

## **Is there a model for sustainable urban planning?**

**Claire Carriou and Olivier Ratouis**

*Claire Carriou and Olivier Ratouis reconsider the theoretical sources of sustainable urban planning from the standpoint of the history of urban-planning doctrines. They show that the references in question are no longer constrained by the classic categories (“culturalism” and “progressivism”) established by Françoise Choay on the basis of textual analyses of planning and development treaties.*

Thinking about urban planning in terms of models, once decried, seems to be making a comeback among planners, especially as the importance of sustainable development becomes ever clearer? Whether they are “modelling” energy consumption, collecting “best practices” in urban planning or creating “labels” for sustainable neighbourhoods, experts in the field are calling, more or less directly, for regulatory – or even standardised – measures and instruments that can be used (and, ideally, reproduced) to build today’s cities. At this point, we should like to call into question the characteristics of the doctrines of sustainable urban planning. In this regard, any notion of a “model” cannot be considered without reference to the works of the philosopher Françoise Choay, which constitute the primary classification approach in this field, and in particular to her founding work, *Urbanisme, utopies et réalités. Une anthologie* (Choay 1965), which is still widely used as a textbook and remains an essential reference 50 years after it was first published. But are its constituent categories suited to describing and qualifying new schools of thought in sustainable development? And is sustainable urban planning nothing more than a model, in Choay’s sense of the term? These questions are, of course, vast in their scope. We shall aim, therefore, not to investigate each and every aspect of them, but rather to provide some initial clarifications on certain points.

### **The two historic models of urban planning: culturalism and progressivism**

We shall first of all return to the approaches adopted by Françoise Choay. In *Urbanisme, utopies et réalités*, which established the theoretical landscape for urban planning in France, the author develops the broad strokes of a history of theories and doctrines in urban planning, and presents a classification of these theories and doctrines. She defends the idea that the proposals for urban developments that are formulated as urban planning was emerging as a discipline, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, present the specificity of offering models “of spatial projections, of images of the city of the future”, in response to what was perceived at the time to be the physical and social disorder of the industrial city. These “models” were conceived in a context marked by the great importance attached to social progress, technology and the benefits of science, where the ambition to radically transform the world by acting on physical spaces was widespread. They are the result of a utopian approach, that is to say an approach “that is deployed in the imagination” (p. 15).<sup>1</sup> Françoise Choay makes a distinction between two kinds of “images of the city of the future”, which she calls

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<sup>1</sup> In her later works, Françoise Choay emphasises the foundational aspect of the utopian approach as opposed to other, more pragmatic, approaches (see, in particular, Choay 1980).

“models”: the “progressivist” model and the “culturalist” model, to which a third can be added, the “naturalist” model, which she subsequently leaves aside. By turning to the concept of “models”, Choay seeks to “underline both the exemplary value and the reproducible nature of the proposed constructions.”

The two main models differ in that they “are oriented according to the two fundamental directions of time – the past and the future – in order to take on the characteristics of nostalgia or progressivism.” On the one hand, the doctrines associated with the culturalist model imagine an urban future with references that are images of the past; on the other, the references associated with the progressivist model are cut off from the past and propose a future of images of a burgeoning modernity. Camillo Sitte, Ebenezer Howard and Raymond Unwin – all three of whom were at the origin of theories on garden cities – are presented as the key figures of culturalism. Le Corbusier and members of the CIAM (Congrès internationaux d’architecture moderne, or International Congresses of Modern Architecture), after Tony Garnier, appear to be the most representative authors of the progressivist approaches. Several determining factors differentiate the two models, in addition to the time-related aspects already mentioned: the relationship to technology, links to nature, and social structure, for example. The validity (or otherwise) of these categories during the period studied by the author is not relevant here, however. Moreover, the book can also be read as a manifesto in a context where urbanistic functionalism was being challenged. And by deconstructing the doctrines – which sometimes means developing, and even slightly embellishing, arguments against them – the book, to its credit, no longer creates certainties but rather incorporates them into a history of ideas and, as a result, re-evaluates them. The question that we wish to consider here is whether the culturalist and progressivist models are still useful for describing what appear to be new urban “models”, and whether, ultimately, their continued relevance is challenged by sustainable development.

