

Perspective

# Sustopia or Cosmopolis? A Critical Reflection on the Sustainable City

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**Abstract:** A broader perspective on the role of cities and their relation to their inhabitants and the planet is essential to effectively answer urgent sustainability questions that emerge in and beyond cities. This essay provides a critical reflection on the notion of the sustainable city. The central question discussed is: how can the ideal of a sustainable city be best conceptualised? Through exploring historic and contemporary theories on the urban-nature-people relationship and analysing some current sustainable city projects with the help of Cultural Theory, it is argued that creating a sustainable city paradoxically means parting with Sustopia. Sustopia often turns into Dystopia when a single perspective on constructing a sustainable city becomes dominant. In order to assist the process of meaningfully conceptualising the sustainable city, the notion of Cosmopolis is re-explored. This notion of a city embraces creativity, critical practice, adaptation, and it places urban development and planning in a context of multiple spatial and temporal scales.

**Keywords:** urban sustainability; cultural theory; perspectives; urban-nature relationship; urban development; critical theory

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## 1. Introduction

Cities are inherently ambiguous systems: They are benefiting the safety, health and well-being of people and harming these values at the same time [1]. They are impacting the integrity of natural ecosystems and adding novel ecosystems to the planet [2]. They are unsustainable resource gobbling hubs and they are a window of opportunity for bringing about a sustainable planet [1,3]. Central in the ambiguity of the city-system is the urban-nature relationship and the role of citizenship herein.

Even though these ambiguities are fundamental to the character and role cities play with respect to the planet, contemporary governance practice involved with sustainable urban development hardly ever takes them into account. The image of The Sustainable City seems to have become *the* widely embraced *ideal* of 21st Century urban development [1,4–10]. It will be argued, however, that due to the inherently ambiguous character of cities, realizing the ideal Sustopia is bound to fail, just as any other historical Utopian ideal has failed and rather resulted in Dystopia. As Lewis Mumford phrased in 1965: “compared with even the simplest manifestations of spontaneous life within the teeming environment of nature, every utopia is, almost by definition, a sterile desert, unfit for human occupation ([11], p. 278)”, and will lead to “arrested development ([11], p. 278)”.

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that cities provide potential for increasing planetary sustainability in many ways [1,3,4]. Therefore, this essay provides an exploration of the question how the ideal of a sustainable city can be realized while taking into account the inherently ambiguous character of the city-nature-people relationship. Parting with the notion of Sustopia can evolve into a more pragmatic conceptualisation of the 21st Century sustainable city; a conceptualisation that includes the chaotic and dynamic processes of a globalising world and does justice to human well-being as a

fundamental value that can be advanced through critical citizenship [12–14]. In order to guide the conceptualization process, the city-nature-people relationship will be explored through the lens of the ancient notion of Cosmopolis. This notion still has the power to embrace creativity, critical practice, adaptation, and it places urban development in multiple spatial and temporal scales. Including the complexities that link the local (urban) to the global scale is imperative for realistic planning for sustainable cities. In order to facilitate a deeper discussion on cities that are both environmentally and socially sustainable, two theoretical schools are combined: Critical Theory of the Frankfurter Schule and Cultural Theory.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The essay is based on an interdisciplinary literature review including literature from a variety of disciplines, such as philosophy, history, sociology, (urban) ecology, urban theory, and sustainability science. This means that the assessed literature is not exhaustive but rather channels towards a perspective grounded in these sources. Through a Critical Theory lens [13–17] the first part of the essay sketches a general historical development of the city-nature relationship and the place of citizens and citizen empowerment and identifies some general trends in conceptualising the sustainable city. In the second part, a number of contemporary sustainable city projects have been reflected through a heuristic framework provided by Cultural Theory [18–24] as pioneered by Mary Douglas, Michael Thompson [21,25] and developed further by other scholars, mainly in the field of sustainability science [19,20,22,24,26–29]. The last part of the essay shows the relevance of integrating both schools of thought. It reflects on how the revival of the notion of Cosmopolis can alleviate the dystopic problems of Sustopia that emerge from following a dominant Cultural Theory perspective pathway when it is not firmly integrated with assets and values of the other perspectives.

