A Spatial Framework for Urban Policy: New Directions, New Challenges

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Abstract
In history books of the future, our century will be noted as the century when global society became in some fundamental sense fully urban. By current estimates, we have already passed the 50 percent mark. Towards the end of the 21st century, the great majority of the world’s population, now projected to around 10 billion, will be living in towns, cities, and metropolitan regions. And most of the remaining 20 percent or so, while living in the countryside, will have become at least partially urbanized, being multiply linked to urban life through media access, markets, and relatives who have moved to the urban, thus completing the transition that began around 1800 and has been projected to be completed in 2100, a span of 300 years (Friedmann 2002).

This is the big news. But there are additional stories in our fictional news report a hundred years from now. Much of the increase in the urban will have happened in Asia, we are told, especially in the coastal areas of India and China. The world’s total population will have leveled off and, in many formerly industrialized countries, will have been going through a demographic aging process for years. No longer are their problems those of a surplus of children and youths with nowhere to go —although this will still be true of many African and Middle Eastern countries—but a population of preponderantly senior citizens looking for security, stability, and peace. For the first time in their long history, Japan and Russia will have had to allow large numbers of migrant workers from the global periphery to care for their rapidly aging populations and fill vacant positions in strategic economic sectors. Even more massive numbers of immigrants will have contributed to keeping the populations of western Europe, North America, and Australasia from suffering similar declines, thus helping to slow down the general trend of a population that is growing older year by year.

Introduction

According to reports from fictional media in 2100, corporate capital, always in search of greater profit potential and new markets, has been migrating for over a century, much as people have done. A number of de-industrialized regions have been successful in upgrading a substantial part of their labor force to advanced

(knowledge-intensive) services, but many others have failed to make this transition and are struggling to stay afloat in a competitive global system that has become much more mobile, and more mobile over longer distances, than it once was. As economic changes keep accelerating, according to these media, economists are working out a new version of their science, which they call disequilibrium economics. According to a Nobel prize-winning scholar, disequilibrium will be the new norm for the 22nd century. In light of these theories, heated debates have ensued concerning the role of the state in the face of constant but variable challenges to urban regions as they attempt to cope with dynamic but unstable fortunes. Should regions in long-term decline—the rustbelts and by-passed regions of the world—be helped to gain (or regain) their competitive edge against the overwhelming evidence of market signals, or should central resources be channeled towards promising “sunshine regions” to help improve their chances of capturing ever larger shares of in-bound capital? Which is the better policy? Or are there other strategic alternatives.

Since the 1930s, spatial disequilibria have been thought of as a problem to be addressed by national policies. The idea was to even out spatial income inequalities by raising the productive capacities of industrially backward regions. In the United States, the most promising of these federal programs was coordinated river basin development, with the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) pointing the way. The Tennessee river was harnessed, and new industries did move into eastern Tennessee and northern Georgia to take advantage of low-cost hydropower, subsequently expanded to include large coal-fired power plants as well. But after World War II, market forces proved stronger in fuelling industrial expansion in the American South, and the TVA area was only one of several areas, not necessarily the most important, that benefited from this location strategy of firms. Industrial development boosted the fortunes of a number of the larger cities in the South—Atlanta, Nashville, Memphis—while stagnant rural counties made their own adjustments, chiefly by supplying surplus labor to the new metropolitan markets (McLaughlin and Robock 1949).

In the following decades, a number of Latin American, African, and Asian countries undertook similar comprehensive programs of river basin development, but economic consequences often failed to meet high public expectations. Energy was of course always in demand, but it was far from being the hoped-for panacea for regional progress. Occasionally, other programs were designed to boost the fortunes of lagging pre-industrial regions. The Italian government, for instance, created the Cassa per il Mezzogiorno for its southern regions which subsidized inter-regional transport and tried to lure industry South, much as the U.S. had done, but with indifferent success. Brazil constructed Brasilia deep in the interior of the country and undertook a vast road building program that would link the new capital with the 20 states and territories of the Union, most spectacularly the Amazon region (Pará, Amazonas, etc.) in a move that many hoped would open up this relatively unspoiled wilderness to modern developments. But what the transamazonian highway mostly accomplished was to create an environmental disaster of global proportions (Hecht and Cockburn 1998). Chile, another Latin American country, attempted to decentralize its excessively centralized state to newly established administrative regions in a move intended to stimulate regional growth on its periphery, but to little avail. The
centralizing powers of the state were seemingly irreversible, and the nation’s capital, Santiago, continued to grow unabated, while peripheral regions languished. As Gunnar Myrdal observed, a spatial disequilibrium, once established, turns out to be difficult to reverse. He ascribed such widening disequilibria to a process of “cumulative causation” (Myrdal 1967). Today, we are more likely to speak of “path dependency” (Kawka 2007).

The long-term persistence of a spatially uneven development was recognized as early as 1955 in my doctoral dissertation, *The Spatial Structure of Economic Development in the Tennessee Valley* (Friedmann 1955). City regions, so went the argument, are central to contemporary economic growth. To achieve high rates of growth, metropolitan resources must be developed. But there are limits to what can be achieved through direct intervention by the state in shifting the emphasis from rural to urban. In the decades that followed, the thesis of a selective, spatially concentrated development (Rodwin 1963) fuelled a theoretically-driven discussion about *pôles de croissance* or “growth poles” (Perroux 1950, Boudeville 1961, Friedmann and Weaver 1979, Parr 1999a). This idea remained popular for a while, and a number of countries tried to adopt it as the basis for a national policy of regional development, among them South Korea, Venezuela, and Chile (Parr 1999b). But no one, of course, actually knew how to make self-sustaining growth poles happen in practice. The Republic of Korea, for one, thought it could adopt the growth pole doctrine to prevent the Seoul metropolitan area from remaining the country’s dominant industrial “pole” but despite persistent efforts to create one or two “counter-poles” in the southern part of the country, the policy failed, and Seoul continued to get bigger. Today, 48 percent of South Korea’s population is concentrated in the capital region. At one point, even Spain thought it could identify “growth poles” as a spatial foundation for a national policy. But since it was found politically convenient at the time to identify a hierarchy of poles that more or less coincided with the actual economic importance of major cities, the policy was unsuccessful in significantly redirecting the flow of state investments (Hansen 1967, Lasuén 1986).

