

## Geographical Perspectives on Planning the Sustainable City

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On the 16 March 2010 a 3-hour workshop entitled ‘*Towards Convergence or Divergence in Planning the Sustainable City?*’ took place within the UCL Bartlett School of Planning. The workshop was attended by 28 participants, representing a diverse cross-section of PhD students, academic staff and research associates from the following departments and institutes:

- Development Planning Unit
- Bartlett School of Planning
- Geography
- UCL Urban Laboratory
- Energy Institute
- School of Eastern European and Slavonic Studies
- Civil, Environmental and Geomatic Engineering

The generous support of the Bridging the Gaps grant also enabled the participation of Dr. Tim Bunnell from the National University Singapore’s Asia Research Institute, who acted as an external discussant. Dr. Bunnell’s contribution provided a unique, fresh outlook to some of the key themes and challenges that the UCL-based participants raised and debated; particularly the challenges of capitalizing on the diversity of sustainability-oriented knowledge production and circulation in an interdisciplinary, and international, research environment.



Traffic in Mumbai (Photo: Andrew Harris)



Mankhurd Rubbish Dump, Mumbai (Photo: Andrew Harris)

The structure of the workshop was framed around the question of whether as researchers and colleagues we are part of a convergence or divergence in urban sustainability knowledge and practice. This stems from the observation that on the one hand, particular policies and models of sustainable urbanism have come to dominate, regardless of geographic specificity, generating checklists of accepted and promoted best practice. On the other hand, it is possible to identify and highlight a tremendous diversity in how ‘sustainability’ is conceptualised and so called ‘best practices’ adopted and adapted to specific contexts. Moreover, in recognition of the interdisciplinarity of sustainable cities research, the workshop questioned the ability of a shared vocabulary alone to incite effective communication across disciplinary boundaries. The workshop was also initiated in order to challenge participants to reflect on their own roles in reinforcing dominant narratives of sustainable urbanism and the propensity for these to ‘travel’ through particular types of global networks (including Higher Education).

Interested participants were provided with 3 indicative readings and a set of guiding questions, via a workshop-specific Moodle page. To help ‘kick-start’ the interdisciplinary debate we invited three senior staff members from the disciplines of planning, development planning and geography, which we had initially identified as ‘core’ in this subject area. Professor Yvonne Rydin (Bartlett School of Planning), Professor Matthew Gandy (UCL Geography) and Adriana Allen (Development Planning Unit) each provided a 10-minute commentary on the ‘state’ of urban sustainability-relevant inquiry ongoing within their disciplines and departments, and their personal perspectives on the pitfalls, challenges and opportunities for improved collaboration and impact in reimagining the sustainable city.

Key registers in these opening commentaries included discussion of the cleavages between normative and analytical approaches to conceptualising the sustainable city. This interchange of ideas generated thoughts on the extent to which the universalised norms of good practice and policy can be married with theoretically-significant local place variations and knowledge production. Debate also emerged from these initial commentaries on the networks of ‘experts’ by which the few idealised (and oversimplified) models and approaches to planning sustainable cities have converged and come to dominate urban sustainability agendas, quite aside from concerns for geographical specificity and cultural appropriateness. The open debate with all participants proved to be incredibly far ranging – from the role of experts and local knowledge, place-based theorisations and issues of complexity to the functioning of financial markets and crises of over- and under-consumption in global terms. Indeed, weaving a singular narrative through these intersecting themes proved incredibly difficult in the wake of this workshop, but this in itself is telling.

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