### **Charters: guidelines for sustainable urban planning**

This question poses methodological problems, in particular regarding how to transpose the approach adopted by Françoise Choay to the present day in order to analyse urban-planning styles. Choay used analyses of operations-oriented and practical texts on the city and urban planning, at least for those texts covering the period in which urban planning had become an independent professional field (from the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century). The texts in question included manifestos or practical publications presenting new ways of thinking about the city and its reform, written by those she considered “great authors” within the confines of the discipline at the time. For indeed it is these authors who enabled her to define her categories. We shall consider two of these authors in particular, namely Ebenezer Howard (1850–1928), inventor of the garden-city doctrine, and Le Corbusier (1887–1965), theoretician of the Modernist Movement. With both of these authors, three characteristics that form the basis of their exceptional auras dominate:

- the production of an elaborate, highly coherent, renowned and well-publicised doctrine;
- the existence of a large-scale – or even international-level – group and network that distributes and circulates their ideas from the outset;
- the creation of urban units that meet established doctrinal protocols – even when deviations from the models are identified.

Today, however, do we not encounter difficulties in identifying comparable authors in the field of sustainable urban planning? Indeed, while sustainable planning and development is the subject of a large number of written works, no single work stands out anywhere near as clearly. Today, sustainable urban planning has no equivalent to Howard or Le Corbusier. And though some have tried (see, for example, Rogers and Gumuchdjan 1997), no one has satisfied the three characteristics stated above: there is no work comparable to *Garden Cities of To-morrow* (Howard

1902) or the *Athens Charter*<sup>2</sup> (Le Corbusier 1943) that sets out the new doctrine. Sustainable urban planning has no bible of its own. And yet, presentations of doctrines exist. Various authors from academic and professional circles have proposed essays on the sustainable city, described different operations (eco-neighbourhoods in particular), produced appraisals of such measures, and, in certain cases, even written guidelines for action designed as collections of best practices.<sup>3</sup>

Among this abundance of literature, however, a small number of texts can be identified as key reference works. They are not by “great authors” such as those analysed by Françoise Choay, as they are collective works. Nevertheless, they have some of the same characteristics, particularly in terms of dissemination and publicisation. These texts immediately resonated with a wide audience and were shared across a broad international network, giving rise to projects that were directly inspired by them. Today, they are references for planning practitioners. One prime example that springs to mind is the *Aalborg Charter*, signed in 1994, and its later revisions. These texts will therefore be at the heart of this initial analysis – bearing in mind that they represent but one approach to sustainable urban planning, albeit an important one in structural terms.

The *Aalborg Charter* was the result of a conference organised by the European Commission and associations of local and municipal authorities following the publication of the EC’s *Green Paper on the Urban Environment* in 1990. Since the Brundtland Report (1987), the *First Assessment Report* of the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) in 1990 and the vote to adopt the Agenda 21 programme in Rio in 1992, sustainability and the environment have become subjects of public concern. The European Conference on Sustainable Cities and Towns held in Aalborg in 1994 also sought to apply to urban areas a number of theories and recommendations relating to sustainable development that until then were considered supranational concerns with stakes that were essentially environmental, economic and even social, with the result that the conference would later be referred to by some as an “urbanistic turning point” (Maréchal and Quenault 2005). The conference brought together representatives from 80 European cities and 600 participants (including civil servants, academics, well-known environmentalists and activists) with the aim of discussing and defining the founding principles of sustainable urban planning. The result of these discussions was the *Charter of European Sustainable Cities and Towns Towards Sustainability*, also known as the *Aalborg Charter*, summarised a number of principles for common action, which the signatory cities made a commitment to respect. A federative network was formed and began to develop. In 2004, a second conference – “Aalborg + 10” – took place to revise the previous charter. At the end of the conference, over 500 cities had ratified the 10 “Aalborg Commitments” (Emelianoff and Stegassy 2010).

## **Transcending culturalism and progressivism**

Do the 1994 and 2004 *Aalborg Charters* look more towards the culturalist model or the progressivist model? Or do they offer something else entirely? To answer these questions, our initial approach was to see whether and in what ways texts on sustainable urban planning meet the differentiating criteria defined by Françoise Choay (utopia, technology, social structure, nature, etc.); we then considered whether these texts provide new criteria in this respect. The summary table below is the fruit of this analysis and is based on Françoise Choay’s own works and the texts of the two *Aalborg Charters*.

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<sup>2</sup> The *Athens Charter* was based on the debates that took place at the fourth CIAM conference, held in 1933 in Athens. Nevertheless, the *Charter* is very much the work of Le Corbusier and not, as its title may suggest, the collective work of the attending architects.

<sup>3</sup> As illustrated by the examples cited by Souami (2009).