By the 1990s, growth pole theories and the policies based on them had been largely abandoned in favor of the recently coined concept of “world city” (Friedmann and Wolfe 1982), and a number of countries, including China, declared their intention to create what they called important cities in the world, or world-class, international cities. These efforts, however, though state-supported, focused primarily on the marketing and branding cities for foreign capital. Emphasis was placed on spectacular projects, the most notable of which was Pudong (East Shanghai). Money poured into new transportation systems and flashy infrastructure, the value of real estate ballooned, and success or failure of the strategy was gauged by the amount of outside capital lured inwards. In a neo-liberal era of market-driven economic growth, globalizing cities were turning entrepreneurial (Jessop 1997).

Given these circumstances and speaking realistically, I propose to take a look at spatial planning and more particularly at how urban policies and spatial planning might fruitfully intersect, allowing for a new coordinative role for spatial planning. The paper is divided into five parts. I begin with a discussion of the three scales of spatial planning relative to urban policy: the neighborhood, the municipality or city proper, and the region beyond municipal boundaries. I conclude by arguing that spatial planning can serve as a matrix or framework for coordinating urban policies in globalizing city-regions which are themselves divided administratively into
different governmental units. Part Two proceeds by suggesting three urban policy imperatives for our era: ecological sustainability, social cohesion, and democratic governance. These principles need to inform all urban policies at the same time that they must be viewed in a developmental perspective, cognizant that spatial structures never remain poised in equilibrium. Instead, minor and often major adjustments must continuously take place. In Part Three, I take a closer look at the nature of urban development policies, more particularly at their principal aims, which I take to be a choice between an externally or internally driven development path. I will argue for the second of these options and try in some detail to show how globalizing city-regions might want to think about their “metropolitan” resources. Part Four, then, finally arrives at the question of spatial planning and its role in urban policy. I briefly review the traditional approaches to spatial planning as they are now mandated in many countries. Following a critical survey of comparative planning cultures, I conclude by proposing a new coordinative role for spatial planning in urban policy formation. Part Five summarizes my findings and conclusions.

Part One: Three Scales of the Urban

It is well to remind ourselves that nearly all our cities are open to the global flows of finance capital, trade, and ideas; and many, though not all cities, are also to varying degree open to migrants from less advantaged areas both at home and abroad. The symbolic walls which in mid-nineteenth century still surrounded some cities have long since been torn down and, where they remain, as they do for example in Xi-an, no longer serve defensive purposes but to attract tourists. Cities could never be effectively contained within their walls, and to some extent, even when walled, remained largely open to the world. Moments of closure have been few in history. Ever since the latter part of the 19th century, the urban has spilled out from central cities into the countryside, becoming virtually ubiquitous. Today you can make cell phone calls via satellite from the Tibetan high plateau and capture vivid images from around the world through satellite dishes in the Amazonian rain forest. Whether for good or ill, all of us are linked up, and the urban is everywhere.

Even so, the spatial patterns of the urban are not random. Urban core areas define surrounding regions to which they give their name and identity. And within these city-regions as we now call them (Scott 2001; Sassen 2006), there are both spatial and political subdivisions, each of which implies a different way of looking at and understanding the urban. Accordingly, it is useful to distinguish three interrelated scales of the urban (Brenner 2004).

The smallest or neighborhood scale is also the scale of everyday life. It is this intimate scale that can give rise to a sense of place and the formation of local communities, though neither is an inevitable result of scale. Varying in size but generally built on a scale that is still walkable, neighborhoods are focused on residential areas and functions: parks and recreation; a range of community services; convenience shopping; primary education; and religious worship. In many globalizing cities, certain neighborhoods have become focal points of ethnic tension with far-reaching negative consequences that need to be addressed. But even older, established neighborhoods are not necessarily stable. There are in- and out-flows of people as well as shifting patterns of fortune such as decline, gentrification, and redevelopment (Friedmann 2003, ch. 5).
The municipal is the second scale of urban life. Municipalities are governmental and administrative units which may be further subdivided into boroughs and districts. In this densely settled space of the city, all urban functions are brought together: residential, productive, service, commercial, communicative, and cultural, along with all the other important things large cities provide, not least the critical circulation patterns formed by air, rail, bus, and car that bind them all together and to city-regions around the globe.

When we look at the city as a whole, we begin to see its historic districts and landmarks, its inner and outer suburbs, its broad social and ethnic divisions, its major arteries, its dominant landforms, its parks and lake shores, its commercial areas, its office towers and industrial districts. All these categories are in part superimposed, jostling each other inside the municipal jurisdiction. They constitute a fragmented pattern of the urban.

The space beyond municipal boundaries yet closely geared to the central city is the third scale of the urban, a more sparsely settled region that is nevertheless essential to the city’s survival and future expansion. Here we find the sources of its water supply, the sinkholes for its solid waste, new urban subdivisions, towns, and Edge Cities, commercial harbors, space-hungry industries and international airports, natural recreation areas and theme parks, intensive year-round farming, abattoirs, scenic sites of exceptional natural beauty, historical preservation areas and more. In one form or another, all of them contribute to the buoyancy and well-being of the entire urban region. This region is criss-crossed by expressways and railways that connect it to the rest of the world, at the same time that they carry weekday commuter traffic. Administratively, it is speckled with various governmental units that assert their restricted powers over sections of the regional space and may be combined into various forms of metropolitan-wide organizations that attempt to view the region as a whole.

Because of the close interconnectivity between central city and region, many urbanists today speak of city-regions as the basic spatial unit for policy and planning. Moreover, each city-region is linked to other regions both near and far. Although we often speak of globalizing cities, what we actually mean is globalizing regions that may grow to large and even very large size until they reach the amorphous, unübersichtlich scale of metropolitan Tokyo with its 35 million people, the largest urban concentration in the world.

The tasks for urban policy and appropriate procedures for their implementation are different at each scale. Here I can only hint at some of these differences. At the neighborhood scale, people’s needs and their well-being are the most important. Here, too, we find the autonomous organizations of civil society, the formation of territorially based communities, and also considerable though usually non-violent social conflict, because urban neighborhoods are rarely homogeneous, and despite their relatively small scale, residents will frequently disagree about the course of action to be taken. On the other hand, neighborhood gentrification will almost always meet with resistance from already established local communities, because however poor they may be, their residents are afraid of being displaced, their social networks disrupted. At the other end of the social

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2 A few highly urbanized regions, such as Germany’s Ruhrgebiet, lack dominant central cities and can be called a dispersed metropolis.

