Giovannoni’s several projects in metropolitan Rome between 1900 and the 1930s (Choay 2001),
- Society Hill, Philadelphia, urban renewal/preservation project in the 1950s/60s (Ryberg-Webster 2013),
- The Main Street Program of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, begun in the 1970s, and implemented in more than 2,000 small towns in the United States (and even exported abroad) (National Main Street Center 2017; Orvell 2012).

¹ Elinor Ostrom later made a compelling case that regulation is neither the first nor ideal choice in managing common-pool resources, and institutional innovations beyond the ken of market or state are sometimes more effective (Ostrom et al. 1999).



Another way to think of conservation focused on functions as well as forms comes straight from economists' theorizing about cultural values: bringing all the flows of benefits demanded by the public (economic, cultural, and environmental). The work of economist David Throsby on flows of cultural value as well as economic value, modeled on notions of cultural capital, help make this argument that not only do the flows of culture need to be sustained (as opposed to thinking about architectural or urban forms needing to be frozen, or objects protected in museums) but distribution of them in the present and future needs to be confronted by policy (Throsby 2001). Further work in the cultural policy realm have proposed additional ways to organize policies and institutions around the idea of multiple flows of value, including cultural and other public values (Holden 2004; Moore 1997).

This line of thinking serves the important function of connecting conservation to other urban functions—conservation is increasingly envisioned as a means of advancing economic development, ecological sustainability, and social well-being— helping end the isolation of conservation thinking and conservation measures as a specialist concern or protest movement aimed only at select monument or urban centers.

THE IDEAL OF CONSURBANISM

“Consurbanism” is offered as an ideal strategy and practice for achieving a practical and sustainable balance between conservation and urbanization. It is, simply, urbanism centered on the idea of conservation, not just incidentally allowing it.

Formulating a workable notion of consurbanism requires rethinking assumptions about both urbanization and conservation (about which more below, under “Barriers”). The ideal is formed around a robust, nuanced, multi-dimensional idea of conservation that addresses both material forms (managing change of the physical qualities of built heritage) and immaterial processes. And, as it refocuses attention toward process, this model of conservation embraces a wide range of values that heritage forms and processes produce in contemporary and future society:

- memorial, historical, and aesthetic value (cultural values)
- wise use (economic values)
- sustainable in ecological terms (environmental values)
- relevant to the challenges and desires of today (social values)

Consurbanism must also abide by the most basic principles of good urbanism—creating geo-spatial patterns and processes that satisfy a wide range of societal needs while maintaining political and ethical positions cultivating respect, humility, freedom, and rights.

If urban heritage and its conservation is framed as connected, not isolated, to the other dynamics and geographies characterizing urbanism, it will by definition advance sustainability. Or, in more contemporary terms, it can be said to mitigate risk and build resilience—adaptability in the face of change, whether more or less predictable (Rodin 2014)—by simultaneously addressing the tangible systems by which societies manage change (buildings, infrastructure) as well the intangible systems (social formations, political institutions, culture). Culture is an overriding concern in debates about resilience—it is the “soft” infrastructure of “ways of living together” that enables other kinds of design, investment, and maintenance of “hard” infrastructure of which cities and settlements are made.

In work that is both historical and contemporary, I've argued for thinking about urban heritage as an extensive fabric of soft and hard infrastructure (heritage in all its forms being constitutive of modern culture)—a theoretical position that makes it risky to isolate built heritage and heritage conservation practices in discrete



conservation zones and organizations. Embedding cultural heritage everywhere—interweaving it with the whole urban fabric—is the ideal outcome of consurbanism (Mason 2009).

The current work of my research group at PennPraxis extends these threads of argument more fully into the question of how American cities currently generate quality public spaces—and processes of governing and managing them—in widely distributed locations so that they sustain widely shared (equitable) benefits to the city as a whole as well as their “home” neighborhoods. Ongoing work about reinvestment in existing public spaces and civic assets, advancing a conception of “civic infrastructure,” models the holistic inputs and effects of urban conservation. The conceptual model we’ve constructed to articulate the ideal process is framed as “civic infrastructure” and our current research is examining best practice public-space development efforts (single-site and system-wide) in terms of five issues (Greenspan and Mason 2016):

- Design, maintenance and placemaking,
- Measurement and evaluation,
- Community engagement,
- Governance and Public-Private Partnerships, and
- Economic inclusion.

One of the key insights confirmed by this scan of best-practices around the United States is the deep interconnectedness and intersectionality of both issues and solutions. Which is to say that traditional means of evaluating the outcomes of urbanization—economic measures—don’t suffice because they fail to address the robust elements and interests of the more nuanced model of consurbanism. Development—and certainly sustainable urban development that takes culture seriously—cannot be measured by economic factors alone. Which brings up the next issue: what are the barriers to realizing a consurbanism ideal?

THE OBSTACLES

In the short space available in this paper, I want to emphasize one obstacle—a long-standing cultural trend I call the “maximizing tendency”: a single-minded pursuit of maximizing one value to the exclusion of others. It shapes all sides of the debate around sustainable urban development and makes all aspects of sustainable urban development more difficult to imagine let alone achieve (including heritage conservation outcomes).

