

Urban environment: mapping a concept

Introductory note

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- 1 Urban environment is a peculiar term that comes from a field of study drawing on both the social sciences and nature – two important scientific epistemologies – without entirely belonging to either one of them. Since it is often considered by researchers in order to understand the actions and social practices that take place in the urban realm, it may be closer to the social sciences although it also is used in discussions on air, water, soil, climate, vegetation and animal life. Its main area of application is society found within a space characterised by a dense pattern of development and an intensity of social interactions: this is what is implied by urban. It refers to a relatively central, intricate organisation of the lived space (Lussault, 2004) and can include any area ranging from metropolises, urban centres, semi-urban fringes, neighbourhoods, suburbs, to mid-sized towns.
- 2 Pointing to the urban environment involves, in essence, the understanding of modified, transformed, disturbed and recreated environments. It follows that the study of the urban environment focuses initially on research topics normally restricted to the domain of the natural sciences, but at the same time it can describe and analyse actions carried out by social actors. The urban environment is therefore considered from the point of view of social relations, global and local issues, problems that need solving, and outcomes or impacts linked to human activities. The key distinction with regards to the urban environment lies in the way that biophysical elements are examined using methods developed by the social sciences and defined from conceptual categories not drawn from the natural sciences. In the attempt to understand the environment, and looking beyond nature in general, our attention is directed towards the ways in which society is organised and surroundings are shaped. To paraphrase William Cronon, the urban environment can thus be seen as a set of entangled social facts and states of nature (Cronon, 1996).

- 3 A number of revised and still evolving schools and disciplines have interlaced over time to contribute to the emergence of the urban environment concept. It first appeared within the context of urban and land-use planning, because it was a major point of concern for hygienist, reformist or utopian planning movements, which influenced how cities were built at the end of the nineteenth-century (Berdoulay and Soubeyran, 2002). Urban ecology pioneers at the Chicago School of Urban Sociology (Park et al. 1925) provided the impetus for its development, and was later taken up by urban ecosystem thinkers such as Jean Duvignaud (1963), Eugen Odum (1971) or Pierre Dansereau (1973) to name a few. Their work ended up being embodied in a series of notions including the sustainable city, the liveable community, or the ecological footprint. They all sought ways to integrate the social with the ecological aspects, but with limited success. The pilot project lead by Stephen Boyden (1977) on ecological integration in Hong Kong was an attempt to expand our understanding of the complex dynamics that emerge when ecosystem and anthropological approaches are combined. Moreover, the urban environment concept is indebted to international institutions, starting with UNESCO's Man and Biosphere Programme, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), or Habitat II and similar world summits where the sustainable development concept and the Agenda 21 blueprint were first brought into the mainstream.
- 4 Capturing the breadth and depth of the urban environment concept is a collection of papers on urban sustainable development edited by Wheeler and Beatley (2004) that define the field of study. Assuming a relationship connecting the urban environment with sustainable urban development, they trace the concept's origins by delving into the work of Ebenezer Howard (1898), Jane Jacobs (1961) and Ian McHarg (1969). The papers focus on transportation, plant ecology and the restoration of urban areas, energy, architecture and urban planning, and do not fail to include social and economic aspects as well by taking up the issues of environmental equity and social justice.
- 5 Within the same field of study, which is the focus of our journal, the endeavour to map the urban environment concept juxtaposes a host of concerns involving planning, urban governance, landscapes, public policies, public and environmental health, and environmental history, whether they are in relation to qualitative or quantitative methodologies, refer to the deciphering of actors' strategies or to the causal analysis of neighbourhood effects, indeed take interest in peoples' lived experience or individual perceptions.
- 6 Taking an unbiased view regarding the approaches being considered, except for the one taken to ground the issues surrounding the urban environment within complex and dynamic social contexts, and with an allergy towards all forms of ideology, the journal hopes that all published papers will help sustain the development of this conceptual map and give shape to an emerging scientific discipline.

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