### The Aalborg Charters and Françoise Choay's culturalist and progressivist models

Determining factors	Culturalist model	Progressivist model	Aalborg Charter (1994)	Aalborg + 10 (2004)
Utopia (imaginary)	Strong utopian dimension: finding the "beautiful totality of the past"	Strong utopian dimension: inventing the efficient city; "determining the ideal-type of human settlement"	Ambivalence: founding principles that also seek to "redress the balance" in existing cities	Ambivalence: "shared vision" of European cities for "local sustainable development"
Time-related aspects	"Recreating a bygone era"; nostalgia for the past	Radical break with the past	Sustainability as a "balancing system"; "learning lessons from the past at local level"; "nothing is set in stone"	"Sustainable future"; preserving urban cultural heritage; intergenerational responsibility
Social structure	Restoring organic communities	Promoting the individual over a universal model; freedom from alienation through "standard requirements"	The city as a "holistic entity" or "ecosystem"	Supporting "open, caring communities"
Nature	Dissociation of nature and the city (with intermediate forms)	Association of nature with the city	"Natural capital" to be preserved and enhanced; biodiversity	Protection and preservation of shared natural resources
Technology	Rejection of technology; "ideology of culture"	Promotion of technology; "ideology of progress"	Support for "using political and techn(olog)ical instruments to achieve an ecosystemic approach to urban management"	Ambivalence: "facing up to the pressures of technology" but encouraging "high-quality construction techniques"
Urban morphology	"Differentiated modes of occupation" depending on the place; closed and restricted ensembles; inspired by ancient forms	Functionalism; zoning; standard order; out of context; planned entities ("units"); creating new towns	Combination of functions; reduction of mobility needs; "every city is different"; compact cities	Urban density; rehabilitating disadvantaged areas and wasteland
Aesthetics	Ugliness of the industrial world	Promotion of standardisation; geometry	N/A	N/A
<i>Economics</i>	<i>Return to more traditional farming and land-use practices</i>	<i>Adapting the city to the industrial revolution</i>	<i>Encouraging an economy that ensures the "viability of the community"</i>	<i>Promoting the economy and employment "at local level"</i>
<i>Governance</i>	<i>Central role of professionals and experts; local democracy as an ideal</i>	<i>Central role of professionals and experts; strong power</i>	<i>Power of cities; "negotiation"; citizen "participation"; experts at the service of local authorities</i>	<i>Participatory democracy; applying the local Agenda 21; experts at the service of local authorities</i>

In italics: aspects not included in Françoise Choay's analysis criteria.

Several conclusions can be drawn from this table:

1. *A utopia without a model.* The charters of sustainable urban planning are neither an updated reformulation of culturalism and progressivism, nor the re-expression of these models in hybrid forms. They differ more fundamentally still in that references to utopia – a cardinal component of the models as defined by Françoise Choay – appear in a much more ambivalent form. In both charters, the link with utopia is more multifaceted, more complex, almost contradictory, even. On the one hand, the intention is to take the city in its current state (or the city that is already there) as the starting point. In the 1994 charter, the city is perceived as a specific ecosystem whose “trade-offs” need to be carefully balanced. The role of urban planning, while the preserve of local authorities, seems to be more about circumspection than decision-making. The Aalborg + 10 charter of commitments, on the other hand, favours more “energetic” interventions on the part of local authorities, albeit combined with the idea of improving the existing city – for example, by making use of abandoned spaces – rather than envisaging a new city.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the salient characteristics of a utopia, as defined by Choay, can be found here. For instance, the 1994 charter is presented as the founding text for a new way of developing the city that breaks with previous practices. It is written as if this were a new, undiscovered field where no relevant initiatives or references exist, placed within the typical three-part structure for demonstrating utopias: denouncing the contemporary evils of urban society, criticising the planning and development tools used up to that time, and new proposals for intervention (without rejecting the currently existing city). It is true that neither of the two charters puts forward a spatial model to be reproduced, as the idea is to improve the existing city; however, more indirectly, via benchmarks for action and technical tools, they present a “shared vision” of the city of the future, as indicated in the Aalborg + 10 commitments. The imaginary dimension – the image of the new, dreamed city that is at the heart of the utopian approach – is very much present, albeit less formalised.