3 Enormous urban concentrations such as Tokyo, Seoul, Beijing and Mexico City among others are partly a result of highly centralized systems of government. Gaining access to the sources of governmental power is one of the most important location factors contributing to the continued growth of these national capital regions.
spectrum, exclusive wealthy areas are keen to keep a certain type of people—of a different color, a different language, a different culture—away from their well-tended (and often fortified) precincts, even as working class neighborhoods are pleading with public authorities for services that are taken for granted elsewhere, such as garbage collection or easy access to health facilities and playgrounds. Neighborhoods are therefore by no means the cozy places that some people imagine. Certain neighborhoods are tough places that may be terrorized by gangs of young people who invest little hope in the future.

At the municipal scale, problems are perceived differently. The key actors here are city government, politicians and bureaucrats, as well as influentials from the business community, such as developers. Their focus tends to reflect these interests which revolve around the urban economy, land use, and the quality of urban infrastructure. At the same time, however, local politicians also have to please the many neighborhoods of the city and respond not only to their frequently loud demands but also be attentive to maintaining some sort of equity across the urban fabric as, for example, by providing universal access to public services. Not least, urban authorities have to learn to work together with their counterparts in the surrounding region on which so much of city life depends. Formal regional associations are difficult though not impossible to manage, as evidence from Europe has shown (Brenner 2004, 274-81).

Coordinating urban policies across the gargantuan spaces of the modern metropolis is an enormously difficult task that requires a great deal of foresight, vision, and skill as well as new forms of collaborative governance along both horizontal and vertical dimensions. In many but not all OECD countries, there are active civil societies and social movements that must be listened to, and whose concerns, just as those of powerful industrial and business organizations, must be respected. Each country and, in some cases, even each city, has its own political culture that will determine just how these problems are managed and the inevitable conflicts resolved. National and provincial legislation set the rules of the political game, assigning powers to different levels of government.

Here I will attempt a somewhat easier task, which is to suggest how spatial planning might potentially serve as a matrix or framework for coordinating urban policies in globalizing city-regions that are administratively and politically divided. But before we get to this subject, I would like to consider two additional topics. The first concerns normative principles that have become imperative for both contemporary urban policies and spatial planning. The second, to be treated at length in Part Three, is related to the strategic options for contemporary urban policy.

Part Two: The new imperatives

Except for specialists, the language of urban policy is still a relatively unfamiliar one, particularly with reference to globalizing city-regions. Policy suggests general guidelines—some mandatory, others indicative—for specific application to decisions across a wide spectrum of public institutions that are charged with responsibility for the social, economic, and physical development of both central cities and adjacent regions. Urban policies can of course also be formulated at national and supra-national levels. Indeed there are very few policies at either level which do not have some bearing on the spatial distribution of economic activities and life chances across the entire system of cities. The approach I am taking...
concern us here, as each region will need to evolve its own context-dependent policies. But what we can do is to identify a small number of general principles and approaches that by virtue of their generality cut across regional differences. I call them imperatives, because for policies to enjoy widespread legitimacy, these principles will, in one way or another, need to be heeded. There are at least three such principles that govern the way we shall have to think about urban policy in the 21st century.

1. **Ecological sustainability.**

2. This principle is by now on everybody’s lips, but interpretations differ, and its application to urban development policy is not at all transparent. A more precise meaning might be that of long-term custodial management of regional resources. Even so, ecological sustainability needs greater specification with respect to urban policy. Here are some examples of potential urban policies that would promote it.

- *Reduce the city-region’s ecological footprint* (Wackernagel and Rees1996). The ecological footprint is a measure of human demand on the eco-system of a region or locality. Typically, the calculation used to measure the ecological footprint of a place is to convert total resources consumed in the area into a measure of land expressed in “global hectares” (gha) *per capita.* Though simple in concept, the ecological footprint of any area is difficult to calculate, and the measure can only be approximated. Still, the meaning of footprint analysis is relatively easy to communicate to a wider public, and research results have been promising (Barrett et al. 2002, Stewart et al. 2003). Although footprint analysis does not directly lead to a reduction in the size of the footprint, it does help to identify strategic areas for intervention;

- *in calculating regional product statistics—supposedly a measure of human welfare—factor out the environmental costs of economic growth such as progressive resource depletion and the health impacts of pollution.* This, too, is a difficult and laborious task, but promising results have been obtained at least for calculations of the environmental burden at the national level (Daly and Farley 2004). To make good policy, the information on which it is based has to accurately reflect the net benefits of economic growth to human wellbeing, and what may reasonably be called a “cost” should not be counted as a net benefit, or simply be ignored. To the extent that economic analysis underpins urban policies, the system of social accounting used should be free of such confusions and contradictions;

- reduce energy use per unit of regional product;
- substitute “sustainable” energy (solar, wind, etc.) for fossil fuels;
- establish benchmark standards for passive energy design in building construction;
- increase urban densities (e.g., housing units per hectare);

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5 The more precise definition of ecological footprint is the total area of land and water eco-systems required to produce the resources that a population consumes and to assimilate the wastes generated, wherever on earth these eco-systems might be located (Rees 1992, 2001).

6 An interesting attempt to calculate a national Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) has been undertaken by The Australia Institute. See [www.tai.org.au](http://www.tai.org.au)
set aside significantly large areas as ecological preserves, such as watersheds;

- increase the proportion of regionally produced fresh food stuffs in aggregate consumption;

- limit the use of private automobiles while encouraging alternative modes such as walking, cycling, and public transit;

- expand and improve the recycling of solid waste;

- impose restrictive quotas on carbon dioxide and other noxious industrial by-products;

- raise public awareness of the need for greater progress towards an ecologically sustainable regional development.

These examples of how the urban footprint might be reduced represent only a partial list and help to underscore the potential reach of sustainable development across a wide range of urban policy areas.

