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Urban environmentalism in context: case studies from
Birmingham (UK), Lodz (Poland) and Medellín (Colombia)

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Urban environmentalism in context: case studies from Birmingham (UK), Lodz (Poland) and Medellín (Colombia)¹

Abstract

The premise of this paper is that, despite the existence of a well-established international urban environmental agenda, cities effectively invent a different one of their own. From the political perspective of neoliberal urbanization, emphasis is placed on how environmental issues are assimilated, given meaning and translated into management practices and urban form. It is argued that environmental issues have to be socially constructed, and that this construction is undertaken not on the basis of objective scientific and technical knowledge, but rather through the discursive construction of values in the environment. In turn, the mobilization of such values and their materialization in terms of concrete development and management practices depends on their degree of articulation to overall city discourse, or the way in which a city 'speaks to and about itself'. As a consequence, it is not the environmental problem in itself which is decisive, but the degree to which addressing that problem can contribute towards the resolution of the dilemmas and challenges of urban management – city aspirations and images, social inequality and unrest, the regulation of populations and the legitimacy of urban governments. The paper outlines the general theoretical perspective and methodological approach, and then illustrates the scope that such an approach offers for the understanding of urban environmentalism in three different cities: Birmingham (UK), Lodz (Poland) and Medellín (Colombia).

1. Urbanization and the environment

Perhaps the most important innovation in urban thinking in the 1990s was the introduction of the idea that cities should be sustainable. Following the Rio Summit of 1992, cities achieved a central place in the diagnosis of global environmental ills, and Local Agenda 21s were actively taken up by urban authorities throughout the world. Sustainability became instantly a universal policy objective of urban plans, which in turn provoked new forms of inter-departmental cooperation across city government in an attempt to address the complex, integrative aims of environment-friendly urban development. These experiences were encouraged by multilateral agencies and networked through a variety of sustainable city programmes, but relied mainly on the initiative of local governments working closely with community and social organizations.

This huge investment of institutional resources and community energy was matched by considerable academic interest in the sustainable city idea. Urban theorists took up the intellectual challenge of what on the face of it appeared to be a daunting reversal of conventional ideas and empirical evidence on the problematic relationship between cities and ecology. The environment also arose as one of the most visible issues in urban politics, in the sense of provoking high-profile protest and controversy eagerly taken up by the media. Above all, the environment seemed to encapsulate, albeit in a confused and contradictory fashion, the idea that urban futures could be better. After a troubled and

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traumatic period of urban change in the 1980s, the environment and sustainable development appeared to offer a more harmonious path toward the future. The environment was holistic and inspirational, and the sustainable city arose as a new urban paradigm in the often bleak landscape of fragmenting postmodern urbanism.

Now into the new millennium, enthusiasm seems to have waned and hopes faded. It is already common to find academic commentators and dispirited professionals bemoaning the meagre results of years of urban environmental management. The overall trends of urban consumption and waste production have not been reversed or even significantly modified, social inequality has become more profound and the pretensions of rebuilding urban communities through an environmental conception of spatial organisation has met with little success (see for example Burgess et al., 1997; Low et al, 2000; Zetter and White, 2002). Environmental NGOs have lost much of their ability to capture the political imagination of urban populations and influence urban policy thinking, whilst city governments plunge ever more enthusiastically into the hard struggle and potential glamour of trying to be economically competitive. The more obvious achievements of recent urban development are not to be found in the soft and subtle field of urban ecology, but in the brash and glitzy architecture of urban re-imagining, business and cultural consumption.

This paper critically reviews what at first sight appears to be the rise and fall of urban environmentalism, and questions the assumptions behind such a general assessment. Certainly it would be untenable to write off urban environmental concern altogether. Although hard environmental achievements are scarce, it is also clear that environmental concern is now sufficiently institutionalized so as to continue to exert an important influence on urban development, if only through a kind of regulatory inertia or at an aesthetic level. Equally, it might be argued that deindustrialization of the developed world's cities has in itself led to significant urban environmental improvements, although it is also widely recognized that new environmental problems continue to arise. The aggressive geopolitics of the new millennium has shifted priorities away from sustainable development and put international relations firmly back into the narrow world of trade and, more recently, the 'war on terrorism', but poverty and the environment persist as important issues on the agenda of multilateral organisations. What seems to have happened is that the anticipated articulation of economic growth, social equality and environmental protection has failed to take place, and that this is particularly evident in cities. This paper questions such an assumption by exploring not so much these categories in isolation, but the relations between them in the context of contemporary urban development processes.

As Harvey (1996: 119) has observed, "all proposals concerning 'the environment' are necessarily and simultaneously proposals for social change and that action on them always entails the instantiation in 'nature' of a certain regime of values", but for environmentalists and urban planners such change has all too frequently been regarded in a direct and deterministic manner: environmentally inspired social change should respond unequivocally to the requirements imposed by natural laws and ecological limits. However, the fact that changes of this kind have not taken place does not mean that ideas and proposals concerning the environment have failed to have any significant effect on the overall dynamics of socio-spatial change. Rather, it is insisted, it is necessary to examine the ways in which such laws and dynamics, and the attitudes and values invested in them,

have been assimilated into the overall dynamic of social and spatial transformation. In other words, this paper explores the *sort* of social change that has been occurring over the last fifteen years or so at an urban level and the role that the environment has played in the unfolding forms of spatial organisation and urban governance. This is the general meaning we give to the term urban environmentalism.