## 3. A Critical Theory Perspective on the History of the City-Nature Relationship

Early ways of conceptualising the city are still meaningful when seeking to understand the role contemporary cities can play for planetary sustainability and human well-being. Therefore, let us first plunge into an iconic reflection on the morphology of ancient and medieval cities. These cities have been ingrained with archetypical concepts of what the Good City is, or ought to be [30] and help us understand the way we conceptualise our contemporary cities.

### 3.1. *Mappa Mundi: The Good City and the Cosmic Scale*

Historian Lewis Mumford [11,31,32] describes how in the time of the flourishing of Egyptian and Mesopotamian culture, but also in the civilisations of the Incas and the Aztecs, and in ancient Asia, the city was created by a king who acted in the name of god. The first thing the king did during his time of rule was erect a temple. This temple was enclosed by walls to protect it from outside forces (both hostile people and wildlife). At the same time, the walls aimed to concentrate, protect and employ the community living in the proximity of the temple. As such, cities were the outcome of the act of creating a safe and sacred place [11].

In Ancient Greece, rather than protecting people within the city from the outside world, the city was centred on human relationships within the city. Plato saw the city state (Polis) as a place where relationships are fostered between people to help each other to participate in ‘the Good’ [33]. At the same time, Plato drew a comparison between the Polis and the human body where the human limbs and faculties represented the larger scale arrangements and order of the ‘cosmic body’. In Platonic and in later medieval times, the city was seen as a micro-cosmos that reflected the larger structure and order of the divine macro-cosmos: Cosmopolis [30,34]. In Plato’s Cosmopolis, the centre of the city represented the highest order of the moral hierarchy (high reason, represented by the governing ‘head’ located in the citadel), whereas towards the fringes and outside of the city, the lower moral ‘faculties’ (or limbs) were represented, from sentries to farmers and wild, uncivilised nature outside the city walls. Achieving the highest ‘Good’ becoming a Philosopher King, or a little later for Aristotle, realising one’s

true human potential [14] was possible only through the symbolic and social geographies embedded in the structural and physical geography of the Polis [11,14,30,33,34].

In 12th Century Europe, urban life was rapidly expanding. In this time, Platonic and Aristotelian thought was flourishing within Christian thinking and it highly influenced writing, thinking and architecture: building the image of the ‘Good City’ in the shape of cathedral towns [30,34]. Medieval maps (Mappa Mundi) often show a world that is placed over the body of Christ. Many maps of the city of Jerusalem, for example, show its circle of walls and gates opening towards the four corners of the wind, presenting the city itself as Christ’s navel; the centre of the world [30,34]. As Lilley [34] describes in his symbolic deconstruction of the medieval city, the geometry of cities was key to the path to God. Not only the physical urban structure often a walled circular shape with a church in the centre and main roads connecting the (divine) centre with the (lower) peripheries played a symbolic role, but also Christian rituals such as processions from the city-periphery to the centre symbolised the path to God. Churches were usually placed in the centre of the city-cosmos. The medieval city was symbolically constructed as Cosmopolis to reflect the divine hierarchical order, consisting of microcosms within a macrocosm [30,34].

### 3.2. Cosmopolis and the City-Nature Dichotomy

In the Cosmopolis concept [34], the city became unified with the ‘divine’ (Logos or ratio) and the cosmos. Paradoxically, the Cosmopolis concept helped separating the ‘higher city’ from the ‘lower nature’ outside the city walls. With the Cosmopolis concept, the world outside the city borders was placed on a lower level in the moral hierarchy. This is also reflected in the story about Utopia referred to by Mumford [11]: “the very first act of King Utopus, when he invaded the land of Utopia, was to put his soldiers and the conquered inhabitants to work digging a broad canal that turns the territory into an island and cuts it off from the mainland ([11], p. 277)”. The urban hinterland represented the wild, the untamed and the uncivilised. The city gates or canals protected the urban inhabitants from the savage outside world and invaders of any kind [35].