Growth is fundamental to urban systems. Development is, at a basic level, a problem of designing, planning, and managing urban economic growth. So, the main questions about growth are not “whether” but “how”: How is growth balanced against other human and social needs *not* advanced by growth? How is growth related to the other factors shaping environment and experience (like self-determination, social well-being, access to culture, healthy environments, and other basic human needs).

The maximizing tendency is the main challenge to shaping growth in a balanced, sustainable manner. It is epitomized by economic maximization (profit-seeking) but not confined to the economic sphere. It is an overarching and imperialistic fundamentalism, manifest in social, cultural, and other realms as well. As with all fundamentalisms, “strict adherence to the basic principles” (OED Online 2017) sets it against pluralism. The maximizing tendency toward growth is marked by belief in one factor to the exclusion of others, willfully ignoring the complexity of systems, resulting in the establishment and enforcement of orthodoxy.

Fundamentalism, wherever it occurs, relies on distortion of observation and theory, and simplicity of political argument—both the enemy of sustainable urbanism. It infects all fields of expertise and most political/governance cultures. And it opposes the sort of nuanced, complex, systems-based thinking we know ought to



govern urbanization policies and decisions. The maximizing tendency stands in stark contrast to good urbanism, which comes from heterodox thinking and practice.

The maximizing tendency animated the great social scientist Herbert Simon to devise his notion of satisficing as an alternative to maximization and zero-sum-game decision frames (Simon 1957; Frank and Cook 1995). The myriad insights of behavioral economics later followed Simon's insights, opening up many more nuanced ways of thinking and deciding (both in markets and with regard to public goods). Yet the power of fundamentalist thinking abides in all sectors, including in design and preservation. Modern economic models, powered by maximization and mathematics, are criticized for their blind spots, modelling on what can be measured, excluding the rest. The tendency might be most apparent in market economics, but it infects design, planning and conservation fields as well. The arrogant, deterministic design visions of prominent architectural movements are just as dire a symptom, and single-minded, defensive discourses and fundamentalist politics of conservation are also to blame. Examples abound: from John Ruskin and William Morris' early advocacy for preservation, to the architectural modernism of CIAM, to the neotraditional principles declared by the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU), to today's (all-too-often) single-minded, single-issue advocates and experts.

Applied to urban growth, the maximizing tendency results in overwrought arguments about the benefits of density—more density will solve most problems—and trickle-down theory of distribution of benefits. Greater density is presumed to result in greater economic good (maximizing land value), greater environmental good (smaller per capita carbon footprint), greater social good (well-being/prosperity/happiness). Few in development discourse consider the cultural implications (though the work of Florida, et al., carries the implicit notion that a higher density of people is a precondition for macroeconomically beneficial cultural creativity). Again, urban growth itself is not the issue, so much as the forms it takes and the social realities attached to it—the distributional issues, the amount of destruction it involves, the impact on cultural processes and ecological systems.

Those of us in design, planning, and conservation must ask what relation growth has to ecological integrity, to equity and social justice, to cultural identity and ownership. (All are growing voices in design discourse, but still minor notes.) Density by itself meets the narrow, short-term interests of developers, politicians, designers, or advocates promoting maximizing ideas. Urbanism needs density with character, with indeterminacy and idiosyncrasy (the alloying agents), with a future not just a present.

With specific reference to historic preservation and heritage conservation, urban growth presents a couple different maximizing-tendency obstacles. First, by subscribing to economic theories of value, excluding the distinct appreciation and autonomy of cultural values as a factor in decision-making; the over-reliance and overconfidence of development on economic reasoning is captured by the old joke that economists know the price of everything and the value of nothing (in other words, culture is a real source of value, invisible to econometric models). Second, urban growth is radically presentist, pursued for and measured in terms of short-term gains—structurally biased against the future and mostly ignorant of the past.

For guidance on how to short-circuit this multifaceted obstacle, one can look back to Herbert Simon, who framed a distinction between two modes of decision-making: maximizing and satisficing. Realizing that individual choices presented the impossibility/unlikelihood of utility maximization in practice, he established ways of valorizing non-maximal decisions. Applying this to sustainable urban development: What does urbanism and urban growth look like in a satisficing mode? Conservation plays a more central role.

But conservation, too, needs to reject the maximizing tendency. What is the right role for conservation? Not freezing cities in place—though this has become the reputation of historic preservation and heritage conservation.² The field's longer and more varied history of conservation shows it to consist of quite a wide range of practices, ranging from strict protection, to creative adaptation of historic structures, to urban redevelopment schemes pursuing forms of modernization mixing new development and protection of historic

² Preservation and conservation are used here more or less interchangeably. In U.S. parlance "preservation" is the broad term encompassing a wide range of



character.

Yet the historic preservation/conservation field is marked by a deep strain of fundamentalist thinking related to the quasi-sacred qualities of material heritage and, latterly, resisting urban development. The field needs to apply more systemic thinking to support more alternative modes of discourse and practice, and debunk the idea that design and conservation, new and old, growth and stasis are necessarily opposed. Instead, how they should be combined? Conservation encompasses a whole range of things—just as “design” does—from strict protection to wise use. In urban terms, conservation is not just a matter of finding the right ratio of conserved buildings to new, but designing/managing the *process* of change so that the built environment performs in all the ways we need (economically/growth, environmentally/health, socially/reproduction, culturally/memory) and in four dimensions (through time and across space).