2. Theoretical perspective: the politics of constructivism

Urban environmentalism, like almost any phenomenon related to cities, is impossible to understand fully outside the forces and dynamics of globalization. There is neither space nor the necessity to repeat the general characteristics of globalization here, although two aspects will be briefly mentioned which are useful to bear in mind in relation to the environment.

Firstly, it can be argued that the environment was a fore-runner of global thinking, to the extent that from the late 1960s the global – the planet earth – was the object of concern, whilst the globalization of economic and cultural life was still in an embryonic stage. The defining characteristic of contemporary environmentalism, both in its analytic and political versions, was the recognition of the global scale of the problems associated with the world's natural resource systems which transgress national frontiers and international geopolitical divisions; the first images of earth from outer space are frequently associated with this new global imaginary. Secondly, early environmental thinking had only a tenuous relation to what would soon become evident as the globalization of economic and cultural life; environmental perspectives tended to be reactive and counter-cultural. Ironically, by the time sustainability had become official development policy after the Rio Earth Summit, the environment had been pushed to the margins of widespread social concern in the face of the upheavals and disruption affecting people's lives in the massive geographical displacement of industry, economic restructuring, the truncation of local cultural traditions based on work and new urban cultures around consumption, class and racial tensions, unemployment, de-skilling and re-skilling, widening urban inequalities in wealth and income distribution, greater spatial differentiation and class, ethnic and racial tensions. With globalization, survival became an economic and cultural affair as much as, if not more than, a question of ecology.

2.1 Neoliberalism and urban development

It is widely accepted that the interests of capital have come to dominate sustainable development policy in the process of 'ecological modernization' (Hajer, 1995; Middleton and O'Keefe, 2003) through a discourse coalition involving government, big business and the scientific establishment. This is not to suggest that environmental problems have become any less or more important, but rather that they are constructed and managed in a particular way. However, understanding contemporary urban environmentalism means locating this particular way of defining environmental problems and solutions within the overall dynamics of cities and the spatial practices of agencies and individuals. In particular, it is argued that as globalization and the postmodern cultural condition have

become integrated into the everyday routines and experience of urban life in the 1990s, then neoliberalism provides a useful conceptual route and analytic focus. Originating in supply-side economic theory of the Chicago school in the 1970s, as an economic policy neoliberalism is most commonly associated with the Reagan-Thatcher period of the 1980s. It is usually understood as the ideology of a new phase of capital accumulation (Moncayo, 2003), the linchpin of which is “the belief that open, competitive and unregulated markets, liberated from all forms of state interference, represent the optimal mechanism for economic development” (Brenner and Theodore, 2002); described by Bourdieu (1998) as a “utopia of unlimited exploitation”.

For urban studies, the advantage of neoliberalism over regulation theory is its greater emphasis on government and public policy and hence the management of change at a more concrete level. Even when heralding the virtues of the market and private enterprise, neoliberalism, like any other public policy area, is enacted through the state and its politics reach out to include the systemic management of social change: the functions and operation of government, labour markets, welfare services, new ideas of citizenship, and so forth. Characterizing neoliberalism in terms of a “roll-back” phase of deregulation followed by a “roll-out” phase of re-regulation, Brenner and Theodore (2002) observe that the politics, institutional dynamics and socio-spatial effects of neoliberalism have, until recently, rarely been theorised explicitly at the urban scale. However, neoliberalism is what city politicians and planners have been wrestling with for the last fifteen years or so, and it has some very specific characteristics. These can be summarized in the following terms:

- The weakening of the nation-state as a level of economic government, the emergence of the city or city-region as a key spatial level in the global economy and competitiveness as the major principle of economic development.
- The multi-scaling of the government of cities as urban development policy is increasingly determined within a complex system of international, national, regional and local institutions.
- The restructuring of the local government, with tight fiscal controls over local authority spending and the introduction of management techniques which imitate the private sector.
- New forms of governance at the city level as local authorities realign themselves with business in the reconstruction of local economies and the promotion of an enterprise culture, partnerships in policy execution and collaborative planning.
- Radical restructuring of local labour markets, within national legislative frameworks but implemented on a local basis.
- The privatisation of public services and welfare provision and the elimination of subsidies on basic service provision such as housing, health, transport and water, especially significant in developing world and transition countries.

- The rise of the service sector and the cultural economy, favouring the educated middle-classes and inducing increased socio-spatial segregation, gated communities, 'archipelagos', poverty and social exclusion.

The explicit links of neoliberal urban development policy to the environment and sustainability tend to be defined in terms of a) the competitiveness requirement of a clean-green city image to attract investment, leading-sector professional workers and tourists, and b) the demonstration of a city's sense of commitment to help solve global ecological issues through the adoption of environmental initiatives and participation in international environmental programmes. Both are outward-looking arguments aimed at the international economy and global policy institutions, although there is limited convincing evidence to confirm that in either case the quality of the environment is of critical importance. Indeed industrial investment decisions may be put off by stringent environmental regulations and in any case the quality of the environment tends to be subordinate to other location decision criteria such as local labour markets, tax and other financial incentives, legislative controls over business activity, communications facilities and infrastructure provision. As a factor in determining the location preferences of high-income employees, the environment tends to lag behind other considerations such as good housing, educational opportunities for children, cultural and shopping facilities and the social status of regional cultures.