In his influential book *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (1992), philosopher Stephen Toulmin describes how the concept of Cosmopolis is still strongly present in Western philosophy, science and society [36]. During the Scientific Revolution the notion of Cosmopolis changed into an image of rational, calculable and manageable structure; the basis of progress, which finally culminated into the emergence of the cities of the Industrial Revolution [36]. Progress framed in industrial terms eventually led to the global sustainability issues we are facing today. It inversed the character of the nature-city dichotomy: since Romantic criticism on the industrialisation of life took off in the late 19th Century, cities themselves are often seen as ‘the Bad’ and the ‘Ugly’ [32,37]: the disrupter of human well-being, non-compliant with respect to evolutionary human nature itself [38,39]. Desmond Morris describes in his book *The Human Zoo* [38] that many cities have grown into places that are not made by their inhabitants anymore, but structurally turn their citizens into sick, dumb, depressive, and aggressive captive animals [38]. The age of materialism that emerged during the Industrial Revolution contributed to the loss of a cosmic scale perspective on the city-nature relationship, as the societal focus turned into managing urgent and immediate issues and crises of human well-being and health [40]. The city turned from the place to achieve ‘the Good’ into a place of moral decline, filth, sickness, and ugliness. Pollution, crowds, noise, dangerous traffic, a lack of aesthetics, a lack of green and also ‘inhumane’ architecture are often blamed for lack of well-being on the physical sphere [41]. The rush of life, individualism and superficiality of many social relations in cities are blamed for lack of well-being in the relational sphere [38,42].

Nature in these times turned from the ‘wild untamed and uncivilised beast’ into something innocent and pure to turn to for relieve of the urban stresses [43]. To cure some of the diseases that thrived well in the filthy crowded and socially unequal urban environment of the Industrial Revolution [44], people who could afford it went into retreat in the mountains for rehabilitation. The way to physical, relational and spiritual salvation was to be found in nature [37]. Also, people

started to bring nature into cities. Motivations for urban greening based on health and human well-being helped to constitute urban green-spaces, making them suitable for leisure, regeneration and exercise [32,45,46]. Therefore, large open spaces were created [42]. The greening of Paris and the construction of Parks in London, for example [46,47], emphasised the regenerative qualities and powers of sunlight and greenery for stressed, ill, or hard-working citizens [34,42,48,49].

### 3.3. Allowing Nature into Cities: Creating a New Order

The early allowance of nature into cities usually represented an idealisation of the Ancient and Medieval cosmic and moral order expressed through gardening practice and design: many influential parks and gardens in Western history have been designed based on geometric principles reflecting and symbolising the divine order and celebrating God as an ‘architect’ of the cosmos [34]. Great examples are the medieval monastery gardens or the gardens of Versailles in France. Later, as a contrast to the rapid urbanisation of the 19th century, and based on Romantic ideas of the goodness of nature, gardens or parks are seemingly allowed to be wilder [42]. Often their design has been based on principles reflecting an ideal human-nature relationship of harmony and aesthetic beauty (e.g., Victorian gardenesque-, picturesque- or cottage gardens) [23,50,51]. In the late 19th Century, the garden city was introduced by Sir Ebenezer Howard in the United Kingdom. Garden cities were highly and artfully planned smaller cities combining a ‘healthy’ balance of residential areas, industry and agriculture, being surrounded by greenbelts [45,52].

As Philip Sheldrake phrases in an article about the relation of the city and the human spirit: “cities have always been powerful symbols of how we understand and construct community [53]”. Whether the design or development of a city takes a ‘greyer course’ or a ‘greener course’, it can always be linked to a “never ending process of creating order ([42], p. 9)”. Urban sociologists Kingsley Davis stated that “the sine qua non of urban existence is the concentration in one place of people who do not grow their own food ([54], p. 430)”. Currently, not only nature is allowed into cities, there is an emerging global trend of growing food in cities [23,55,56]. In our contemporary megacities where manufactured food is shipped in from anonymous megafarms, re-connecting people with ‘real’ and ‘healthy’ food through urban farming is increasingly attractive to many people, and in some cases even a healthier way to survive when access to expensive manufactured foods becomes limited through crisis or urban food-deserts [57]. This trend seems to turn upside down Kinsley’s statement about the character of cities. Does the popularity of urban greening and urban farming herald a new reordering of cities and what it means to be a citizen?