2. *From spatialist ideology to technicist and management-based ideology?* More generally, the common principles set out in the charters tend to distance themselves from the premises put forward by texts focused on the concept of “models”. These premises were supported by the spatialist ideology, correlated to utopia, to be understood as the belief that taking action that affects space reforms both individuals and social conditions. The Aalborg charters offer no comparable entry point. First of all, spatial aspects are not presented as the main vector for action affecting the city, as a significant number of actions are of an intangible nature and concern day-to-day practices, consumption and management choices. Above all, the meaning attached to interventions affecting the city differs. The notion of progress and, more generally, social reform, which was one intended outcome of urban-planning action in the models, is barely touched upon. What are significantly more visible, however, are the more modest aims of making urban society fairer, reducing inequalities and emphasising solidarity – but not radically transforming society. The spatialist ideology of the models was built, moreover, backed up by the belief that science and technology had the power to change the world (Friedmann 1989). In the charters, the use of technology is always very much present: multiple indicators, standards, indices and guidelines, intended to provide tools for urban management, are mentioned. However, when envisaged in this way, tools and techniques tend to go beyond their role as simple decision-making aids and begin to contain with them the meaning and purpose of action affecting the city, at the risk of losing the spirit of social reform. Accordingly, in the shadow of the official line on the sustainable city, we can see the emergence of an “ideology with scientific and technological connotations” (Lévy 2009, p. 148), the aim of which would appear to be limited to management and “management-based urban planning”. There comes a point where we begin to ask ourselves, in this case, whether sustainable urban planning can still form the basis for a belief in improving the human condition. Is it presented as an urbanism of disillusionment? Or as a form of urban planning that is the lesser of two evils or

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<sup>4</sup> As an illustration of this position, we might mention the many sustainable neighbourhoods that are being developed on industrial wasteland or on former military sites.

an apophatic urbanism (Chalas 1998) pleading the case for the city of the disenchantment of the world announced by Max Weber (1959)?

3. *Between the infinity of development and the finiteness of nature.* The relationship to time and temporality represents another point of divergence. As we have seen, the importance of the historic models lies in their ability to anticipate, for a given city image, the social changes that the decision-makers wish to see implemented. The responses proposed by culturalism and progressivism diverge, depending on whether the image of the ideal city is sought in the past or in the future. Nevertheless, both models share the idea of indefinite possibilities for rebuilding and improving the urban and social world. Sustainable development, as portrayed by the charters, is presented as breaking with this vision of history. Rather, it is now a question of managing and “preserving” present resources and acting “responsibly” for future generations. Sustainability, unlike the projection of a utopian order, acknowledges the impact of present actions on the future, based on the idea that each and every action may cause a proportionate amount of destruction later on. Here, there is also the implied threat that the natural world has its limits – symbolised by the finiteness of its resources, in particular fossil fuels – that replaces the view of the world as an inexhaustible store wellspring. However, the charters do not deconstruct the premise of development (whether economic, social or human), now described as sustainable, or indeed the prospect of growth, both of which are by their very essence limited (Burbage 2013). The use of the notions of “investment” and “capital” with regard to nature clearly reflects this. In this regard, the charters appear to be compromises, midway between a perception of history as an endless process and an approach that raises awareness of its limits.

4. *Governance: expertise and participation.* Lastly, this table highlights the emergence, in both Aalborg charters, of new questions concerning governance that were not taken into account by Françoise Choay’s categories. And yet a re-examination of Choay’s texts reveals that both models opened the way for new professions embodied by experts-cum-demiurges, mostly architects. In the two charters, the expert figure is less prominent, but the importance of knowledge and skills backed up by technology is a key premise. Furthermore, local authorities and citizens have a new role to play. Sustainable urban planning, according to the text of the charters, is depicted as a collective action conducted at local level, with strong emphasis placed on the participatory dimension.

## **Sustainable urban planning and local communities**

Sustainable urban planning cannot be attached directly to either of the two “historic” models established by Françoise Choay. The differences concern both the characteristics taken into consideration in the analysis of the doctrines (the determining factors, several of which stand out in particular, such as economics and governance) and the role of models in urban planning. Although sustainable *development* is sometimes described as a new utopia, can the same be said for sustainable *urban planning*? What is at play here when a fourth dimension – space – appears alongside the usual trinity of economy, society and environment? For while sustainable urban planning, like sustainable development, establishes the principle of a break with the past, space does not play the same key role in social change as was the case in the culturalist and progressivist doctrines. In sustainable urban planning, the approaches adopted are focused on local communities and the *locus* is granted a tremendous freedom of action.

Furthermore, there are significant differences in the way sustainable urban planning addresses questions such as the status of the authors of its doctrine (in other words, theoreticians), the role and uses of written texts, and the link between theory and practice. The collective dimension dominates here, as shown by the central role played by charters, which was not the case with the great authors identified by Françoise Choay. Consequently, it appears that the categories proposed by Choay deserve to be reconsidered, at the very least in terms of their extensions and continuations, and perhaps also in terms of the capacity of these canonical statements to integrate later urban doctrines into a more general history of urban development.

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