Given that cities generally have failed to make any serious contribution to global ecological sustainability and that the quality of the environment is of uncertain importance for urban economic development, it is relevant at this juncture to turn to the third dimension of sustainability discourse: the social. The critical study of neoliberalism provides a useful way of approaching this dimension in the sense that it offers an analytic perspective which goes beyond the evaluative vagueness of 'urban quality'. To the extent that neoliberal change involves the remaking of institutional landscapes for the deployment of new regulatory frameworks, it allows analysis of urban environmentalism to be inserted into the machinery and politics of the regulation of urban populations during a period of radical urban restructuring. We are thus introduced into the 'evolving geographies of state regulation' as 'systemic capitalist restructuring makes obsolete extant institutional frameworks and requires new institutional searching and regulatory experimentation [...] in which diverse actors, organisations, and alliances promote competing hegemonic visions, restructuring strategies and development models...' (Brenner and Theodore, 2002: 9). Sustainability, of course, is one of those models.

Furthermore, state regulation should not be seen as limited to the expedition of statutory or legal regulations but refers to a whole range of 'techniques of government'. On the one hand, social acquiescence requires that new regulatory measures are seen to be good or necessary or unavoidable, which in turn implies the creation of new social subjectivities concerning the rights and obligations of citizens and their place in the new urban order. The environment may be seen as playing an important role in this type of change. On the other hand, neoliberalism has entailed a 'dramatic intensification of coercive, disciplinary forms of state intervention in order to impose market rule upon all aspects of social life' (Brenner and Theodore, 2002: 5), including urban society's marketized relationship with nature and the environment through sustainable development discourse. Quite clearly, underneath urban environmental management lies a twin strategy of seduction and coercion.

2.2 The social agenda of urban environmentalism

Since the outlining of the 'big issues' of global sustainability at the Rio Summit, local agendas are increasingly defined in terms of organizational and individual behaviour. The articulation of the economic, social and environmental dimensions of development, once constructed as a credible proposition, can only demonstrate the validity of its inner logics through the concrete actions of society on itself. Agenda 21 was the first formulation in this respect, and since then the changing emphasis from critical reflection and analysis to action and the monitoring of its effects has been relentless. This shift of social concern from the correct understanding of environmental problems to the mobilization of effort and action has considerable significance. The transition from analysis to activity takes the attention off causality and the structural imbalances of society and puts the spotlight on not so much effectiveness but more the manifest intention to contribute to change on the part of the actors and agencies involved.

It is here that urban environmental agendas take a decisive social turn. Urban sustainability policy requires the active cooperation of citizens on the practical level of everyday behaviour. This involves, among other things, the inclusion of citizens in urban management practices through such things as partnership programmes; the inducement of life-style changes in areas such transport and personal health habits; government intromission into domestic life in aspects concerning energy use, eating habits and waste separation in the home; the inculcation of moral values relating to civic responsibility; the restating of the conditions of citizenship through new duties which condition access to public services; the construction of an appropriate political subjectivity no longer resting on collective organisation and party representation, but the permanent fulfilment of personal obligations for full 'city membership'. In this way urban environmentalism constitutes part of a new form of governmentality or the authoritative regulation of conduct towards particular objectives (Osborne and Rose, 1999), a distinctive character of which is the active and obligatory participation of citizens as political actors in carefully controlled domains and networks of urban life.

The urban level brings together the myriad of behavioural requirements demanded by sustainability discourse within a single spatial unit controlled by an integrative administrative structure. Whilst this, in principle, allows urban management to articulate its environmental programmes across diverse policy areas, it also multiplies the potentially manipulative quality of urban environmentalism through mutual reinforcement, the conditioning of access to diverse services and the extension of social discipline over individual rights. In a pure form, this is what most environmentalists would probably argue to be needed in the neutral, holistic sense of sustainability. However, as we have seen sustainability is a political programme skewed towards particular interests and invested with wide regulatory powers. In this sense environmental policy and practice can, in the name of the general good, establish a set of rules which systematically conceal private interests and condition the access and participation of different social groups in the unfolding urban order of inequality and exclusion.

2.3 Urban environmentalism and the management of social conflict

At the urban level, the patchy progress of environmental management and the overall ecologically regressive trends of urbanization, together with the frustration that this has produced amongst critical expert opinion - though not officialdom - is a logical consequence of sustainability discourse itself. Sustainability is based on a flawed set of propositions whose inner inconsistency is of little concern to the power interests of those who control that discourse through the politics of ecological modernization. The demonstration of the validity of sustainable development and sustainable city policy lies in the field of social practice. When this practice fails to produce the desired results, then the apparent urgency and gravity of environmental problems is sufficient to support calls for the redoubling of efforts. The consequent emphasis on intention and action leads to a superficial preoccupation over performance, with environmental monitoring and indicators carrying the standards of expectation of organizational and individual behaviour. Criticism of sustainable urban development policy within its own logic can therefore only serve the interests of that dominant discourse by, ultimately, contributing to the call for more action of the same kind. For its part, analysis of the cultural politics of the environment (see for example, Fischer and Hajer, 1999; Macnaughten and Urry, 1998) introduces the diversity of social experience of the environment into what at is an otherwise monolithic, flat and unnuanced version of the relationship between society and nature. In this sense it provides valuable insights into the social practices that sustainability policy seeks to modify and explains some of the difficulties involved in achieving 'sustainable' social change, without addressing the structural economic dynamics which drive sustainable development policy.