In his essay called *The Right to the City*, geographer David Harvey (2003) pleas for a “right to remake ourselves by creating a qualitatively different kind of urban sociality ([58], p. 939)”. In critical urban theory ‘the right to the city’ is a central notion [13]. Critical urban theory calls for a reflexive attitude towards urban development and to evaluate it in the context of existing or emerging power-regimes and structures [13,16]. This sociological movement is founded in the Kritische Theorie of the Frankfurter Schule where influential thinkers like Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse and Habermas, amongst others, reflected on how societal trends and institutions were shaped in the context of post-war capitalism [15,16]. The scholars of the Frankfurter Schule aimed to demarcate an alternative sociology by finding an alternative to bourgeois philosophy on the one hand and to technocratic approaches to social science on the other hand [15,16]. In their ‘critique of the instrumental reason’, the critical theorists deconstructed and criticized the positivist idea of instrumental science that aimed to make “institutional arrangements more effective, to manipulate and dominate the social and physical world ([16], p. 202)”. Critical urban theorists demonstrate that the established ‘regime’ is fundamentally ignoring deeper questions about the causes of the global crisis which is considered to be rather systemic (including human norms and value systems) than purely economic [13,16,58–61]. Science is often instrumentally employed to legitimise the power of the regime [62–64], but it can also be employed to question its legitimacy and appropriateness. Critical theorists the ‘classical’

critical thinkers as well as the recent ones emphasise the exploration of democratic and emancipatory alternatives of organising social capacities and human-nature relations [14,16].

Urban critical theory explores normative questions of power and knowledge in the context of contemporary urban development in a globalising world [16]. It contrasts the technocratic approach to urban sociology of the influential Chicago School, the cradle of urban sociology [42] and criticises the way science is often employed to legitimize policies that are constituted in the context of a neoliberal global system [13].

Pointing to new slogans such as the ‘global city’ [65], the ‘smart city’ [66] the ‘world city’ [67], or ‘networked cities’ [62,68], urban critical theorists unravel the way contemporary information, knowledge and power structures strengthen urban issues. Examples of such unravelling can be seen in the identification of the (ancient) unequal development between city centres and the periphery [69], spatial polarisation [59], marginalisation and exclusion [13] or access to facilities and resources such as healthy food or green spaces [70,71]. In the words of Eduardo Mendieta, “all critical urban theory tears at the Potemkin façades of neoliberal megapolises of affluence and megaurbs of destructive accumulation to unveil the realities of squalor and dispossession so that we may claim our place in the properly human polis ([14], p. 444)”.

The global uncertainties we experience now involving amongst others climate change, failing capitalism, failing democracy, civil unrests, terrorism, over-population, and ecological degradation characterise a world in crisis, or more positively expressed: transition [72]. As a reaction to this changing world the role of urban areas and urban sustainability has recently been put prominently on the Global Agenda again [73]. Based on the literature review above, three historically dominant responses can be identified in thinking and planning for sustainable urban development [20,22,23,74]. (1) *A planners’ perspective* reflecting the human search for order, structure and policy-regulation of factors that harm human well-being; (2) *A subversive citizen perspective* reflecting people’s revolutionary powers by creatively resisting existing order and structures that hamper human well-being and principles of equity and equal access to the urban ‘goods’; (3) *A laissez-faire perspective* reflecting the entrepreneurial spirit of people and the ideal to find prosperity and human well-being within free and unlimited economic growth. These responses are in an enduring interplay and ‘struggle’ for power and are still apparent in contemporary urban policy, planning and development. In the next paragraph, a Cultural Theory approach is applied to some illustrative contemporary sustainable urban development cases in order to help unravel the more specific power structures brought forth by these three dominant perspectives on The Sustainable City.

## 4. Unraveling the Sustainable City with Cultural Theory

### 4.1. Cultural Theory

Cultural Theory (CT) offers a way of identifying archetypal perspectives in discourse and practices by looking at various styles of worldview and management strategies [21–23]. It discerns hierarchist, egalitarian and individualist perspectives and also the autonomous, fatalist and dynamic perspectives [23] (see Table 1). The three main urban development trends identified above (*planners’ perspective*, *subversive citizen perspective*, *laissez-faire perspective*) fit very well into the first three perspective categories of Cultural Theory, respectively the individualist, the hierarchist and the egalitarian perspectives.

