

Urban environment and social inequality in Latin America

The following text is a translation of the originally spoken text of the animation in French:

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For many years now, the environment has been of major concern worldwide.

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Water and air pollution, soil contamination, deforestation, loss of biodiversity...

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...and the precarious living conditions of a majority of the planet's population have mobilised many researchers, decision-makers and professionals.

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Furthermore, civil society, having until recently left scientific and political experts to run operations,

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... is now getting involved and applying pressure so that its opinions are heard and acted upon.

Beyond the differences in opinion about what action needs to be taken to mitigate these problems,

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...environmental questions cannot be tackled by taking only one perspective into account. Due to their multiple causes and the conflicts of interests they arouse, ...

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....it takes a combination of different disciplines to understand questions concerning both the natural and the built environment.

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Natural sciences, engineering, architecture, as well as town and country planning, social sciences and economics must all be brought together

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... if we want to have a chance of defining appropriate long-term solutions.

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Our research is based on such a multi-dimensional perspective of the natural and built environment. Four research teams have been working on urban questions for many years now. They have carried out a three-year research project into the problems of expanding cities entitled "Urban environment and social inequality in Latin America". This was part of a programme financed by the Cooperation Unit at the Federal Polytechnic School in Lausanne and Swiss Development Cooperation, which was selected from among some 15 competing projects. The institutions involved are the Laboratoire de Sociologie Urbaine (Laboratory of Urban Sociology), formerly the IREC, of the Natural Architectural and Built Environment Faculty at the Federal Polytechnic School of Lausanne in Switzerland; the non-governmental

organisation Habitat-Cuba in Havana, Cuba; the non-governmental organisation Pro Habitat at La Paz in Bolivia; and finally the Faculty of Architecture, Design and Urban Planning of Buenos Aires in Argentina. The project was directed from the Laboratoire de Sociologie Urbaine by Professor Jean-Claude Bolay and Doctor Yves Pedrazzini along with Ana Rabinovich.

We chose the urban environment as our focus for analysing the relationships between technological innovation and environmental quality through the lens of sustainable development. The intention was not to apply this concept as a panacea to age-old problems, but instead to examine in a very pragmatic fashion, whether environmental improvements in urban areas through technological innovations are compatible with the two other key aspects of sustainable development, i.e. social equity and economic prosperity.

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The main hypothesis guiding our work is that the processes involved in improving the urban environment are factors of spatial fragmentation and social inequality if the proposed measures are restricted to technological solutions.

Starting from this main hypothesis, we developed two sub-hypotheses:

Firstly, the implementation of projects designed to improve the urban environment, which require huge investment, leads to rising costs and greater inequality among urban inhabitants if no social measures are adopted to balance them out.

The second sub-hypothesis suggested that innovative solutions for environmental problems related to the urban habitat require a change in logic for the design and implementation of urban projects, and widespread consideration for the role social and institutional actors play.

In order to gain a better understanding of these hypotheses, let us take a look at real-life situations in Third World countries that illustrate the changes sweeping our world.

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Most of the inhabitants of our planet live in urban areas, whether this be in large megalopolis or in small and medium-sized towns.

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However, less than half of the city-dwellers enjoy the infrastructure and services that are required for healthy and dignified community life.

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For most city-dwellers living on the margins of normality, life is extremely precarious in terms of housing,

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... jobs and future prospects.

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This precariousness affects the whole environment. However, we now know that, although Third World cities show signs of general uncertainty,

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... the situation is not necessarily so different in the North, where the same precariousness is also beginning to affect most working-class areas, both socially and spatially. What is more, urban uncertainty means that,

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... rather than urban planners and the strategies of experts guiding the regeneration of cities, ...

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...they tend to regenerate themselves. This happens in a kind of constant movement, ...

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... as an accumulation of abrupt breaks and changes, rather than as the result of the actions of property developers.

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Considering this somewhat fatalistic observation, ...

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... one is entitled to wonder why most cities in the Third World ...

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... have not been able to prevent social decline and spatial fragmentation.

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In our research, we confronted our working hypotheses with three projects that aim to improve the urban environment.