Sustainable development policy and the idea of sustainable cities need to be understood within the dynamics of economic change; not economic change in general but in the specific terms of the globalization of capital and neoliberal urbanization. This is especially so in the case of cities, which have emerged with renewed force and novel functions in the networked economy of global flows. The common preamble and justification of urban sustainability policy is that more than half the world's population now live in cities, but then goes on to analyze resource demands, waste production and the physical conditions of urban habitation, a functional approach which elides the particular dynamics of neoliberal urbanization. Neoliberalism as the most recent phase of capital accumulation involved huge transformations not only in the physical organization of cities but also in urban social life: local economies, work, welfare, forms of governance, identities, citizenship and sociality were all restructured. This was no smooth and peaceful transition. It involved the radical upheaval of livelihoods, political conflict, violent protest and repression, social division and changes in the law, state guarantees and individual rights. It is in this field of urban social change and conflict where the environment has played a significant role, ideologically shifting public concern from the economy to the environment and constituting a new sphere for the regulation and control of individualized urban populations.

Sustainable development has established itself as the authoritative voice in talking about the environment, despite the extraordinary amount of empirical evidence belying its

weaknesses. Its strength obviously lies in its *discursive* power to shape understandings and legitimize practical action of a particular kind. It is not surprising then to find that considerable critical reflection has been directed precisely in terms of the sustainability as a discourse (see for example Harvey, 1996; Darier, 1999; Bauriedl and Wissen, 2002; Bickerstaff and Walker, 2003; Rydin, 2003). The problem with much discourse analysis is that it limits itself to discourse as some discrete entity and ignores the 'conditions of its emergence'. Discourse is not abstract reflection but 'language in action' emerging from institutional contexts, invested with power and constitutive of social practice. Inherent in this idea is that discursive and non-discursive practices on and in the name of the environment need to be examined in relation to the movement of society as a whole, and from our particular interest, neoliberal urbanization. This dialectic approach to urban environmentalism opens up alternative inroads into understanding contemporary urban government, planning and the politics of the environment.

In this way I will try to demonstrate that urban environmentalism, far from having had a minimal effect on urban change, can be seen as forming an integral part of one of the greatest transformations of space in urban history. It has been hugely successful not in its own overt reference to ecology but in the sense of providing argumentative and representational support for the rebuilding of cities, the spatial restructuring of urban economies, new forms and techniques of government, urban lifestyles, a sense of citizenship and political subjectivities. The theoretical resources for exploring these themes are largely Western and refer principally to the societies and cities of advanced industrial countries. Globalization, it may be argued, is by definition the extension of these economic, social and cultural forms to all countries now inextricably caught up in the hegemonic world of advanced capitalism. The same observation would seem to apply to the spatiality of cities, now at least partially endowed and homogenized by a uniform display of buildings and infrastructure. However, this is only true to up to a point. Globalizing forces are played out over localities with their own political trajectories and conjunctures, institutional and regulatory forms, regional cultures and spatial configurations and particular intersections of local/global relations. Underneath surface appearances lie place-specific adaptations and hybridized forms; the path-dependency of urban change and its implications for urban environmentalism will be explored principally through the three city studies.

The case studies are explorations of urban environmentalism in action rather than descriptive comparison through equivalent data. This methodological approach is implicit in the rejection of ecological modernization which assumes the environment to be some kind of objective and measurable phenomenon whose significance can be captured through measurement, monitoring and indicators. The approach adopted in this paper is much more concerned with processes and meanings, and how these are context dependent and politically conditioned. The cities were selected in order to illustrate as clearly as possible the particularity of urban environmentalism. All three are second-cities in their respective countries according to population size, but construct their own versions of environmentalism in very different economic, cultural and developmental conditions: Birmingham within a de-industrializing developed country, Lodz within a transition country from the former Soviet bloc and Medellín within a developing country context.

3. Urban environmentalism in Birmingham, UK: competitiveness and urban quality

The UK's second city is situated in the centre of England and dominates the West Midlands conurbation, an industrial region consisting of seven unitary authorities. Birmingham currently accounts for about half of the conurbation's total population of just over two million people. For over a hundred years its metal manufacturing and engineering based economy moved both regional industry and the British engineering and automobile sectors. In many ways the unfashionable hub of British urban life, Birmingham embraced modernism with unusual enthusiasm in the 1950s and 1960s, with what turned out to be disastrous consequences, and the last twenty years have in many ways been a single-minded attempt to rebuild the city's image and erase its economic dependency on manufacturing. Finance, commerce, culture and retailing have underscored a more glamorous architecture and urban design as the city has emerged with some success on the competitive world stage.