**Table 1.** Map of the six Cultural Theory Perspectives.

	<b>Hierarchist</b>	<b>Egalitarian</b>	<b>Individualist</b>	<b>Fatalist</b>	<b>Autonomous</b>	<b>Dyn. Int.</b>
Social relations	Hierarchically nested groups, power relations	Egalitarian-bounded groups	Ego-focussed networks, competitive relations	Involuntary exclusion, relations determined by others	Deliberate withdrawal, no involvement in coercive relations	Deliberate combination, pluralistic relations
Myth of nature	Perverse/ tolerant: Nature is robust within limits	Ephemeral: Nature is fragile	Resourceful: Nature is a resource without limits	Capricious: No rhyme or reason	Benign: Nature is a pure, giving, living entity	Resilient: Nature is dynamic & complex system
Idea of Human Nature	Sinful but redeemable by good institutions	Good but corruptible by evil institutions, malleable	Self-seeking and very stable, unmalleable	Unpredictable—some are benevolent, more are hostile	Good but ignorant	Human nature is complex and dynamic
Directing Principle	Law/Legislation	Fairness/Justice	Needs/wants/preferences	Providence	Love, Dignity	Integrity
Activity	Policy	Civil Disobedience	Technological Innovation	Passivity	Self-Realisation	Integrated Assessment
Knowledge Epistemology	Empiricism & Expertise	Art & Poetry & Lay/Indigenous Knowledge	Experimentation & Exploration & Innovation	Agnostic/Opinion	Meditation & Prayer & Intuition & ‘Verstehen’	Integrated Assessment
Sustainability model	Regulating people, planet and profit	Planet & People first	Profit is prerequisite for people and planet	Survival of the fittest	Planet first	Integrating people, planet and profit
Risk Approach	Risk averse—involuntary dangers imposed on people not acceptable	Acceptable risks dealt with in community	Opportunity for personal reward	Avoid personal risk and cope with imposed risks	Acceptance of perceived risks for personal learning	Risk anticipating
Management attitude	Monitoring & controlling	Support & guidance	Leadership/ Innovation	Coping	Personal enlightenment	Co-evolution & engaging
Management style	Control	Prevention/Precaution	Engagement/Lobbying	Coping	Retreat	Adaptation
Management priority	Political and social stability	Protection of the weaker	Prosperity	Why bother?	Harmony	Dynamic Balance
Resource management strategy	Differential maintenance: Needs are prescribed. Collective resources can be increased by certified experts	Sharing: Needs are managed by sharing and fair distribution	The winner takes it all: Increase both needs and resources as far as entrepreneurial skill will allow	Survival by coping: Cannot manage needs or resources therefore must simply cope	Simplicity and abstemiousness: Resources are fixed so one person's gain is another person's loss	Needs and resources determined on principles of integrated assessment
CC Risk perception	Medium, less urgent	High, urgent	Low	Low/ why does it matter?	High, urgent	Medium/high
Climate change causes	Lack of global governance and planning	Profligate production and consumption	Sceptical towards scientific consensus	Inevitable human/ natural processes	Lack of oneness with nature	Mix of causes
CC Management	International agreements, imposed by states on consumers and producers	Strict precautionary principle. Rapid reduction in emissions. Decentralization of decision making	Innovative business as usual. Perhaps internalisation of environmental costs	Life goes on. Take advantage of windfalls in resources	Individual voluntary simplicity.	Clumsy solutions
Cost distribution	Common responsibility for costs, distributed across global society	Costs should be borne by the richest. Strict polluter pays principle	Costs distributed by free market	Costs of adaptation borne by those who need to adapt. It is just bad luck	Low individual costs when going off the grid	Collective agreement based on cooperative stakeholder dialogue
Economy as a driver of/response to CC	Contributing driver, contributing response	Main driver of climate change, inappropriate response	Not a driver, main response	Globalisation and climate change seen as inevitable processes	Driver, retreat from global economic system & consumption as response	Contributor and part of possible response



- (1) *Hierarchism: the planner's perspective*: how can cities actively be planned, governed and re-structured in a green and sustainable way to alleviate all the adversities from the global crises? The *hierarchist* perspective can be characterised by a high level of social and systemic compliance with a management style dominated by top-down planning, control and maintaining order.
- (2) *Egalitarianism: the subversive citizen perspective*: how (far) can citizens take back control of their lives and increase their and their fellow citizen's well-being through participating in citizen led subversive action? The *egalitarian* perspective is characterised by striving for societal unity, emancipation and protection of the weaker against the powerful status quo. Strategies to go by are revolutionary activism, participatory initiatives and (creative) civil disobedience.
- (3) *Individualism: the laissez-faire perspective*: how (far) can the government retreat and leave urban development to the market and (more or less facilitated) citizen participation in order to cut costs? The *individualist* perspective is led by the notion of individual responsibility and the power of innovation and entrepreneurial creativity. Rejecting top-down government interference it sees a major role for markets to lead development and innovation.

