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Book Review

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Book review

'One Planet' Cities: Sustaining Humanity within Planetary Limits

D. Thorpe. Routledge Publishers, Abingdon, UK, and New York, USA, 2019, ISBN 9781138615090, £120 (hardcover), ISBN 9781138615106 (paperback), £36.99, 308pp.

'One Planet' Cities addresses the crucial question of how the essential needs of the growing human population can be met without destroying the earth's already over-stretched life-support system. The author David Thorpe, lecturer, consultant and publicist, examines all kinds of aspects of modern urban society: from food provision, biodiversity, climate change, energy, water, transport, industry, circular economy, buildings and neighbourhoods, to technology, finance, decision making and governance, through the critical lens of supporting international standards and indicators. For Thorpe, data verifiability and measurability are key issues. The book is aimed at practitioners and policy makers involved in governance, administration, urban environments and sustainability, as well as students of these subjects.

The book is divided into 18 chapters presenting key issues and their interrelated themes eloquently. It ends with an imagined vision of what a genuinely sustainable future might look like, the *one planet city*, but also shows pathways towards that vision, which in essence consist of processes of 'contraction', gradually reducing the overall levels of consumption, and of 'convergence', reducing the differences between the consumption levels

of the poorest and richest on earth, supported by strong systems of governance. This book presents many cases and examples from practices all over the world, showing that things can be changed for the better, albeit not always easily.

It is my personal view that we have to show our planetary boundaries as clearly as possible, and this book does so. However, we also need to show how built-environment professionals – planners, policy makers, designers, engineers – should or could work towards sustainable cities and city regions. In the chapter on 'How smart is a *smart city*?' Thorpe states that cities are only as smart as their citizens and their leaders: 'Information, evidence, equity and education are the pillars of a smart city...' (p. 222). I could not agree more with this statement and I think it underscores the importance of looking for a fundamental rethinking of primary and secondary education throughout the world, which should focus much more on our planetary challenges, *as well as* potential solutions for today and tomorrow. The development of 'one planeters' needs to be catalysed as soon as possible, and they should be educated from an early age.

The education question brings to mind one idea I got while reading the book. Reading it was a pleasure but I missed one fundamental aspect, especially as the book is intended for students of urban design and planning. As Thorpe rightly says on page six, 'Imagining the future is the first stage in the task of creating it', yet there is not one single image, visual, photograph, map or any other visual-spatial representation in the book. For more than two decades I have been looking for ways in which theory, empirical data, scientific knowledge, literature and case-study knowledge can be communicated in such a way that an urbanism student or (young) practitioner can use these while working as a planner, designer or engineer, helping them to develop solutions and make plans, visions, designs, models and so on. This has not been an easy task, as all planning tools, system engineering approaches or design methods have their different strengths and weaknesses.

However for me, a pattern language approach stands out. This way of working helps to organise complexity, document, evaluate and compare cases, and transform (scientific) knowledge in particular into 'simple' design and planning principles, the so-called patterns, supported by data and literature, and visually illustrated by examples and schemes. Therefore, patterns consist of both verbal and non-verbal elements that build the bridge between the recurring nature of a problem and a physical form that 'solves' that problem. The (large number of) relations between patterns can be developed and visualised within a complex pattern field. A pattern language approach does not prescribe how or what to design or plan; the designer/planner has to decide on these issues themselves for specific cases. However, it does facilitate the inter- and transdisciplinary communication between stakeholders in finding a window of opportunities and a solution space. A *One Planet pattern language* would fit the aims of the One Planet community perfectly: giving a tool to make plans and proposals for interventions in the built environment based on the knowledge and expertise that already exists, as shown perfectly by this 'One Planet' Cities book.

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