2. Social cohesion: this is, first of all, a distributional criterion which argues that wide socio-economic disparities should be reduced. In this sense, cohesion is equivalent to the familiar principle of social justice. Second, social cohesion also argues for the equalization of spatial access to public facilities and services across the region, from schools to swimming pools, from public transit to health centers, from refuse collection to street lighting. Some refer to this aspect as spatial justice. Finally, the principle of social cohesion argues for the reduction of inter-cultural and ethnic tensions through specific programs aimed at strengthening local citizenship and solidarity, particularly at the level of neighborhoods (Holston 1999). For many cities, this relatively new principle challenges familiar ways of seeing, understanding, and doing. This is not the place for an extended discussion of how to lessen inter-ethnic tensions, but important work along these lines has been done, among others, by Sandercock (1997; 2003), Attili and Sandercock (2006), and Amin (2002).

3. Democratic governance: the complexities and multiple scales of city-regions are such that decision-making which also leads to effective action is no longer exclusive to traditional government but increasingly involves “ecologies of actors” (Evans 2002). Governance (as opposed to government) refers to a fluid, consultative, participatory, and deliberative process that often blurs the classical distinction between public and private, involves civil society organizations as well as corporate interests and public institutions, and emphasizes dialogue and negotiation over hierarchy and rule-making. Above all, it is—or should be—a transparent process that encourages public deliberations on critical policy issues. For a more extended discussion, see Healey 2005 and 2006; Gutmann and Thompson 2004.

In addition to these three imperatives, urban policies must also be viewed in a dynamic perspective. City-regions are located in a globe-spanning urban net that undergoes constant realignment, as some regional economies surge ahead, others experience decline, and still others get stuck in the doldrums while “storms of change” blow relentlessly across the world. The global network is thus in constant disequilibrium—economic, political, cultural and digital. It is organized hierarchically, with a few “global cities” at the top functioning primarily as financial clearing houses (London, Paris, Zurich, Tokyo, New York, perhaps soon to be joined by Shanghai) and a handful of other cities whose role is to articulate their respective multi-national, national, and regional economies with the global system as a whole. This hierarchy of “world cities” (Friedmann 1986; Knox and...
Taylor 1995; see also Beaverstock et al. 2006) is inherently unstable, however, with city-regions moving in and out according to their respective and variable fortunes.

The point I want to make here is that over the past several decades we have come to realize that city-regions have become the major focal points or “poles” of economic growth. But the old idea of poles is a static formulation. To become proactive, city-regions have to be empowered by senior governments to guide their own development trajectory and acquire the legal and financial means to carry them out (Newman and Thornley 2005). City-regions, of course, are embedded in national economies, and the levers of national policy continue to be important. But with globalization continuing, national policy instruments, while remaining important, are beginning to yield to urban-centered policies.

But what policies should these be? Should they be driven by a desperate sense of global competition for in-bound capital or rather by policies that look towards upgrading their own assets, mindful of the three principles of ecological sustainability, social cohesion, and democratic governance we have discussed?

**Part Three: Urban policy for what?**

A sharp line divides two very different approaches to urban policy. The prevailing approach argues that in an era of footloose capital looking for high returns, cities are obliged to do their utmost to attract outside capital from investing in their region lest they fall behind in the game of global competition. It is said that to survive in these sweepstakes, cities, like firms, have no option but to compete. For example, many globalizing cities want to reach world-city status by becoming a hub for global corporations. Their policies emphasize favorable tax structures, attention-getting architecture, heavy investments in expensive infrastructure, athletic events such as the Olympics, and major trade fairs which they believe will put them on the map as desirable places for global capital. Urban development is thus understood primarily as a function of external, inward-bound investment. A less popular strategy is one that believes that a better use of scarce resources would be investing in a region’s tangible assets for long-term development. Though not opposed to in-bound capital, this thesis proposes to lay a solid foundation for a long-lasting development from within. This is the argument I should like to make.

There are seven clusters of such assets, including human, social, cultural, intellectual, natural, environmental, and urban. To varying degrees these assets are present in all city-regions, in rich countries as well as in poor, and I shall argue that caring for and investing in them should be the principal task of local government.

Heading the list are a region’s human assets, that is, people and the quality of their lives. At issue here are so-called basic human needs, principally adequate housing with secure tenure; educational opportunities for young people to prepare them for the modern world; access to good health; and—given the metropolitan scale—affordable mobility. The satisfaction of these tangible, material needs constitutes the foundation for our most fundamental right, which is the right to life and human flourishing. Achieving quality housing, education, and health for every citizen must therefore be a primary aim of every genuine development. In the final analysis, this is a state responsibility. Leaving their satisfaction to the blind operation of market forces will only exacerbate

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8 This section is based on my UN-Habitat Award Lecture delivered at the Third World Urban Forum in Vancouver, B.C. (Friedmann 2006).
inequalities, allowing those few who already have a foundation in basic assets to pursue a life of human flourishing while marginalizing the majority who lack these foundations for the most precious of human rights.

The second regional asset is its organized civil society, that is, the multiple self-organizing activities of local citizens. When given a chance, people will do a myriad things for themselves. There are local churches, mosques, and temples that are supported by and draw the faithful. For younger people, there are football clubs, while others engage in music making and dancing. In Spain, I have come across gastronomic clubs whose members enjoy cooking for each other, celebrating fellowship with food and wine. Elsewhere, people support civic initiatives that promote projects throughout the city from neighborhood beautification campaigns to visiting old people’s homes. Hobbies ranging from flower arranging to bird watching will inevitably bring aficionados together. In some western countries, such as Canada, some civic associations are also active politically, lobbying the government on behalf of various causes.

Organized civil society is for the most part deeply engaged with the everyday life of neighborhoods and communities. Basketball or soccer teams from different parts of the city-region play against each other and are celebrated as local heroes. Religious associations honoring local saints generate a strong sense of belonging and support the work of volunteers in the community. Housing associations assist people in acquiring a home. Neighborhood centers help to integrate newcomers into the mainstream of urban life. Lobbying groups bring their concerns to the attention of government, pushing for new legislation. Youth clubs help young people who might otherwise be lost to the street find support among their peers. Organized civil society should thus be seen as a source of civic strength, an asset worthy of public support. Its active role acknowledges the full diversity of the city-region while promoting local citizenship.

The region’s heritage of its built environment and the distinctiveness and vibrancy of its cultural life comprise the third asset cluster. There are two parts to this cluster: physical heritage and the cultural traditions of everyday life. The first refers to historical buildings, distinctive urban neighborhoods, and monuments commemorating past events or personalities. As we think about heritage values, a question is raised about the role of memory in development. It seems to me that one of the reasons why we treasure the relics of bygone eras is that, if we did not, how could we value the future, which itself will soon pass into history? These continuities are important to us as human beings. They are also important in establishing a sense of place.