As Marco Verweij and his colleagues [22] argue, none of the perspectives on their own can be the basis of a well-functioning society [22]. Even though the perspectives are conflicting in nature, separating them is only a heuristic construction that may be useful to better understand the world in unravelling its complexity. In real life there will always be a mix of perspectives defining worldviews and practices [22,23]. However, sometimes one of the perspectives can be dominant in the mix [23]. In this part of the paper it will be discussed with some case examples of urban development how these three perspectives, when becoming dominant, can potentially lead to dystopic situations. The cases discussed below are selected on a basis of accessibility, prominence and expected perspective differences.

## 4.2. Three Perspectives On the Sustainable City

### 4.2.1. Hierarchism: The Planners' Perspective in Dongtan and Tianjin

As an answer to expected energy crises and climate change, eco-cities have become an important focus of urban policy, planning and research agendas of moving towards a low-carbon economy [75]. Traditionally, cities often developed more or less gradually around industrious activities of communities which made urban planners develop and design parts of cities step by step. Currently, especially in the Middle East and Asia, a new trend can be identified of designing and constructing complete cities from scratch. According to Rapoport [76] many of such 'flagship' eco-city projects like Masdar in Abu Dhabi, Songdo in Korea, and Dongtan near Shanghai in China and the Sino-Singapore project Tianjin "come to see and promote themselves as 'models' of sustainable urban form, examples which should be replicated around the world ([76], p. 143)". Keeton [77] describes how Tianjin would be a model for hundreds of new Chinese towns which are due to be constructed over the next decades [76,77].

Even though some new and designated eco-cities are bound to flourish and thrive, especially Dongtan and Tianjin became leading examples of where the sustainability dream rather turned into a nightmare. Dongtan was supposed to become a World Expo model for what it means to build an eco-city and it was meant to house the emerging Chinese middle class [75]. However valued the idea, Dongtan became a model of how an eco-city should rather *not* be built. The design was celebrated globally, but the completion of the city mainly failed because of corruption and funding issues, and the lack of community engagement largely brought on by the displacement of farmers and other people that originally had their livelihoods at the location [78]. The high design focus was bound to make the planners forget about the people that ultimately make up a city. As Julie Sze [79] writes in her analysis of what went wrong in Dongtan: "Sustainability takes power and people seriously, rather than as an afterthought to the techno-fetishism that eco-desire inhabits, glorifies, and draws its breath from [79]". A critical analysis by Caprotti [75] of the other 'flagship' eco-city project Tianjin confirms this analysis by emphasising that "the internal social resilience and the emergence of communities

within newly-built eco-cities needs to be assessed ([75], p. 10)". Caprotti finds that many eco-cities are bound to become rather exclusive, high-tech gated luxury communities which are not accessible for the middle class, or for the often large populations of low-paid (migrant) workers who build these cities [75]. Another often neglected issue is the connectivity to the original local and regional socio-economic and geographical context. This turned out to become disastrous for the Tianjin project. Even though some people moved to live there already, mobility and infrastructural problems, lack of facilities, lack of diverse employment opportunities and pollution caused by the surrounding industries are some of the factors contributing to this 'well-planned' eco-city rather becoming a ghost-town [75]. Devastatingly, in August 2015 two big chemical explosions close to the Tianjin project killed over a hundred people, ending the eco-city dream abruptly [80].

In Dongtan and in the Tianjin project, the idea of sustainability was used as a 'planner's' blueprint for the ideal city. However, sustainability principles were employed in a technocratic way, not taking into account the displacement of original residents of the area; not taking into account the aspects that are necessary for people to actually live there and make a living through employment opportunities; not taking into account the risky connection to the surrounding industrial context. Egalitarian and individualist principles were neglected.

#### 4.2.2. Egalitarianism: The Subversive Citizen Perspective in Detroit and Chicago

In times of crisis, increased civil activity in fostering subversive solutions to detrimental circumstances can be identified [23,42]. Detroit and Chicago are two cities which immensely suffered from the 2008 economic crisis. Citizens tried to mitigate the physical decline and lack of financial resources and healthy food by starting urban farming initiatives. Both cities can now be called the global capitals of urban farming and many articles and online sources are available on the positive and negative aspects of urban agriculture in these cities [55,81–83].

