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Report on the round table
“European Cities in an Urban World”
By Matthew Wendeln





Panelists

Sandro BALDUCCI, Professor of Planning and Urban Policies, Vice-rector of the Politecnico di Milano

Susan FAINSTEIN, Professor in Urban Planning, Graduate School of Design, Harvard University
Patricia TORRES, Principal Urban Development Specialist, Inter-American Development Bank
Belinda YUEN, Chartered Town Planner

Moderator: Peter RAMSDEN, URBACT Lead Expert

Introduction

Peter Ramsden opened the session by arguing the importance for European cities of learning from other regions. We used to think that European cities were the most advanced and that the rest of the world should learn from us. Now we know that some of our “advances” were built on the sand of credit; it’s time to start learning from elsewhere and to build a genuine two-way exchange. So how can we improve the European urban model, and particularly what can we learn from other parts of the world?

The discussion was organized around the main challenges identified in the European Commission’s report, *Cities of Tomorrow*¹

1. Cohesive and sustainable cities

The first theme to emerge was **the tension between growth and equity** in today’s cities. In her book *The Just City*, **Susan Fainstein** promotes three goals for urban projects: equity, diversity, and democracy. But she explained that these three goals are often in tension with each other, and that all tend to get overshadowed by local governments’ obsession with economic competitiveness. Fainstein called on urban practitioners to focus on equity as their top priority.

Moreover, city leaders need to evaluate how much growth their development projects actually create. In many “mega-projects,” large public subsidies fail to create much wealth at all, with even less trickling down to ordinary citizens. On the other hand, in some cases a modest amount of public spending can create large amount of

growth. The renovation of New York’s Highline, for instance, stimulated \$6 billion of investments.

Responding to the question of what European cities can learn from their U.S. counterparts, Fainstein argued that American cities are particularly good at absorbing immigrants. Despite recent anti-immigration rhetoric in U.S. national politics, big cities like New York have generally welcomed large numbers of immigrants without generating much antagonism. Indeed, many American cities are actually being *saved* by immigration.

Fainstein also offered a negative example for her European audience: American cities’ destruction of downtown social housing, as an attempt to disperse poor residents. Undertaken in the name of reducing segregation—and thus strengthening social cohesion—such programs in fact remove badly needed housing for low-income residents.

Turning to the example of Asian cities, **Belinda Yuen** also discussed the tension between growth and equity. Asia’s rapid urbanization and teeming mega-cities bring both opportunities and challenges, starting with the huge demand for housing, jobs, and amenities.

Asian examples offer several lessons for European cities, Yuen said. The first is **the need to “make planning work”**. Given the massive investments currently underway, the decisions Asian planners make today will affect urban residents for a century or more. For example, Asian cities are realizing the importance of planning for walking and biking—not cars. At the same time, this heady rhythm of investment has turned Asian cities into “laboratories” for new urban ideas, as the case of Singapore shows well. Finally, the continent’s urbanization reminds us that despite their drawbacks, cities are key to social opportunity and sustainability.

An audience member asked **Susan Fainstein** what specific policy elements can best **reconcile growth and equity**, thus making growth more inclusive. Fainstein pointed to two priorities: educational training and quality-of-life amenities. Training programs need to overcome the current infatuation with glamorous, white-collar jobs, she said, and identify the real needs of the labor market. Investments in urban amenities can benefit a wide range of residents while making the city more attractive to outsiders. That’s a better use of public resources than investing in speculative office complexes!

¹

http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/conferences/citiesoftomorrow/index_en.cfm

Another audience member asked how to improve **citizen participation** in the planning process. **Belinda Yuen** noted that if citizen participation in Asia differs from country to country, it is increasingly a reality. Even historically top-down planning regimes, such as in Singapore, are realizing the importance of community voices. However, **Susan Fainstein** cautioned against excessive optimism. It is hard to achieve widespread, meaningful citizen participation. The U.S. probably has more public participation than anywhere else in the world, she noted, but the process is often controlled by the same recurrent groups of participants, who rarely represent the broader community.

2. Creating a resilient and inclusive economy

Patricia Torres explained that in Latin America as well, growth is not equally distributed. On the contrary, Latin America is both the most urbanized and the most inequitable region in the world.