I would therefore argue that heritage districts are of special significance in the vast expanse of the contemporary urban region. People identify with their neighborhoods before they identify with a region most parts of which they have never visited. For the most part, we live our lives quite locally, not universally, and we treasure the small spaces of the city, its public markets, and local tea rooms, coffee shops, and pubs that are places of encounter. In Canada’s Vancouver, one of the most popular of public spaces is Granville Island, a remarkable adaptation of an old industrial space that draws thousands of local shoppers and tourists day after day the whole year around.
The second part of the cluster is the vibrancy of a city’s cultural life. Here I am thinking chiefly of popular traditions in which people of all ranks and ages participate, which come round each year, and to which we look forward with pleasure. They include festive occasions that mark the passing of the seasons. A three-day festival in Tudela, a small city in northern Spain, is celebrated each year with dancing on the city square, communal breakfasts on tables set out in the streets, and a religious procession, carrying an image of the Virgin around the neighborhoods of her city. Such popular festivities emerge, as it were, spontaneously, year after year. Local traditions, they are both civic and popular occasions that build bonds of solidarity among the people while giving identity to a place. The strength of a region, I would argue, is its people and their ways of life.

The fourth cluster of a city-region’s tangible assets is intellectual and creative: the quality of its universities and research institutes, its local treasury of artisans and artists, intellectuals and scientists, and all others, musicians and writers, poets and film makers, actors and dancers who embody a region’s creative talent. Though small in number, they are essential to a region’s future. The best among them are also the rarest, and to lose them represents an inestimable loss to the city. But creativity must be nurtured. It is important to allow these human treasures to exercise their talents to the fullest. Scientists need research laboratories. Students pursuing advanced degrees require universities that are properly equipped and staffed. Film makers require studio spaces, and artists need galleries to display their work as well as studios in which to produce them. Actors and dancers must have stages to perform their work. And all of them require the freedom to create as they will.

There is much talk these days about a so-called creative class that cities should endeavor to attract (Florida 2005). My argument here is different. Although creativity cannot be induced, creative work requires public support. Market forces alone do not suffice. New ideas and artistic creations are often unpopular, and those who create them tend to march to a different drummer from ordinary people. Cultural and intellectual elites, their presence ensures a city’s capacity for innovation. Professional contacts extend across the globe to other cities, and from these exchanges come new ways of seeing and thinking that add to the city’s liveliness and vigor. It is these elites that are the primary source of informed critical thinking which can be crucial to charting a city’s future.

I turn now to the fifth cluster consisting of a city-region’s natural assets, by which I mean its basic resource endowment: farms, watersheds, lakesides and ocean beaches, picturesque landscapes, forests, and fisheries, whose use is both for production and enjoyment. Natural assets are easily squandered through neglect or thoughtless exploitation. Peri-urban areas are critical spaces in resource management precisely because they are the sites where village and city encounter each other and intermingle in a crazy quilt of land uses. The city’s appetite for land is voracious, not only for new housing and industrial uses, but also for airports, landfills, power plants, amusement parks, suburban shopping malls and strip developments along major highways. What was once a serene landscape of wheat fields, small towns and villages can quickly turn into a fractured environment that, being neither urban nor rural, seems utterly “out of control.” And yet, because the city vitally depends on its natural endowment, its outward expansion must be constrained, and appropriate planning ensure the harmonious development of its richly diverse but often contradictory land uses. City and region stand in symbiotic relation, and so long as this relationship is rightly understood and carefully nurtured, both will
advance together. Where this is not the case, the city’s relentless expansion will threaten to destroy the region’s natural endowment, generating economic, social, and environmental costs that will ultimately undermine its own development.

Closely related to its natural resource endowment is the sixth cluster of assets that we call *environmental*, which includes those qualities of the physical environment that are essential for sustaining life itself, such as the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the capacity of the land to support human settlement at high densities. I will say little about it, because so much has already been written (Keiner 2005; Beatley and Wheeler 2004). But unless we impose what many would consider draconian measures, we will eventually perish in our own wastes. Unfortunately, the message hasn’t sunk in to the extent that it needs to, and lip service to the environment is more common than rigorously enforcing the standards that we know must be applied.

The seventh and final asset cluster is the *quality of urban infrastructure*, which is all the facilities and equipment for transportation, energy, communications, water supply, sewerage, and solid waste disposal that typically swallow up a large portion of a city’s capital budget. There is nothing particularly novel about urban infrastructure as an asset. The question is rather what purposes and social groups are to be served by public works. In a sense, urban/regional infrastructure is supportive of the development of the remaining regional assets while informed by the imperatives of sustainability, cohesion, and governance.

The true wealth of a city—so runs my argument—will be found in the progressive development of its tangible assets through a concerted and sustained effort of its own. Real wealth is not measured by the growth of regional product, a single statistic that hides more than it reveals and is deceptive, because it feeds our predisposition to favor growth over decline, quantity over quality. Different sorts of hard data are needed to assess the state of a region’s true wealth, data that must be collected district by district and even neighborhood by neighborhood to reveal significant variations across space. Overall averages are not very useful for policy analysis, let alone in planning. Each of a city-region’s many assets must be separately evaluated in terms of investments made and the achieved results. Maps showing outcome measures can be produced and shared with a wider public to gain a comprehensive understanding of the existing situation, the results obtained over the past planning period, remaining disparities, and proposed ameliorative measures. Creating a public dialogue around shared information of this sort would create a basis for the next round of planned actions.

Building assets by steadily investing in them will do more for long-term urban and regional development than soliciting investments from global firms into an underdeveloped asset base subject to further degradation. Global capital is indeed highly mobile. It has no stake in the region where it places its money so long as profits are ensured, global markets are conquered. Seducing outside capital by selling off or simply neglecting regional assets leads to an illusory development. It sets up a situation in which eagerly competing city governments inevitably drive down global wages while benefiting only the top one-third of its population.
Part Four: Spatial planning— from master plan to coordinating matrix for urban policies

Now that we have reviewed the three scales of urban policy, the fundamental principles that should inform it, and the focus on a development strategy which aims at the sustained development of a region’s tangible assets, the time has come to ask the question that, in a sense, forms the core of my argument, even though it is only possible to discuss it now. What is the role of spatial planning in the process of urban policy formation for regional development?