Economic restructuring was the dynamic behind urban environmentalism in Birmingham. In the mid-1980s a city centre strategy was prepared to renovate and rebuild the centre based on the theming of sectors or quarters of the city (Birmingham City Council, 1987). Through a series of subsequent planning and policy documents, the importance of the environment was discursively constructed around the notion of the quality of the built environment as the key to rebuilding the city's economy and making Birmingham an attractive and competitive metropolis. There are several aspects to this process that warrant particular mention.

Firstly, Birmingham was at the forefront of urban re-imaging in the UK, ahead of central government policy on both urban and environmental policy. This was the period of Reagan-Thatcher neoliberal state roll-back, and Birmingham was heavily influenced by entrepreneurial government, property-led development and boosterist policies being undertaken in the USA (see Thornley, 1991; Griffiths, 1998). Secondly, European Union structural funds were important in the financing of specific city centre redevelopment projects and Birmingham was the first British city to open an office in Brussels. However, more than other comparable cities in the UK, Birmingham invested heavily from its own budget, which allegedly had serious negative repercussions on public investment in education and social services (Loftman and Brendon, 1996).

The economic goal of urban environmentalism and the institutional arrangements that went with it had profound environmental implications. On the one hand, it resulted in the privatization of the environment, in the sense that it was appropriated as a significant urban issue by the business and property sectors, which from the mid-1980s constructed and still maintain strategic control over urban environmental discourse. Furthermore, the discourse coalition formed by city politicians, business leaders and management consultants was effectively extended into the development of the different quarters of the city centre, to such an extent that the private sector not only controlled the significance of the environment but also its ownership through property and its control through regulation,

surveillance and policing. On the other hand, the emphasis on quality produced an aestheticization of the environment, since it was principally concerned with the question of image – the city’s architecture and urban space - for attracting investors and service sector companies. In both cases, the result was an exclusionary environment of consumption, designed for external investors and the city’s professional classes but substantially excluding the city’s poor and ethnic minority communities.

This problem was addressed from the mid-1990s onwards. In line with many other cities, Birmingham had to develop strategies of city marketing now aimed at its own citizens, in an attempt to make them feel part of the new city environment. The first visit to the city by a US president, for a G8 Summit in 1998, was the occasion for a notable campaign in this sense, with posters of local residents and phrases such as “Get your hair done, Marge, Bill Clinton’s coming to town” (Barber, 2001). Another strategy for widening the scope of urban environmentalism have been area-based regeneration programs which extend the city’s particular brand of environmental discourse to the previously ignored, poorer parts of the city and the ‘community’ (Roberts and Sykes, 2000; Birmingham City Council, 2004a). Through such programs the environment forms part of strategy to encourage marginalized citizens to adapt to the work requirements and civic responsibilities of the new post-industrial, entrepreneurial city. In short, the environment has been constructed as an integral part of the restructuring of capital and the re-regulation of labour in Birmingham’s transforming economy.

Undoubtedly the key concept has been the notion of quality. Environmental quality was consistently argued as the prime requirement of economic diversification and the ultimate measure of the everyday urban experience of citizens. This was no casual association of ideas. A complex coalition of institutions ensured that environmental quality became the definitive feature of urban development aspirations, urban management goals and urban evaluation criteria. What at first sight appears to be a remarkable return to environmental determinism, given legitimacy first through a discourse of economic survival and later through the social content of sustainability, was of course structurally integrated into urban development dynamics. The notion of environmental quality in Birmingham was constructed in the very specific and demanding circumstances of long-term industrial decline and the obligation to restructure the city’s economy in the context of new globalizing dynamics and urban competition. The initial phase of environmental discourse, argumentatively directed by and in the interest of capital, was undertaken in the period of radical neoliberalism of the 1980s whilst the shift to community, the labour market and citizen subjectivity unfolded in the re-regulatory phase of the mid-1990s onwards. Several important aspects of this process can be drawn out:

Firstly, the environment was not simply a glossy facade to post-industrialism but an integral part of the spatial restructuring of the city’s economy. The crisis of Birmingham’s old Fordist-style engineering and automobile industry resulted in the city’s post-war modernist spatial organization and urban aesthetic becoming as redundant as large parts of the traditional economic base. The environment became both the opportunity for new capital circulation in the property market and the spatial requirement for the development of the service sector and the cultural economy. New forms of governance, partnership with

the private sector and institutional innovation, complexity and obfuscation were vital in delivering both environmental meanings and physical realities.

Secondly, the construction of the environment and the emergence of sustainability policy was not a rational progression towards ecological enlightenment but part of the strategic exercise of political and economic power within the city. Environmental meanings were constructed in a period of radical social change and conflict, where the privileging of economic interests was obscured by the symbolic function of the environment in creating a sense of city pride and inclusion, re-shaping social aspirations and citizen subjectivities, regulating behaviour and establishing new moral obligations in a privatised social landscape. The highly political nature of the environment-as-development became neutralised as a common-sense requirement (of urban quality) and collective global responsibility; in this sense the environment fulfilled an important ideological function.

Thirdly, the reality of environmentalism in Birmingham was far removed from the holistic, integrative quality of the environment as an abstract concept. Urban development discourse assured that the environment was disassembled and reconstructed in order to facilitate and legitimize differential spatial appropriation, in a subtle discursive distribution of rights of access to, control over and responsibility for different parts of the city. The integrative possibilities of the environment were limited to the purely symbolic realm, the reach of which has been limited by the manufacturing tradition and ethnic diversity of the city's population.

