How do government officials, businessmen, scholars, activists, and urban residents conceive of sustainability? How do we see sustainability in practice in our urban spaces? How much do local contexts matter when thinking about sustainability? Do meanings of sustainability change from place to place, and, if so, how? "Adventures in Sustainable Urbanism" takes readers on a series of field trips from post-earthquake neighborhoods of Christchurch, New Zealand, to the postindustrial suburbs of Dortmund in Germany’s Ruhr region with stops in China, Canada, and the United States to see sustainability, or at least rhetoric around it, in practice. But the editors begin with examining the word “sustainability” and acknowledging that the word itself can be overly broad in its use. By using the field trip as the organizing framework for the chapters and stressing the socially constructed nature of sustainability, the editors hope readers will think of sustainability as part of a “process of constant political struggle” (p. vi). Rather than being presented as an unalloyed good, sustainability is shown to often be a green cover for exacerbating social inequalities.

The deployment of the language of sustainability and the political struggles attached to it are evident throughout the chapters even when not explicitly stated by the authors. The first two chapters, written by the volume’s editors, provide broad historical and contemporary overviews of sustainable development, urban theories, and the rise of urban planning as a profession. The conceptual ambition of these chapters is to work against a technocratic, solutions-oriented mindset often seen in companies and individuals who sell sustainability as a product. Instead the editors emphasize the contingencies and conflict behind urban boosters’ conflation between urban development and sustainability. After these initial chapters, the field trips begin. Each chapter is written by a scholar and resident of the place they explore, which adds a measure of intimacy to the exploration. Despite the diversity of outlook and places explored, the chapters share an implicit critique of the ways sustainability is often used by city officials, boosters, and residents.

Tim Baird and C. Michael Hall survey historic and contemporary sites, including hotels, cathedrals, and an art center, in Christchurch after a series of earthquakes in 2010 and 2011. Christchurch’s Central City Recovery Plan used the hallmarks of sustainability discourse to present a post-earthquake image of a green, prosperous, and accessible city for everyone. But Baird and Hall see fissures, especially in the “Share an Idea” campaign in the Te Papa Ōtākaro/Avon River precinct plan, noting that many proposals supported by residents had not been implemented. They conclude by...
noting that the idea of public consultation “has been proven to be somewhat of a misnomer ... in which normal democratic rights remain suspended, [and] the notion of urban development is grounded in real estate values” (p. 62). In their chapter on Newtown Creek, which divides Brooklyn from Queens, Winifred Curran and Trina Hamilton continue the critique of real estate development and gentrification along this massively polluted yet almost ignored waterway, the site of a decades-long oil spill. Their tour of the creek also puts into relief the presence of the natural world in the midst of a Superfund site and New York’s own industrial past. The specter of oil haunts Calgary, the urban center of Canadian oil development. Freya Kristensen’s tour includes meetings with city government staff to discuss a “visioning program” called imagineCalgary in the Office of Sustainability. In Vancouver, a Canadian city with a less visible relationship with oil, urban researchers Marit Rosol and Cristina Temenos create a historical field trip from a freeway overpass to a community garden. Their trip explores Vancouver’s past and present reputation as a green city through its transportation infrastructure, available housing, and density and asks how one can see policy priorities in the urban built environment.

The prominent place of real estate development and business interests throughout these chapters becomes most explicit in geographer Constance Carr’s contribution on Luxembourg. Carr notes the small nation’s outsized significance as a European government, banking, and business center, and it is here that the ways sustainability is easily amenable to commercial goals is most clear. Her tour takes us past the nondescript headquarters of Amazon Europe on a cobblestone lane in the city of Luxembourg, the university, and banking headquarters before stopping at a winery along the Mosel River to reflect on the nation’s dependence on finance, government, and commerce for the social viability of sustainability. Carr’s chapter raises vital questions about the often uneasy and fragile relationship between sustainability and economic development, including what possibilities exist for a notion of sustainability that challenges rather than capitulates to economic imperatives.

Economic imperatives mean more than just creating hospitable conditions for Amazon Europe. Geographer David Giband situates his field trip just outside of Montpellier, France, an Écocité designated by the French Ministry of Ecology. This Écocité encountered disapproval from environmentalists who argued that the project’s focus on real estate development and green living for members of the “creative class” rather than low-income people made a farce of sustainability. Located at some distance from the city center, the development in the Oz district was touted as a “participatory city,” but Giband sees social separation and fragmentation at its center. Despite the nods toward environmental responsibility, he wonders if such developments mean that we are “facing a brand new sustainable urban archipelago or a fragmented mode of urbanization throwing its back on the traditional city for good?” (p. 171). The drive to build new, ostensibly sustainable cities rather than invest in older urban fabrics is also evident in I-Chun Catherine Chang’s chapter on Tianjin eco-city in northeast China. Built inside one of the country’s largest industrial belts, Tianjin was meant to house 350,000 permanent and 60,000 temporary residents. But on her tour, Chang finds the city massively underpopulated. Her graduate student tour guide says that her parents, a school teacher and a grocery store worker, could never afford to move into the city despite government incentives. And despite the empty apartments, migrant construction workers live in temporary structures outside the city. This story leads one to ponder how massive urban green construction projects have anything to do with sustainability for residents who may or may not exist.

The volume’s final two tours are situated not in new but in historic places. Michal Kohut sees
California’s Inland Empire as “the battleground between conservative politics of white entitlement from Orange County and the progressive politics of social justice” from Los Angeles (p. 188). In his teaching, he structures courses around the region and its agricultural and urban practices from the Parent Navel Orange Tree in Riverside to the Redlands Public Library which houses materials related to the lives of Mexican citrus workers. Kohut admits his skepticism around green plans and hopes for an alternative centered on something other than the ideology of growth. In the final tour, Susanne Frank details her move to Dortmund in the German Ruhr. Residents discourage Frank and her family from moving to Nordstadt, a part of the city seen as unsafe with high crime rates. She takes their observations as a catalyst to research the community and the choices residents make as they have children in their neighborhoods. While she understands the creation of middle-class enclaves that prioritize children’s safety, she fears how much they conflict with residents’ ostensibly progressive political rhetoric.

In the conclusion, the editors return to reflect on sustainability’s long history as a guiding concept shaping urban design while noting again that the concept is not without controversy. If anything, the chapters in this volume demonstrate how easily sustainability aligns with the social and economic commitments of educated, middle-class people, sometimes described as the creative class. This alignment shows how sustainability acts as a key ideological tool for advancing certain social, political, and economic viewpoints beyond narrow conceptions of nature or the environment. While the editors often emphasize that ideas about sustainability are social constructions, they spend less time analyzing those constructions. This book can be read productively alongside such volumes as Hillary Angelo’s *How Green Became Good: Urbanized Nature and the Making of Cities and Citizens* (2020) to think further about those connections and the various ways that sustainable urbanism and visions of urban futures have come to be a social construction. These field trips reveal realities on the ground from underutilized yet vital community centers to cobblestone streets to large-scale eco-cities to readers, but also raise questions. These include: What, if any, synthetic conclusions can be made about sustainability? How does sustainability look in other parts of the world not covered in this volume? How do we talk about the importance of specific places? What would a sustainability that focuses more on environmental justice than economic opportunity look like in a city? And ultimately how is sustainability a useful concept? The field trips in this volume put into relief the necessity of grappling with these questions to confront our urban past, present, and future.


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