The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) fights inequality through three goals: integrating policy approaches, investing in human improvement rather than expensive infrastructures, and **dealing with existing communities**. The latter point is crucial, Torres explained. Urban communities have already created their own spaces and social networks. Planners need to approach them on their own terms, identify genuine community leaders, and assure that citizen participation occurs at all phases of an urban program—from project design to final decisions on how to spend money.

In Latin America, this focus on human improvement and community involvement has helped **spur real growth with limited resources**. When local actors make an urban project their own, Torres said, they multiply the power of the original investment. Today the IDB touches twice as many communities with the same amount of money as when it first started: one million residents in twenty countries with about \$6 billion.

One audience member followed up on Torres' point by highlighting the importance of the **informal economy**, arguing that in most cases resilience is strongly linked to “informality” if not synonymous. He stressed that this is the case in most African countries but not only. In domains such as the labor market and affordable housing, “informality” helps real communities respond to the failures of the formal marketplace.

Another attendee asked how the IDB dealt with transportation and the connectedness of poor neighborhoods. Torres responded that this is one of IDB's main goals. Its third “generation” of urban projects seeks to move beyond individual neighborhoods, working on their connections with the rest of the city.

Finally from the audience, Ann Morton Hyde, lead expert of the URBACT Roma-Net network, indicated that Torres' examples resonate with the problem of Roma exclusion in Europe. Since a lack of resources is the main obstacle for actors dealing with Roma, Hyde noted how useful it would be to have an IDB-style bank to invest in Roma-inclusion programs!

3. Governance

The importance of **networking and citizen participation** were again highlighted in the third topic of the round table, governance.

Sandro Balducci tackled the question of how to **balance formal and informal governance arrangements**, especially at the metropolitan scale. Urban growth has made older city boundaries and institutions outdated, but most efforts at creating metropolitan levels of governance have failed. Balducci thus argued that the best way forward is to develop informal links that can connect central cities and peripheral areas: shared visions, stakeholder involvement, and decision-making capacity.

Balducci offered three reasons to be relatively optimistic about this informal path to governance. First of all, it is already happening. In the Greater Paris project, for example, an informal “conference” has provided a space for discussion among fragmented institutions. Secondly, new technologies provide greater opportunities for connecting people, including urban experts and ordinary citizens. And finally, informal forces can revitalize public spaces opened by local officials. The Berlin airport, New York's Highline, and the new pedestrian-only sections of Broadway all illustrate the creativity of informal dynamics.

Balducci's comments segued into a discussion of **mutual learning among cities**—a fitting end for an URBACT panel.

Patricia Torres discussed the importance for Latin American cities of learning from their European counterparts. A joint program of the IDB and the European Commission allows Latin

American urban practitioners and elected officials to exchange with European counterparts in selected cities, such as Lyons for instance, about sustainable development solutions.

More broadly, gatherings like the URBACT conference enable cities to learn from initiatives elsewhere, instead of constantly trying to “reinvent the wheel.” Or as **Susan Fainstein** put it: since each locality develops a unique response to common problems, the more we can share these different approaches the better we all are. Even “global cities” have much to learn, as New York discovered when Hurricane Sandy showed the need to investigate flood-control techniques.

Belinda Yuen pointed out that thinking collectively is especially important because if the “what” and the “why” of sustainability are now obvious, the “how” remains a very tough question. Sharing our knowledge about policy solutions is

the only way to overcome the practical hurdle moving forward.

How much can European cities really learn from the rest of the world? In the end, Yuen concluded, “One of the messages that come forward here is that we’re not that different.” **Sandro Balducci** agreed. European cities are distinctive enough to speak of a “European urban model,” he said, but many of their problems are common to urban areas across the globe. That’s why we need to keep learning together.

References and links

See more of Sandro Balducci at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kZUg-zZZQyQ>

See more Susan Fainstein at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5LhpyRhHaD0>

URBACT II

URBACT is a European exchange and learning programme promoting sustainable urban development.

It enables cities to work together to develop solutions to major urban challenges, reaffirming the key role they play in facing increasingly complex societal challenges. It helps them to develop pragmatic solutions that are new and sustainable, and that integrate economic, social and environmental dimensions. It enables cities to share good practices and lessons learned with all professionals involved in urban policy throughout Europe. URBACT is 300 cities, 29 countries, and 5,000 active participants

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