Finally, the logic of ecology has played an insignificant role in Birmingham, even when introduced at a late stage within the framework of sustainable development policy (Birmingham City Council, 2004b). The inclusion of references to global ecological problems was simultaneously translated into indicators of social behaviour, calibrated according to the city's political necessities and economic development possibilities. In this way the environment was employed to both create and conceal the logical and social contradictions of its sustainable development policy, as illustrated, for example, by appeals for the prudent use of natural resources within an urban policy based on intensified consumption, or claims to social inclusion amidst growing inequality and polarization.

4. Urban environmentalism in Lodz, Poland: democracy and participation

Lodz is located in the centre of Poland some 140 kilometres to the west of Warsaw. It is the smallest of the three cities studied, with a population of just under 800.000 and centre of the Lodz voivodeship consisting mainly of smaller industrial towns. It grew rapidly into a cosmopolitan industrial city based on textiles in the nineteenth century, then suffered badly during and after the World War I as Germany confiscated industrial machinery and finance capital, and securities were lost to the Soviet Revolution of 1917. The city did not suffer heavy physical damage during World War II but it did mean the withdrawal and extermination of its large German and Jewish populations, passage into the Soviet bloc, communism and a centrally planned economy (Liszewski, 1997). The implosion of the

Soviet Union in 1989 witnessed a return to liberal democracy and system change back to capitalism and the eager embrace of the challenges of the market, the European Union and globalization (Szul and Mync, 1997; Markowski and Rouba, 2000).

Lodz is therefore a fascinating case of fluctuating urban dynamics brought about by geopolitics, and an opportunity to explore the ways in which radical changes in the conception of the environment, political practices, development processes and management forms have constructed environmental meanings and urban spatial realities. The transition period back to a market economy provides the opportunity to study two different epistemologies of nature and politics of the environment, and the spatial consequences of their legacies and superimpositions in urban development (see for example Liszewski and Young, 1997).

Marxist critique of the relationship with nature (including human nature) highlighted the problem of alienation through commodification and argued for rational control based on scientific understanding, exercised through the centralized planning (for detailed accounts see Schmidt, 1972; Frolov, 1981). Such epistemologies are not free-floating abstractions but conceptions of reality anchored into the structure of society, part of its praxis. However, “really existing socialism”, just as “really existing capitalism”, never quite lived up to what it claimed to be. In the case of the Soviet bloc countries, the drive for industrialization, the over-riding aim of creating a working class proletariat and the Cold War became political obsessions which created an implacable distance between scientific socialist environmentalism and communist development strategies. Cities such as Lodz were conceived principally as production units and strategically planned by economic ministries (Thomas, 1999). Large-scale industrial development was the leading priority, followed by mass housing; investment in infrastructure, social provision and consumer goods lagged way behind, and investment shortages led to the systematic evasion of environmental protection measures. So by the end of the 1980s Lodz certainly had more contaminated natural environmental systems than equivalent cities in the West, but it also enjoyed certain spatial conditions (compactness, combined heat and energy provision, dominance of public transport, ample open space) and social characteristics (equality and social justice, as understood in socialist terms) which fitted conveniently into the emerging urban environmental agendas of that time.

The environment was equally important in political terms. In the 1980s the environmental movement was the only opposition group tolerated in Poland and was crucial to regime change throughout Central and Eastern Europe (Tickle and Welsh, 1998). However, although the regionally-based and highly heterogeneous environmental movement achieved political status, it failed to capture the popular political imagination. Lodz was typical of the fact that large sectors of socialist society benefited directly from the industrialization process and were little inclined to examine its environmental costs, whilst traditional and religious beliefs continued to hold sway for many immigrants from rural areas. Once socialism was abandoned, the environment lost much of its political potency and became re-institutionalized as a management concern. However, improvement of the environment of Lodz was a crucial requirement not only in terms of a symbolic break with socialism and its legacy, but also as a technical requirement for aspirations to European Union membership. Whilst environmentalism was important in ending the socialist regime, it was

also a means of legitimising the transition to capitalism, but now directed towards external agencies rather than urban populations (see City of Lodz Office 1997; Polish Ministry of the Environment, 2002). Economic collapse and industrial restructuring facilitated this enormously, though undoubtedly the Polish state and local government devoted considerable resources to this end. However, neither before nor during transition was the environment a significant issue for the majority of citizens in Lodz (Wodz and Wodz, 1998). This tends to support the argument that the environment has been more important as a means to an end than an end in itself, an issue of power politics and system change rather than sustainability as some kind of objective goal.

The 1990s saw the introduction of elected local government, greater urban autonomy and integrated land use planning, which in principle allowed a more integrated and participative urban environmental management. Lodz joined the European network of the Healthy Cities programme. However, inherited power structures and political practices limited the scope citizen participation, corruption increased, alliances were formed between traditional city leaders and new capitalists, whilst local environmental groups either integrated into emerging bureaucracies or marginalized on to the fringes of anti-capitalist protest (Wodz, 2002; Obywatel, 2003). As a consequence, the environmental legitimation of democratic local government had to be consciously created through management practices. Under the socialist system, 'sustainable development' was a doctrinal affair and responsibility of the Communist Party. The capitalist notion of sustainable development holds no equivalent assurances and stresses the responsibility and need for the active involvement of everyone. Rather than a theoretically inherent characteristic of development, sustainability had to be nurtured through demonstration, education, new urban imaginaries and attempts to change the conduct of people's everyday lives (see for example City of Lodz Office, 2001). However, this overt intromission through management into the field of values and personal decision making in turn produced consciousness of the logical inconsistencies, political abuses and the practical dilemmas of sustainability. The battle over life-styles seems to be a losing one when confronted with the stresses and seductions of capitalism.