Like so many of the terms in this paper, spatial planning has only recently come into wide-spread use in English. More familiar terms, at least for some of us, might be physical planning, or town and country planning, or community and regional planning. In a recent global survey of planning practices that ranged from Japan to the Netherlands, from South Africa to Canada and the United States, I found almost universal acceptance of comprehensive, master planning or its equivalent (Friedmann 2005). In country after country, cities are mandated by national governments to produce master plans that specify future land uses and circulation patterns. Sometimes the criteria and standards of these plans are mandated as well. To become official, plans have to be approved by local councils as well as senior governments. Once approved, they are supposed to serve as a guide for specific land use and location decisions. This form of planning is a completely static practice, however, and needs to be rethought. It is out of step with the dynamic flows of globality that have rendered traditional approaches to physical planning obsolete. There are several reasons for this judgment:

- master plans are typically municipal rather than regional plans;
- they are exclusively concerned with land use (and only incidentally with circulation, which is the primary responsibility of what is usually an autonomous transport agency engaged in its own planning) rather than with the total spectrum of urban policy issues;
- they are drawn up by a specialized branch of municipal government rather than through a wider process of collaborative deliberation;
- the process of drafting master plans and getting them approved takes years, so that they are usually out of date by the time that they become effective;
- they are imposed from above, with relatively little and mostly symbolic citizen participation and other consultative processes; and
- when it comes to major project undertakings—a riverfront redevelopment, a large-scale office and residential complex, a new subway line, a neighborhood revitalization program—master plans are often set aside to allow for the necessary changes in land use and circulation patterns.

In short, master planning turns out to be an exercise in futility, an outdated practice that had its origin in beaux arts architecture that gave birth to it more than a hundred years ago. Architects design blue prints for buildings. But city-regions are not artifacts that can be designed. They are pre-existing, exceedingly complex, and continually changing structural webs of relationships. Although the spatial patterns of regions can be constrained and to some degree shaped by direct interventions, they cannot be simply imposed by the will of
government. Planners deceive themselves if they think that they can guide, let alone build cities according to a plan drawn up by technical experts.

The new term “spatial planning” is therefore not just a change in terminology but a search for a new relevance in the context of urban policy and mega-project design. In short, it proposes a new model of physical planning that can be succinctly described as follows.

- **While** still concerned with location and, more broadly, with spatial relations, the power of spatial planning derives not from its official, mandatory character as in master planning but from its **role as a coordinating instrument closely intertwined with urban policy formation and the design and implementation of large-scale projects.**

- **Spatial planning** has different applications at the three scales of urban policy: neighborhood, municipality, and region. At each scale, it involves an ecology of actors that may include local residents, a wide range of concerned government officials and private stakeholders, as well as representatives of civil society organizations. Across all scales, spatial planning should ideally operate with the same set of basic assumptions about future demographic, economic, and social trends that, as a practical matter, can be taken as “given” for purposes of urban policy and project design.

- The main purpose of spatial planning in this model is not to mandate particular land uses but **to allow for the better coordination of urban policies and large-scale project developments across space, to test alternative policies and designs by looking at their spatial implications, and to allow for an informed public discourse about them.** Like urban policy formation, spatial planning needs to become a more flexible instrument. In the course of considering the spatial consequences of policies and large-scale projects, participants are in fact engaged in an intensive, interactive learning process (Friedmann 1978). Even though written documents play a role in this process, they are not the most important product of spatial planning which instead should be understood and practiced as a process run in “real time. When spatial “plans” are produced in the course of this process, they will for the most part be transitory, provisional documents that, constantly updated, provide a series of snapshots of the globalizing city-region as it evolves under the influence of market forces, collective decisions, and popular resistance.

- **Planners’ professional expertise** is still needed, but in the coordinative processes of spatial policy, they will be working as members of working teams alongside other experts who have different knowledges, interests, and concerns rather than as the hierarchically super-ordinated masters of the arcane art of master planning.\(^9\)

In the preceding paragraphs, I have presented an emerging **model** of spatial planning. But models are abstract, logical creations that do not readily translate into actual practices. I would therefore like to give a brief account of an actual planning process that, although not identical with the model, is a close approximation.

Vancouver, British Columbia, has abandoned comprehensive master planning as the focus of its planning activities. Instead, it has evolved an intensely communicative, real-time process which, over time, has led to the

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\(^9\) With a particular focus on urban regions, Healey (2006) provides insights into how such processes have actually been carried out in Amsterdam, Milan, and Cambridge (U.K.). See also the 20-city survey by Kreukels, Salet, and Thornley (2002).
dramatic transformation of its downtown peninsula, now widely studied as the Vancouver model. The following account is based on a recent study by Leonie Sandercock (2005).

First, some necessary background. Canada is a federal state, and urban policies are a prerogative of the provincial governments. As the economic capital of British Columbia, the country’s western-most province, the city of Vancouver has a population of just under 600,000. It is also the center of a metropolitan region—the Greater Vancouver Regional District—which is four times its size and has its own unique form of government. In 1953, the Province adopted the so-called Vancouver Charter which granted the municipality of Vancouver substantial autonomy over its own affairs.

Municipal political parties are somewhat improvised affairs in Canada, and are generally independent of major political blocks that function as electoral machines at the federal level. In 1972, a reform party, The Electors Action Movement (TEAM) ousted the business-friendly Non-Partisan Association (NPA) that heretofore had dominated city politics. As reported by Leonie Sandercock, “TEAM had a more sensitive approach to development, a more inclusive vision for the future of the city, and [was committed to] a more participatory planning process” (Sandercock op. cit., 2). A Toronto-based planner, Ray Spaxman, was hired as the new director of planning, and thus began a new era of urban development which over the next three decades completely transformed the city from a small provincial city at the far end of the transcontinental railway into a global metropolis where more than 50 per cent speak a language other than English.

A major planning achievement during this period was the redevelopment of Vancouver’s downtown district which not only turned the city towards the water that flowed around its edges but also brought about a dramatic change in the form of its built environment. Within the past ten years, nearly 40,000 people have moved into more than 150 high-rise towers that sprouted within a one-mile radius of the central business district, raising its total population to 80,000. This new forest of glass and steel is also a city of neighborhoods, of green spaces, of mixed use, of schools, shops, and community centers, and of twenty kilometers of continuous seawall for public recreational use encircling the downtown peninsula. Arguably, it is the highest quality urban public realm in North America.