In Argentina, we examined the management of public services and, to be more precise, drinking water supply and wastewater treatment in a context of economic liberalism characterised by the privatisation of urban amenities.

In Bolivia, we examined waste management, collection and treatment in a context of institutional innovation that has been affected by the emergence of a regulatory system encouraging citizens to participate in decision-making.

Lastly, in Cuba we studied innovations in the housing sector, analysing the architectural and planning processes that offer an alternative to the large-scale state housing projects. The context here was characterised by the emergence of new actors from civil society, i.e. non-governmental organisations.

We analysed these three examples and tried to understand the following aspects:

How are operations decided upon and put into practice?

Are we now able to say where real innovation is to be found?

Is this innovation in the technological products and/or in the projects that are implemented?

What is their cost in economic and financial terms, of course, but also of their effects on society and the environment, both to produce and maintain them, but also to manage and organise the processes?

And finally, what is the social impact of these interventions?

Do users benefit from these changes regardless of their socio-economic status?

If the answer is yes, what are the mechanisms?

What is the response of civil society and society in general to the strategies that have been adopted?

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The first results from the studies carried out in each of the three countries throw up much interesting food for thought. The strategies that have been adopted to protect the environment in cities in the South probably require a reorganisation of the partnerships between the different levels within the public authorities and private companies, particularly in situations where councils do not have the necessary financial and technical resources to satisfy the minimum requirements of the population.

In Argentina, as in Bolivia, such institutional reorganisation made technological improvements possible.

In quantitative terms, the number of people with access to this service increased, and there was an improvement in water quality and flow in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area.

Household waste collection was organised in the streets of La Paz in working-class districts where this service had not previously existed.

Although private-public partnerships are becoming essential for economic and even administrative reasons, these partnerships can have a considerable negative social impact, since both the companies and the authorities are mainly motivated by money – one of them wants to earn more, whereas the other wants to spend less.

In Argentina, for instance, this economic logic has led to the difficulties that disadvantaged social groups face in paying their bills for a service that has become too expensive. Users are beginning to join together to claim their rights, there are conflicts and this leads to new regulatory bodies being formed.

The company encounters new difficulties to be able to generate a return on its investment. Since a multi-party approach that is both technical and institutional, but also economic and social is lacking, the technological improvements that have been implemented turn out to be ineffective.

We have thus come full circle, and the partners have to redefine the rules of a game aimed at distributing a public good – water.

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In Cuba, things are quite different.

In a fast-changing social and economic context, experiments in alternative architectural and planning processes to the large-scale state housing programmes seem to be successful at local level.

Under the guidance of an NGO and thanks to new models adapted to the local context, these urban laboratories make it possible to produce living areas that are more environmentally friendly and at less costly than the housing produced by the public authorities.

What distinguishes the situation here from the two previous cases is, firstly, that these technological improvements are associated with processes in which the local population is fully involved, which makes it possible to produce homes that are better adapted to their requirements;

and, secondly, that these changes are taking place in a society where everyone has the right to housing and where everyone can afford a home thanks to generous government subsidies.

There are however various obstacles to extending and replicating this experiment at regional or even national level. These are mainly in the form of administrative and legal complications.

Looking at the process, one might think that extending these experiments would challenge official thinking about architecture and urban planning, even if the state model is often regarded as anti-urban.

As if social justice in terms of habitat, if it is to be judged acceptable, can only be developed under the control of a higher body that ensures it is diffused to all Cubans, thereby avoiding any kind of housing inequality, and that only the state has the authority to play this role.

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To sum up, it is possible to conclude from the first results of our research, in which we have examined the institutional, social and economic dimensions of predominantly technological strategies adopted to improve the quality of the environment, that the real innovation in the environment is never to be found in the places where it has been explicitly announced.

In fact, any technology can be innovative - or should be - since if it is not, it will be quickly discarded.

However, although innovation always has a technological dimension, it cannot be restricted to this. It always has to bring about institutional, social and economic change in the processes through which it is implemented. If not, the improvements will remain experiments and will stand no chance of having any profound and lasting impact on people's future and that of their environment.

This confirms the need for an interdisciplinary, multi-actor approach like the one we are promoting and developing in urban sciences.

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Thank you for listening.