Practices such as urban farming in this context represent ways of (re)making cities as "cities for people, not for profit ([59], p. 371)". Urban farmers who take back their 'right to the city', may be called pioneers of critical practice [16] and demonstrate how small and local scale positive action can inspire new positive action and creativity all over the world [84]. Chicago and Detroit are examples of how the economic crisis, which hit hard in these industrial cities, fuelled bottom-up urban farming practices that helped reduce food-deserts, alleviated the feeling of despair and brought citizens together [81]. However, especially when coming from dire straits situations, there are some potential problems with citizen driven urban farming. Such civil ad-hoc action may not include a long-term vision for the improvement of urban living conditions and can also have detrimental short and long-term effects. Often the soil used for urban farming is contaminated by industry, traffic and construction residues [85]. Crops are also often affected by air pollution [85,86]. In particular, lead and mercury contamination of soil and water is a problem for human health [85]. Also, the use of untreated sewage water can be detrimental for health [83]. Air pollution from traffic and industrial emissions can also contribute to the contamination of produced food with oxidants, sulphur dioxide, fluoride and ammonia [86]. This makes citizen-driven action such as urban farming a risk for increased illness of producers and consumers of urban grown foods. The unregulated use of drinking water for agricultural produce can also be problematic, especially in cities in more arid regions [87].

These potential problems show that for effectuating a sustainable urban living environment, there is a need for balancing citizen participation including bottom-up ways of increasing equal access to green resources and food (egalitarian perspective) at the one hand and some amount of visionary long-term planning including government-led approaches to decrease the health risks caused by urban based soil, water and air pollution (hierarchist perspective).

#### 4.2.3. Individualism: The Laissez-Faire Perspective within Urban Labs

After the economic crisis started in 2008, many European municipalities started experimenting with so called Urban Labs. Cities, parts of cities or governmental areas are turned into experimental



zones where citizen engagement and creative entrepreneurship are encouraged to collaboratively work on finding creative solutions to urban sustainability issues that would traditionally fall under urban planning and governance. According to Paskaleva et al. [88] these “new ways of engaging with the stakeholders are necessary to provide them with not just better access and inclusion but also to empower them to act as a catalyst in transforming the dynamics of city services as well ([88], p. 45)”. Tying into concepts such as low-carbon cities, smart cities, green cities, or creative cities, public-private partnerships are forged in order to experiment with new forms of urban governance [89]. The idea of the Creative City was coined by David Yencken in 1988 [90]. It heralded a new view of urban planning and development, where ordinary people can help finding extraordinary solutions for urban developmental issues. In a creative city skill-variety, ideas, talented people, and creative institutions are all mobilized [90]. Creative citizenship is often cornerstone of the Urban Lab initiatives.

Currently, Europe is funding a number of Urban Lab projects under JPI Urban Europe [91] in order to learn from the variety of experimental urban government modes in cities ranging from Amsterdam (The Netherlands) to Espoo (Finland). Another example is the Central European Creative Cities network of Gdansk, Genoa, Leipzig, Ljubljana and Péc, that benefitted from EU funding in order to “improve public policies in order to strengthen cooperation between businesses and other economic sectors, to boost skills and to support entrepreneurs and start-ups [92]”. Fostering local connections between public parties, private parties and civil society have to lead towards creative entrepreneurship and social and economic innovation. An example of such dynamics can be found in Maastricht. Maastricht, participant in the JPI Europe project URB@EXP, has an Urban Lab—Maastricht-LAB that runs parallel with traditional municipal planning and governance. Maastricht-LAB operates in the field of finding new ways to govern urban space. After the 2008 crisis, the city decided to cut spending on the urban green infrastructure. Maastricht-LAB now has the role of engaging and facilitating individual citizens to take the lead on this task. Citizens and entrepreneurs can adopt canopy-driplines of urban trees, roundabouts, or take initiative for planting and maintaining high quality flora in municipal green space that has been impoverished due to the financial cuts.