How this transformation of Vancouver’s central district came about reveals a planning culture that is based on a consensual process initiated and led by the local state that involved, in addition to the Municipal Council itself, city planners, architects, developers, and the general public. The recently retired co-director of planning

10 Other accounts of the Vancouver planning story include Olds (2001) and Punter (2003). Sandercock’s account does not include reference to the regional setting and the planning responsibilities of the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD) covering the Lower Mainland. The city of Vancouver is a key member of the GVRD Board which, in addition to land use planning is also responsible for regional water supply, waste management, and transportation.

11 TEAM lasted only a few years in office. But its innovative approach to urban development was taken on board by a restructured Non-partisan Association (NPA) which, compelled by an active citizen movement on the left, moved towards the political center, remaining in power until 2002 when it was replaced by another “left-wing” movement, the Coalition of Progressive Electors (COPE). Spaxman served as planning director for sixteen years, from 1973 to 1989.
responsible for the central city, Larry Beasley, characterized this process in a simple but telling phrase: “What we finally determine to do is the result of thousands of conversations” (Sandercock op.cit., 1).

One of the first steps undertaken by the newly elected TEAM Council under Mayor Art Phillips, a millionaire businessman, was the establishment of a three-person Development Permit Board, chaired by the Director of Planning ex officio. (Today, the chair is no longer the Director of Planning. But the Director of Planning continues to serve as a voting member). The Board was to meet in public and keep minutes of its proceedings, thus giving transparency to its decisions. To work with the Board, the Council also approved an Urban Design Advisory Panel, made up of two representatives each from the development industry, the design professions, and the general public. Thus was brought into being a design-sensitive permit system that has prompted one commentator to acclaim Vancouver as “distinguished by its sustained commitment to deploy civic powers and resources to reshape its urban space, form, and development trajectory” (Hutton 2004, 485).

A milestone in the city’s effort to re-imagine itself was Expo 86, a major “world’s fair” that was sited on a swathe of abandoned industrial land and railway yards on the south shore of the downtown peninsula. The Province had acquired the land in the late seventies from the Canadian Pacific Railway and, shortly after the Expo, decided to sell it. An international sale of this 76 hectares site was organized, based on a financial bid and a specific design concept. Eager to extend his property portfolio to North America, Hong Kong’s wealthiest developer, Li Ka-Shing, had long before sent his son Victor to Vancouver to acquire citizenship and establish himself as a residential developer. This was the beginning of Vancouver’s “Asia connection,” that would ultimately lead to a stream of Chinese immigrants from Hong Kong and the mainland, some of whom would come to reside in the residential towers of the new “Hong Kong on False Creek.” As Sandercock observes, “unlike most waterfront mega-projects elsewhere, from London to Sydney, no special legislation was created to override local planning provisions and processes to give developers what they wanted. On the contrary, the long gestation process of the official development plan of False Creek North…produced design principles…that have shaped all subsequent residential mega-projects in Vancouver and that give the new vertical city its distinctive design, attractiveness of public realm, and attentiveness to social planning issues” (Sandercock op. cit., 39).

Among the social provisions was the planners’ insistence that the new housing would have to set aside 25 percent of all units for families and 20 percent for social (affordable) housing. In addition, neighborhood facilities would have to be provided within each tower complex, such as community centers, primary schools, leisure facilities, and neighborhood shops and offices, as well as a seawall with a 35 foot wide promenade that would link a system of public parks along the entire extent of the project. These and other provisions would be paid for by the developer.12

All this was made possible by a unique process of collaborative planning. Sandercock explains:

The emphasis is on collaboration by teams comprised of developer and city staff to prepare master plans and convert them into official development plans, rezoning plans, and design guidelines rather than on planners preparing concept plans on their own. The developer pays for the creation of a

12 One reason for Concord Pacific’s acquiescence to assume development costs for social facilities was the very low price for which the company acquired the land on which it would build.
dedicated planning team to work full-time on project preparation, while the city works corporately, linking the planning function with other departments (Engineering, Social Planning, Parks) as necessary. Over almost three decades, the evolution of this approach has socialized a new generation of talented designers into a civic-oriented design culture exceptional in North America, producing not only some excellent architecture and urban design...but also an outstanding urban public realm, defined in particular by the public spaces of the seawall itself, the parks strung along and connected by the seawall, and the public art in this area (op. cit., 42).

It is important to note that the evolution of this local planning culture was grounded in an extraordinary public consultation process. Between 1988 and 1993, over 200 public meetings on the False Creek North (the Concord Pacific) project were held with some 25,000 citizens in attendance.\(^{13}\)

Sandercock concludes her story of the remaking of downtown Vancouver with the following comment:

…as a planning model, Vancouver’s shift to discretionary zoning for the Central Area proved crucial in allowing a flexible approach to development proposals. But this discretionary approach is only as good as the technical competence of planning staff and, even more important, of the values shaping the overall planning environment. Here is perhaps the heart of the Vancouver story: over three decades of public debate and slow gestation processes for official development plans, during which intensive design negotiations were undertaken, a unique local planning and design culture has evolved in which not only public sector planners but also designers working for private firms have been socialized into a vision for Vancouver livability and civility, safety and vitality, and have worked collectively to generate the design and planning tools to create such a city (op. cit., 43).

A comparison with the more adversarial planning culture of the United States is inevitable. Canadian culture generally can be characterized by a greater reliance on the state to defend the public interest and to resolve ensuing conflicts with a consensus-building approach involving lengthy negotiations among the contending

\(^{13}\) Extensive citizen participation is becoming more widespread throughout North America. For example, in the attempt to devise a Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP) following the destruction of the city by Hurricane Katrina, the following event took place. “On Saturday,” writes Robert Olshansky, a professor of planning, “was a landmark event: UNOP’s “Community Congress II” involved over 2,500 participants in five cities, electronically linked via the magic of America Speaks. To a planner, the New Orleans Convention Center was a stunning and historic sight. Imagine one thousand people at over one hundred tables, generally representing the demographics and neighborhoods of pre-Katrina New Orleans, all actively engaged in planning conversations with fellow residents. Imagine them electronically linked to halls in four other cities, all doing the same thing. They discussed, voted, and created their own ideas. They did this from 9 am to 4 pm on a Saturday. All they got was a free lunch (some also got a free bus ride or child care). Most participants stayed until the end. This all transpired in a town that supposedly suffers from ‘planning fatigue.’ I dare you to try this at home.