Is Lodz any more 'sustainable' as a city? Whilst the condition of natural resources has improved in the short-term, along with some regeneration of the built environment, the long-term trends are more troublesome. Lodz is cleaner but consumes more energy, livelier but more congested, wealthier but more unequal, and so forth. Even more so, it is the social agenda of sustainable development which appears most at risk, as issues of equality, social pathologies, participation and inclusion continue on the negative downward spiral. It is insisted in Lodz that these are temporary deficiencies which will be solved as economic growth increases, rather than universal dimensions of unrestrained capitalist accumulation and neoliberal urbanization policy.

There cannot of course be any absolute answer to such a question. Over the period of transition Lodz has become both less 'sustainable' after abandoning the tenets of socialist environmentalism and more 'sustainable' in following the capitalist path of ecological modernization. They are two different truths of sustainability. The wholehearted adoption of capitalist urban discourse is bringing with it a rapid move towards a typically Western urban development agenda: economic restructuring, city promotion, industrial and technology sites, image rebuilding, heritage selling, the culture industry, shopping centres,

new suburbs for the new rich, social differentiation, rising crime, problems of inclusion, new forms of planning, the dilemmas of green-field or brown-field growth, infrastructure improvement, the uncontrollable rise of the car and road congestion, and so forth. The ultimate question is, of course, whether and under what conditions capitalist space is sustainable.

5. Urban environmentalism in Medellín: the defusion of violence

Medellín is a city of two million inhabitants and the centre of a metropolitan area comprising nine other municipalities with a total population of approximately three million. It is located in mountainous countryside some 440 kilometres by road to the north-west of the capital Bogotá. In 1930 it was a town of 100,000 people resting in a rich upland valley in the central cordillera of the Colombian Andes. Now it claws its way ever higher up the steep valley sides and is bursting at the seams. It is a bustling dynamic industrial centre with a strong regional culture and boasts some of the highest rates of utility provision in Latin America.

However, in the 1980s things started to go wrong. Accumulated urban problems and industrial recession combined to produce economic stagnation, widespread impoverishment and accentuated spatial segregation (Medellín Metropolitan Planning Department, 1985). Latent social tensions rose to the surface and then exploded with the emergence of the drugs cartels (Jaramillo, 1996). Violence reached epidemic proportions and the number of homicides in the metropolitan area reached 6,644 in 1991 (1 in 400 per annum). The drugs trade became an issue of international importance and its related violence a threat to internal government. A dual strategy was devised to deal with the problem. The politico-military dimension was coordinated through a presidential programme set up to simultaneously repress and negotiate settlements with illegal organizations and establish pacts between warring factions in the popular sectors of the city. The other dimension, more intuitive and spatial, was aimed at improving living conditions in the poorer areas of the city, and here the environment and the idea of sustainability played a key role in the symbolic reconstruction of a sense of unity and common purpose.

The implicit challenge of urban environmentalism in Medellín was to mobilize meanings of the value of life, harmony and peaceful coexistence in and through nature, and to use the construction of those values to re-think a future overshadowed by violence. The environmental problem lay not so much in the objective conditions of the city's natural resource systems, but in how to insert the environment in the deployment of formal urban development (both discursive and physical) in order to provide coherence and direction to urban social life and to legitimize state authority. The exercise was by no means academic – periodic disasters caused by floods and landslides ensured that the environment was a potent social concern. However, for the sustainability metaphor to acquire social acceptance, meaning had to be mobilized and materialized in the symbolic forms within which people played out their everyday existence.

Discursively, the environment emerged as a vector of the sense of vulnerability affecting the city and was exploited to deflect the complicity or impotence of the city authorities to manage critical levels of unemployment, crime and violence. The first formal manifestation of this argument was in the 1986 development plan, where crime and violence were articulated to disaster prevention, road accidents and fire control, a conjugation of risks which the city had to face up to if the “community[were] to recover a sense of tranquillity and become co-author of its own security” (Medellín Metropolitan Planning Department, 1986). A year later, a landslide buried 300 homes and 500 people, and the vulnerability/environment equation was cruelly given concrete expression. The discursive construction was consolidated in the post-Rio Summit climate of the 1990s, which provided international authority to the city’s use of the environment for conceptually reconstituting a sense of wholeness and harmony in a socially fractured and violent society, and as a means of solidifying optimism in the future (Brand, 2002). The environment became intimately associated with the notions of equality, security, peaceful coexistence, rationality and harmony – all those qualities so notoriously absent from the world of social relations at that time.

