Sustainable Cities

New Standpoints **interviews Nico Larco, who teaches urban design at the University of Oregon. Nico Larco defines sustainability in terms of urban development, and talks about "Sustainable Cities Initiatives", in which students take an active part in the sustainable development of cities.**

NSP. People often think of sustainable cities as green building design, parks and biking. Do you agree with them?

Green building, parks, and bike tracks are definitely a part of creating sustainable cities, but they are components of a much larger strategy. On a broad scale, sustainable cities are those that have low carbon emissions, help preserve clean and healthy water, support a robust and diverse ecology, and have a strong identity and sense of place. One of the main ways to conserve energy and limit carbon emissions is to reduce the number of car trips, to the advantage of walking, biking, or transit trips. Cities that are dense, have mix uses (that blend a combination of residential, commercial, cultural, institutional, or industrial), have well connected transportation networks, and create inviting, walkable areas, do well in this regard.

To preserve clean and healthy water, sustainable cities must be careful in how they treat their waterways, by limiting stormwater runoff and pollutants, but they also need to help maintain a healthy water cycle by, where possible, having water naturally returning into the soil and earth, instead of being piped to distant locations.

Sustainable cities are sensitive to the natural ecologies that surround them and help preserve and create habitat that can support a wide range of species. One of the best ways of doing this is building compact cities that don't sprawl out into the natural and agricultural areas around it.

Finally, sustainable cities are ones that have a strong sense of identity and place. This creates areas that are loved, well inhabited, and cared for. While this seems to occur naturally in historic city areas, with the dominance of the automobile and the sameness of commercial areas, newer development often lacks identity: feeling like you are anywhere, and nowhere.

NSP: You strongly advocate multi-family suburban development: isn't that a new notion in American culture? What categories of the population, socially speaking, adopt the multi-family environment?

Suburban multi-family housing has actually existed for decades in the United States, but it has grown tremendously in the last three decades, with over nine million units now in existence. While I don't think it is a good alternative to compact, dense cities, it is a great alternative to typical single-family home sprawl that exists in much of North America. Suburban multi-family housing is much denser than single-family home development and is typically located near commercial areas. The challenge we face is that it is still developed in the typical suburban, disconnected model, without sidewalks, and without direct connections to the things around it. So we have density, but it is impossible to walk from one place

to another. There are a number of us around the country who are working on changing that.

The interesting thing is that this housing type breaks the traditional stereotype of the suburban family: It mostly houses young single people, divorced individuals, single parent families, and the elderly. Their lifestyles are different to that of the typical nuclear family with children; they are much more interested in interaction and contact. This is a huge opportunity for a shift in the way we think of, and develop suburbs in the United States.

How can city-dwellers benefit from compact development?
The advantages are numerous. Compact development limits the amount of wilderness and agricultural lands that are consumed by urban development and in doing this, reduce the impact on habitat and the natural water cycle. It also encourages increased densities of development that, when designed and planned well, promote walking, biking, and transit use. If there was one thing we could change to make cities more sustainable, I would choose this. It is connected to so many of the goals of sustainable cities.

I don't know if this is a drawback, but the primary difficulty in creating compact development – at least in the United States – is a general preference for low-density development. It is funny, because if you talk to people about the kinds of environments they want to live in, they overwhelmingly say, "walkable development with a mix of commercial uses", yet their housing preference is for single-family homes that can't support that kind of development. It is a puzzle.

A former Oregon governor once famously stated that what the citizens of his state disliked most were density and sprawl. I think this applies to most of the United States.

NSP: Now, what is The Sustainable Cities Initiative (SCI)?
SCI is a multidisciplinary organization at the University of Oregon that is focused on sustainability-based research, education, policy, and professional training. We firmly believe that sustainable solutions can only be found when incorporating a range of disciplines. We therefore work with individuals in the areas of architecture, planning, landscape architecture, business, law, journalism, economics, and product design (to name a few). Our goal is to do cutting-edge sustainability-related research and then work to put that knowledge into practise. We do this through professional trainings, through policy work, and through a program we call the Sustainable City Year Project. Each year this program partners a city with more than 25 university courses, to work on real world sustainability-based projects. More than 500 students a year are tackling the problems of a nearby city and helping to envision and implement more sustainable solutions.

NSP: Have other cities or universities adopted your approaches?
We have had over 40 universities come to our workshops in the last two years to learn about how our model works and to see how they can adapt it to their own conditions. These have mostly been North American universities, but this coming year we will be including universities from Spain, Sweden, and Gabon, and are just starting conversations with partners in Ecuador. There is truly a global interest in sustainability concerns and education and we are thrilled to be part of the network of people and organizations that are helping push this work forward.

NSP: You have reached out to such a distant country as China: the city of Cheng Du is part of the project now. How do you intend to collaborate?
China is seeing unprecedented growth that has until recently been primarily evaluated based on GDP growth. That is changing as the central government is starting to prioritize quality of life and sustainability issues. This is a critical shift. We are working with various cities in China on finding models of development that fit the needs and pressures of the Chinese context. Some development in China is really innovative in terms of sustainability, but much still has a lot of room for improvement. Through working with city governments and providing professional training, we are helping transmit some of the lessons learned and research that is happening in the US and Europe. There really is a tremendous opportunity to affect change in China's development patterns. ■

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