“Community Congress II also had political significance. At the core of UNOP is the idea that citizen voices are important, and that the city needs to have a broad and intelligent conversation regarding its choices. People have heard enough political grandstanding and they are eager to converse. With the success of the Congress, local politicians now have no choice but to support this process. The Mayor, for example, led off the Congress ambiguously, but ended the day with a show of support….” The subjects of risk and [neighborhood] shrinkage are now back on the table, and people are willing to engage in these challenging issues thoughtfully and creatively” (Olshansky 2006).
parties—Larry Beasley’s “thousands of conversations.” It is also more seriously concerned with social issues of urban development and with listening to a multiplicity of voices. Organized civil society is perhaps no stronger in Canada than in the United States, but it is politically more active, in part because it is encouraged to occupy political space at the municipal level. This has shifted Canadian politics, and especially urban politics, to the “left” of the economically dominated planning that rules South of the border.

This story of “planning by conversation” illustrates aspects of the proposed spatial planning model. This aside, “planning by conversation” is a homespun model that grew out of the local political culture, involved enlightened leadership, and an active civil society that welcomed the new forms of planning and its results that emerged. Like every such story, it is a uniquely singular account. At the same time, it demonstrates that successful spatial planning can be shifted away from documents to real-time processes. The story at the regional level, which is not covered here, is more ambiguous. Even so, the existence of a hybrid body such as the GVRD, ensures a level of coordination and decision making that is regional in scope, itself a recognition that cities located in the metropolitan area cannot be “planned” in isolation from each other.14

Part Five: Summary and Conclusions

In this paper, I have by-passed the question of urban policy institutions and guidelines at national and supranational levels, important as they are, arguing that city-regions are the new units for formulating their own policies. This is not to say that senior governments have become irrelevant for cities. But as Brenner (2004) has convincingly argued, there has been a realignment of decision-making powers over the past two decades, with substantial devolution from national levels downward to cities and, at least in Europe, upward to the supranational level of the European Union. Additionally, many of the decisions of intergovernmental bodies with worldwide reach, of which the World Trade Organization is probably the most important, indirectly affect urban fortunes in both positive and negative ways, though they lack a mandate to make urban policies. The interactive network of relations, of which global business is also part, creates a dynamic situation which requires constant adjustments on the part of local governments even though the consequences of their decisions are increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to predict. In short, all of us live today in a high-risk society where there are few certainties, the future is difficult to predict, and the system of contingent decision-making has to be pushed further and further down the hierarchy.

Accordingly, three distinct scales of “urban policy” were identified, with neighborhoods at the smallest scale and the city-region at the largest. In between them, the municipal scale is perhaps the most immediately important because it can be directly linked to the powers of a local state, leaving open the question of whether governance can be pushed, on one hand, still further down to borough and neighborhood levels and, on the other hand, further out to the region. At each scale there are different actors and different modes and procedures of

14 Cooperation across metropolitan regions is a difficult assignment with often mixed results. For European experiences, see Heeg et al. (2003). In an unpublished paper, Andy Thornley proposes four characteristic models for European regions with different impacts on multi-level governance relationships: (1) unitary regional models; (2) dual models of local and regional governance within a regional hierarchy; (3) dual models of local and regional governance with mediating regional government and strongly equipped local government; and (4) functional and ad hoc models (Thornley 2004).
policy formation and planning practice. I suggested that in some ways the most important scale is that of the neighborhood, because the legitimacy of local government ultimately depends on the well-being of the population, and it is in neighborhoods that most of us live.

The argument then continued with a consideration of what urban policies might mean. I divided my argument into two parts. First, I suggested that all urban policies today need to be informed by three imperatives which I identified as ecological sustainability, social cohesion, and democratic governance. Second, I posed a question of strategy: whether to go all-out in enticing in-bound global capital via city branding and mega-projects, or else ensure the long-run viability of the regional economy by investing directly in seven major clusters of its tangible assets. Favoring the second alternative, I then turned to my last question, which is the role of spatial planning in urban policy formation.

Spatial planning has become the new international language for what in many parts is still called comprehensive master planning or its equivalent. The latter practice is based on the notion that cities, and more specifically urban land uses and circulation patterns, can be laid out in two-dimensional space to serve as a guide to city builders over many years, and that planners can, in fact, design the “good city” the way good buildings are designed by architects. Whatever the origin of this practice, it has by now become an “exercise in futility” at a time when nothing stands still for very long, when the future is uncertain, when governments have yielded powers to the private sector, and when governmental decision-making has increasingly been replaced by governance—a system of decision-making that is at once “fluid, consultative, participatory, and deliberative.” Spatial planning is therefore more than a new term for an old practice but a practice that needs to be completely re-thought. It is no longer engaged in laying down a comprehensive pattern of land uses and circulation for the long-term future, but a practice that must intersect with urban policy formation in “real time,” that is through ongoing face-to-face transactions with all relevant stakeholders.

It may be appropriate here to repeat the short paragraph in which this new mission is spelled out:

The main purpose of spatial planning … is not to mandate particular land uses but to allow for the better coordination of urban policies and large-scale project developments across space, to test alternative policies and designs by looking at their spatial implications, and to allow for an informed public discourse about them. Spatial planning, like urban policy formation, needs to become a more flexible instrument. In the course of considering the spatial consequences of policies and large-scale projects, participants are in fact engaged in an intensive, interactive learning process. Even though written documents play a role in this process, they are not the most important product of spatial planning which instead should be understood and practiced as a process that is run in “real time.” Spatial “plans” produced in the course of this process are for the most part transitory, provisional documents that, constantly updated, provide a series of snapshots of the globalizing city-region as it evolves under the influence of market forces and collective decisions (p. 23).
This new spatial planning model is illustrated with a case study of planning the new downtown peninsula of Vancouver, a city that abandoned master planning for a new system in which planning proceeds by way of “thousands of conversations” involving public hearings, bargaining, and negotiations. The widely acclaimed results of this effort over a period of 25 years are testimony to the viability not only of the Vancouver model (with all its peculiarities) but also of the more abstract spatial planning model summarized above.

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References