Even though this development seems rather egalitarian, an emerging dominant view on the role and character of Urban Labs, creative cities and creative citizenship can be criticized from an egalitarian subversivity perspective at the same time. This dominant view is outlined clearly in a paper by Hospers and Pen [93] and Florida [94]. These authors argue that the creative city should basically help politicians to advance competitiveness on the ‘global city market’ and stimulate economic growth by facilitating the reduction of local government spending and maintenance of urban green. From a critical perspective, such motives for market institutionalisation of civil creativity need to be monitored with critical caution. With mainstreaming and institutionalising bottom-up initiatives like urban agriculture, urban greening and gardening into local markets, access to public goods such as green space will shift towards citizens with the means and capacities (such as skills, time and resources) to participate. In urban areas or neighbourhoods where such means and capacities lack, there is a high risk of deterioration of the quality of the public (green) space.

Potential emancipatory creativity can be employed to maintain and feed the status quo of a market driven society where governments retreat, global corporations rule, protection of the weaker fades, environmental health declines, and where people have to solve their own problems without facilitation delivered by democratically chosen representatives [95]. Creative cities and Urban Labs run the risk, when not combined with a long-term vision and planning perspective, of becoming pioneering the geographies of “Actually Existing Neoliberalism [96]”. Institutionalised citizen and entrepreneur participation can be austerity in disguise, creating inequalities instead of reducing them. At the same time, the quality of the environment is becoming dependent on ad-hoc initiatives: it may suffer from a lack an underlying vision for a structural and sustainable way of increasing the environmental quality of life for both people and non-human urban residents (biodiversity).

## 5. Cosmopolis Revisited: Playing at the Edge of Chaos

Plato said: “this city is what it is because our citizens are what they are”. The central question elaborated in this essay was: how can the ideal of a sustainable city be best conceptualised? As the examples above illustrated, a ‘Good City’—a sustainable city is everything but a blueprint of Sustopia (the hierarchist planners’ perspective). Sustainability is also impossible when simply relying on ad-hoc citizen initiatives without a clear structural future vision, independent of the question whether the initiatives are authentic citizen action (egalitarian subversiveness) or rather austerity measures in disguise. A sustainable city consciously includes a dynamic variety of the different perspectives. Consciously embracing a diversity of perspectives also includes embracing a diversity of actors. Not only people interact in cities. Cities are also places beyond any nature-culture dichotomy. According to Bruno Latour, we are embedded in multi-actor networks of ‘associations’ [97]. This postmodern conception of dynamic trans-social relations that includes people in all their perspective diversity and different activity, nature in all its forms, and also artefacts, technologies, infrastructures and ideas is not yet very much reflected in how sustainable cities are developed and designed today. Nourishing and cherishing the interplay of a diversity of perspectives and non-homogeneous actors is imperative to avoid becoming locked-in inside a singular sustainability pathway that is bound to become dystopic [98]. Also, cities are no interconnected nodes. Their internal dynamics are in an enduring interplay with the larger socio-ecological landscape. In these times of globalisation, this interplay is characterised by a strong connectivity of the interactions and relationships involved [99–101]. Acknowledging that this essay takes on the Cultural Perspective of the dynamic integrator, embracing perspective diversity combined with a consciously critical attitude, is a fundamental attribute for contemporary citizens to fostering both urban resilience and the potential of adaptation and evolution [72,98,102–108].

As such, a sustainable city is a place where Cosmopolis revives in a novel way. It is a dynamic and creative place that is inherently conscious of its global context and of its internal and external dynamics and metabolism [1,4,109]. Cosmopolis enables living in a world where complexity and change are leading principles of (urban) development. It is a place where local spontaneous initiative and action of individual citizens, entrepreneurs, organisations and communities is combined with visionary governance and structures that promote solidarity and equality for a long-term future [95,98,110,111]. The sustainable city demands more than a top-down design and implementation of sustainable technologies and infrastructures. It demands additional bottom-up involvement and engagement, but also it demands from its inhabitants, politicians and entrepreneurs great openness and creativity to engage with unexpected events [60,111]. Living in a sustainable city involves being ready to learn from surprise, and being ready to adapt when necessary [98]. It allows a degree of instability [93]. A ‘truly sustainable city’ is as fragile as life itself and in constant need of critical reflection, creative nurturing and enlightened engagement of citizens with a well-developed and educated consciousness, celebrating life and the art of living, cherishing diversity as a strength [13,16,112]. In other words: a sustainable city cannot be a fixed ideal Sustopia. If a city intends to be a force for environmental and social good [3], it is a dynamic, ever changing place, integrating multiple geographic and time scales, where all actors are allowed to play at the “edge of chaos [35,113]”.

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