Institutions were of fundamental importance in mobilizing these meanings, convert discourse into practical action and ground symbolic meaning in the everyday experience of urban reality. In 1992 the city created the Instituto Mi Río (My River Institute), an executive body for carrying out environmental improvements concerning river basin management, landslide and flood protection measures, forestry and landscaping, with a strong social development component. It worked mainly in the poorer sectors of the city, bringing real physical improvements, greater security, public space and amenity to abandoned communities (Medellín, Instituto Mi Río, 1996, 1999). Its works had physical impact, high media profile and strong community support; above all it was able to demonstrate ‘sustainability’ in action. In the mid-1990s this executive institution was complemented a regulatory one in the form of a regional environmental authority and, as we shall see later, the relationship between them was to prove decisive.

Sustainable urban development, understood as the mobilization of meaning through symbolic form, led to a substantially different spatial agenda from that normally associated with ecological modernization. The functional dimension of spatial organization (energy consumption, pollution, public health, lifestyles, and so forth) ceded to an alternative social rationality. More than a technical issue, the environment was directed towards the systematic organization of visually significant events in the urban landscape: an implicit aestheticization of the urban sustainability ideal. There were three main elements: the elevation of natural elements to key status in spatial organization, the greening of built form, and the redirection of socially significant events to ‘natural space’. In practice this involved, for example, important urban improvements through spatial interventions along the streams flowing down the mountain sides and the extension (and perhaps eventual displacement) of symbolic and recreational space from the traditional city centre to the main river, despite enormous practical obstacles (Brand, 2000).

These urban expressions in Medellín should be contextualized in Colombia’s long formal tradition in international environmental policy and national regulation, dating back to the Stockholm Conference of 1972 (Carrizosa, 1991). During the 1990s neoliberal national

governments continued to develop environmental policy whilst overseeing the privatization of services and dismantling of public institutions (Palacio, 2003) and there was a general 'environmentalization' of urban planning practice (Brand, 2001). The environment was one of only two areas of state expansion. At the national level the Ministry of the Environment was created along with regional environment authorities with considerable regulatory and financial powers, and this counter-trend was undoubtedly an important indirect factor in the emergence of high profile environmental meanings. The other and more recent area of state expansion has been in the field of security and defense (Brand, 2003), with huge investments largely financed by the USA in the armed forces and police, since 2001 justified on the grounds of the war on terrorism.

The new millennium has therefore witnessed a shift in the social significance of the environment. Changes in political leadership, a more authoritarian and repressive mode of governance at both national and city levels, neoliberal fiscal and governmental reforms and military responses to the problems of crime and violence, led to the adjustment of environmental institutions and the primacy of repression over negotiation and the more subtle and integrative strategy of environmentalism (Brand and Prada, 2003). As part of this process, technical environmental regulation now reigns over the social construction of meaning, and this in turn has implied a 'depopularization' of the environment: less direct intervention in the poor sectors of the city and the use of the legal and technical instruments of environmental management by the middle classes in defense of their own interests with regard to particular development projects.

6. Conclusions

This paper has argued and illustrated the diversity of ways in which cities construct meanings in the environment, and how these meanings are mobilized through planning discourse, institutions and spatial form. From the globalizing discourse of sustainable development emerges a diversity of approaches and urban strategies which defy the standard epistemological assumptions and technical strategy of ecological modernization of orthodox sustainable development policy. The environment, far from being an external object, becomes a social construction when spatialized and politicized through urban development, and this in turn necessarily introduces urban trajectories, political conjunctures and regional cultures into the understanding of urban environmentalism.

From the three cities studied, it is clear that the environment can privilege different aspects or components of urban space: architecture and urban space in Birmingham and natural resource systems in Lodz, whilst in Medellín it acquired a predominantly metaphorical condition. Similarly, what it connotes can vary from competitiveness in Birmingham, system change and globalization in Lodz or social harmony in Medellín. These are not of course unique or mutually exclusive meanings but questions of emphasis. What all three cases demonstrate is the way in which the environment has been employed within diverse processes of radical urban transformation to both rationalize change and legitimize city governments.

The general context within which such change has occurred is of course globalization, with neoliberal policies leading the way towards the technification and marketization of the environment and its concomitant depoliticization. Urban environmental management is increasingly directed away from local populations and in the outward direction of global institutional standards and international clients. This unifying tendency of ecological modernization ends to standardize urban approaches, though it is not clear how far this trend will continue in the future. Whilst cities can generally demonstrate improvements in certain aspects of natural resource systems and contamination levels, the social agenda of urban sustainability is worsening: greater inequality, growing poverty and social exclusion. With the emphasis on natural resource systems, the symbolic potential of the environment in terms of social integration diminishes, and has evidently been partially replaced by intensified repressive measures concerning the control over space, such as by-laws, surveillance, heavier policing, militarization, and so forth.

The fundamental weaknesses of urban sustainability based on ecological modernization are evident not only in its social reality, but also the growth imperative and consumption dynamics underneath the environmental surface. As has been frequently observed, cities are in a difficult position to oppose or even modify the competitive dynamics of the urbanization of capital under current globalization processes, yet are faced with enormous problems of governability. In this sense the environment has been an extremely useful urban construction in recent years but, along with the sustainable development idea itself, appears to be waning in the radicalizing climate of neoliberalism and militarization in the new millennium. It will surely take very imaginative city administrations and revitalized environmental and social movements to reverse this trend.

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