Urban Living and Built Environment

Who owns the space in the city? How do we integrate current and future needs of the city inhabitants into its design?

Understanding urban living

The physical form of a city influences its environmental performance and social dynamic, as well as behaviours, feelings and health of its inhabitants.

Depending on features of a particular city or neighbourhood, we may decide whether to walk or to travel by car, whether to sit outside or quickly rush back home, whether it is safe for children to play in the backyard or not.

Our cities are constantly evolving, shaped by different, often conflicting, forces, such as national and local legislation, business interests, environmental challenges, as well as by inhabitants and other people that make use of the city, e.g. tourists or commuters.

Many European cities are facing challenges in balancing those different forces, producing conflicts that very often revolve around:

● gentrification

Gentrification is a shift in a social structure of a certain community towards wealthier residents and businesses that cater to their needs. This leads to increased property values, often resulting in original inhabitants being forced to move out.

● urban sprawl

Urban sprawl refers to a situation of uncontrolled urban development, when cities are expanding into neighbouring countryside. Fuelled by the development of motorized transport, sprawl leads to a number of environmental and social problems, including air pollution, decline of farmland and wildlife habitats and social segregation.
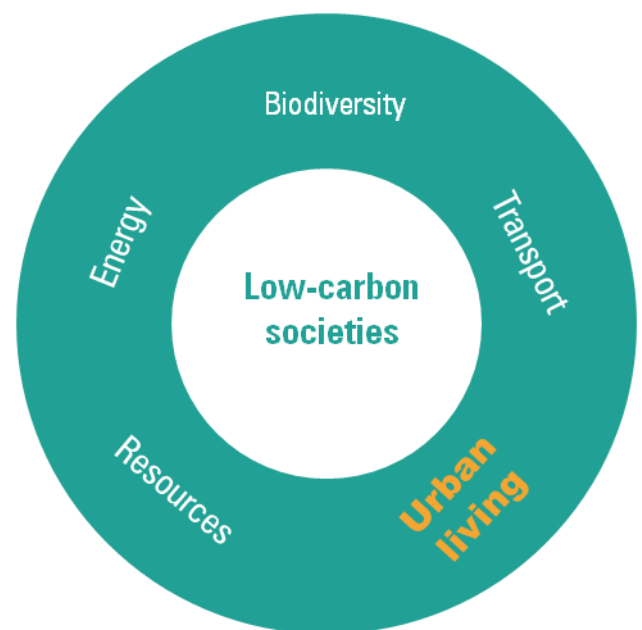
Urban living and the big picture

Regions, cities and communities are complex, interconnected systems so we need to learn to look at the big picture.

Urban living can be understood as an overarching perspective that brings together various low-carbon domains. In this sense it constitutes a framework in which all other domains need to be considered.

The challenge is to reconcile the needs of inhabitants with the principles of low-carbon and sustainable urban development. Environmentally-friendly solutions are often more costly or less comfortable than existing ones, especially in the short term. Closing the city centre to cars may cause resistance among those used to commuting by car, just like higher energy prices related to investments in renewable energy may push some people into poverty.

This challenge is further exacerbated by the speed and uncertainty of the changes that our societies undergo. How do you design a city for an uncertain future?

In the European Union, buildings account for 40 % of the total energy use in the EU and for 36% of EU CO_2 emissions, representing Europe's largest source of greenhouse gas emissions.

The Vacant City project in Budapest (Hungary) maps and activates abandoned properties in the city

Launched by the Hungarian Contemporary Architecture Centre (KEK), the project aims at finding solutions to the emerging problem of vacant properties in our cities. The residents of Budapest were invited to upload data about vacant properties, creating a publicly accessible inventory. The next stage is to match these spaces with communal, social and cultural initiatives, in order to bring them back to life.

For more information visit lakatlan.kek.org.hu/en

"
More than 11m homes lie empty across Europe – enough to house all of the continent's homeless twice over.
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The Guardian, 23.02.14

Searching for solutions

The essence of urban living is communication, understanding and respecting the diversity of the city. European cities have long been experimenting with participation processes, involving inhabitants in developing and implementing local strategies and projects. However, many of these processes were criticised for involving always the same, limited group of people or for focusing on minor issues, while the main decisions were taken elsewhere.

With spread and growth of bottom-up initiatives like the ones mentioned above, the role of local governments needs to change. Participation is increasingly evolving towards co-production, based on trust, empowerment and a shared vision for the future.

Hanover Action for Sustainable Living (HASL) co-creates sustainable future with local residents in Brighton (UK)

Set up in 2009 by local residents, HASL promotes sustainable living in the Hanover neighbourhood of Brighton & Hove city. By hosting a range of fun and educational community events, HASL engages people from across the social spectrum in a colleactive endeavour to explore and co-create sustainable urban living in a densely-populated city-centre neighbourhood.

For more information visit www.hasl.org.uk

ARTS is a research project which aims to benefit theory, policy and practice related to accelerating sustainability transitions.

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