SOLUTION PATHS

How to move around the obstacles presented by the maximizing tendency at work in economic development, urban planning and conservation, and move toward a consurbanism model? Let me briefly suggest two paths.

REGULATION AND GOVERNANCE

Taking a cue from Garret Hardin and Elinor Ostrom: regulation is needed to sustain the commons (heritage), but it need not be a simple matter of state regulation and market incentives. Ostrom pointed to the efficacy of some traditional *cultural* arrangements to manage common-pool resources like water as an agricultural resource, and there is room for experimentation in different sorts of institutional arrangements to take on the various “ownership” interests (legal and cultural) attached to cultural heritage (Mason 2016). In other words, culture can contribute to governance, and therefore conservation is a tool for governing.

With more specific reference to heritage conservation/historic preservation policies: they need nuance. The most powerful preservation policies tend to be regulations preventing demolition or unsympathetic modifications to listed sites, as well as incentives linking financial benefits to rehabilitation (redevelopment). Listing policies tend to force either/or decisions about cultural significance because they mesh easily with regulations and incentives. Some countries use ranked listings, and most center their decisions on the architectural values of buildings. More deliberate inclusion of societal values in listing decisions (getting beyond reliance on architectural fabric-centered policies) would foreground cultural values—e.g., sites of negative memory, which might bear intense social meaning yet be architecturally undistinguished. More emphasis and investment in incentivizing good (conservation-supportive) development, not just preventing bad actions, would be an important part of any consurbanist strategy.

THEORY

In the theoretical sphere, we need to articulate a systemic, holistic understanding of urban growth and conservation, and one path toward this is focusing not on formal outcomes but the complex flows of value from urbanism. Economist David Throsby’s version of sustainability principles, articulated in his masterful overview of cultural economics (substantially focused on heritage conservation), integrated cultural values (the values of cultural goods and practices) into economic policies. Cultural capital, added to the other types of capital commonly theorized, accounts for the additional values at play wherever heritage is a concern. Decisions are thereby challenged to meet a set of sustainability principles, articulated by Throsby (2001) as:

- Generation of tangible and intangible benefits,

design and protection practices, whereas “conservation” refers to the technical work of arresting decay and repairing historic structures. In global (non-U.S.) practice, the terminology is turned upside down: “conservation” is the encompassing term; “preservation” is the technical practice.



- Intergenerational equity,
- Intragenerational equity,
- Maintenance of diversity,
- Recognition of interdependence, and
- Precautionary principle.

The building blocks of consurbanism theory could include Throsby's conception of cultural and economic values and valuation, models of sustainable urban development, and values-centered preservation theory (Avrami, Mason, de la Torre 2000; de la Torre 2002; Mason 2006). These sympathetic theories set up a more complex model of urban growth and its effects of non-economic systems. The Historic Urban Landscape Recommendation (HUL), published by UNESCO in 2011, attempts to weave these ideas together into a straightforward recommendation for undertaking urban conservation planning (Bandarin and van Oers 2012; HUL 2011).

As part of the integration pursued by the HUL and other varied models of conservation planning, we also need models that extend deliberately to account for the values of culture. I am not referring to theories of sustainable development suggesting the addition of a “fourth leg” (beyond economic, ecological, and social factors) (United Cities and Local Governments 2010); rather, I am referring to a more direct reckoning with cultural processes and forms and how they change and shift, yet still serve the coherence of their community. Culture, after all, is not a collection of objects; rather, it is a set of processes and relationships that use objects. Perhaps some models of “cultural services,” if not cultural capital, would lend themselves readily to integration with econometric experimentations (with stated-preference studies, for instance) to inform balance of economic development and cultural (capital) development in specific settings. Anthropologist David Maybury-Lewis's notion of “cultural confidence” also holds promise for identifying the tolerances within which a culture can change yet retain its integrity for those who belong to it.

CONCLUSION

We can all relate to inheritance. It is important to many of us personally, connecting us, across generations, with flows of cultural and economic value generated by forebears. Why shouldn't it be a force in how we build cities?

What if inheritance, as a channel for cultural value flows, mattered more? What if inheritance was considered a key social infrastructure, enabling processes of cultural reproduction and group identity formation and social self-expression? What if conservation was privileged by public policy?

The new narrative about sustainable urban development will (still) be about growth and new development—and should *also* be about inheritance and conservation. New practices of conservation-centered urbanism (consurbanism) should be planted in some of the fertile ground prepared by the SDGs and New Urban Agenda.

We've got research to do—and advocacy—to convince both those inside the professional realm and among decision-makers. I hear loud and clear that our current, global urban situation presents us with many urgent, basic problems to solve—hunger, poverty, insecurity—and conservation typically lacks such urgency. But any vision of future cities without a robust capacity for talking about and implementing conservation is incomplete, and therefore inadequate.

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