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Reimagining the Sustainable City

Author: Doriana Musaj

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Introduction from the Editors

The Architecture of Relation: Reimagining the Sustainable City

DORIANA MUSAJ

POLIS University

At a time when cities across the world are struggling with crises of identity, density, and meaning, sustainability has become a word that risks losing its essence. What once evoked a balance between human and natural systems is now often flattened into a technocratic slogan. Against this background, the Polis Urban Forum sought to bring the debate back to its intellectual roots.

The round table *“Exploring Sustainable Urban Futures”* was part of the series Polis Urban Forum, organized within Tirana Planning Week 2024 (April 22-25, 2024) by the Faculty of Planning, Environment and Urban Management, Polis University in partnership with the Heinrich Böll Stiftung Tirana (HBS) foundation. Their shared cultural and social agendas made this collaboration particularly resonant. The discussion took place at Destil Creative Hub, in the heart of Tirana, as an open event inviting architects, planners, students, and citizens to reflect on the shared condition of urban life.

The session gathered four scholars - Franco Purini, Pantoleon Skayannis, Skender Luarasi, and Llazar Kumaraku - each representing different schools of thought and cultural backgrounds, yet united by a common interest: the city as a living laboratory of ideas. Moderated by Doriانا Musaj, the conversation followed a fishbowl format, in which questions and reflections circulated among the discussants and the audience; as Elinor Ostrom would say, *“the larger the audience, the wider the pool of the common.”*

The City and Its Meanings

For Franco Purini, architecture has always been sustainable, *“it has always organized life,”* he said. To the architect, the problem lies not in architecture itself, but in what has been forgotten: tectonics, typology, and the relationship between form and thought. In his words, the discipline is losing its hierarchy of knowledge, *“Our faculties are disintegrating. Subjects multiply, but the true issues of building disappear.”*

Pantoleon Skayannis, approaching from a planning and governance perspective, defined the city as the very condition of sustainability, polis as both urbs and civitas. A sustainable city, he argued, depends on the equilibrium between physical form and human organization. Architects may shape space, but they must also understand how society inhabits it. *“You have to unify the two Tirana,”* he said, referring to the physical and social layers that remain disconnected in the capital of Albania. From a more conceptual lens, Skender Luarasi questioned the autonomy of architecture. *“We should not confuse autonomy with constancy,”* he noted. For him, architecture exists within a web of changing forces, - gravitational, social, environmental, - and its role is to overcome them through transformation. Referring to the historic evolution of the living environment he concludes that *“If the forces did not change, architecture would have remained the same from antiquity to today,”* he observed. Llazar Kumaraku, in turn, grounded the discussion in the enduring nature of form. While styles and languages evolve, typology persists, *“The cathedral of Paris carries Roman, Gothic, and Renaissance arches, but the typology remains constant.”* He emphasized the mere fact that what changes is expression, but what remains is the structure.

Together, these viewpoints illustrate the paradox inherent in architectural sustainability: it is simultaneously eternal and constantly evolving. Purini evokes the neglected significance of form; Skayannis reinstates the civic as the authentic standard of sustainability; Luarasi contextualizes architecture within the dynamic forces that influence society; and Kumaraku reestablishes continuity via typology. Their similarity lies in the reminder that architecture transcends mere building; it embodies a dynamic network of relationships between structure and significance, between stability and transformation, and between the urban environment we create and the life it is designed to support.

The Challenges of the Contemporary City

When the conversation shifted from architecture to the city itself, Skayannis was unequivocal *"Cities are the question, not just architecture."* The challenges of the urban millennium, he argued, are primarily social, - equity, governance, migration, and mobility, - all intensified by climate change and digitalization. Cities like Istanbul, Cairo, and Hong Kong illustrate how density and inequality now coexist in paradoxical ways: compactness without community. Purini expanded the discussion to the scale of the megacity, warning of fragmentation. *"Rome is already several cities within one,"* he said. *"It is held together only by its 250 churches, -religion not in the theological sense, but as a social glue."* He foresaw the disintegration of global metropolises like Los Angeles or Shanghai, where repetition and anonymity erode identity, *"Tens of kilometers of identical towers, where it becomes impossible to recognize oneself in space, that is the misfortune of disintegration."* For Kumaraku, the danger lies in imitation and trends: cities increasingly resemble one another, losing the uniqueness of place. From the "Bilbao effect" to the global race for towers, urban identity risks being replaced by architectural fashion. Luarasi pointed to another kind of loss - the disappearance of history as a foundation for design. *"In architecture schools today, history is not taught as it once was,"* he lamented. Unlike mathematics, which can exist without its past, architecture depends on historical consciousness. *"History is important for the future,"* he said. *"By studying the past, we make better choices for what is yet to come."*

When you listen to these voices, you can tell that the city is stuck between remembering and forgetting, being dense and spreading out, copying and losing. The modern city, whether it's Tirana or Los Angeles, is no longer a single thing; it's a place where tensions exist between global models and local meanings, between the promise of progress and the fragility of belonging. What the discussants exposed, each from different tradition, showed is the urgent need to reclaim the city as a space of consciousness: a place where form remembers, history directs, and identity resists erasure. Sustainability begins not with technology solutions but with cultural awareness, the courage to remember a city's past significance and to imagine its potential future development.

Anonymity and the Ethics of the City

The most significant part of the conversation arose when Purini described anonymity as the fundamental condition of contemporary urban life. In the outskirts of Rome, he stated, individuals no longer acknowledge one another; *"Living in anonymity destroys life. It creates detachment - even within families."* Sustainability, in this sense, is not just ecological or economic but deeply human, the capacity to rebuild social dialogue. Skayannis added that sustainability today is in danger of

methodological distortion. If its four dimensions - social, ecological, economic, and institutional - fall out of balance, future generations might inherit a hollow concept. Social sustainability, he warned, is under threat from the erosion of equity and justice, *"The notion of sustainability must now include welfare and governance - who makes decisions, how decisions are made, and how the public participates."* He drew an evocative example from Rotterdam, a city designed to live with water. Minor basins transform into lakes during intense rainfall and then serve as skate parks in arid periods, exemplifying a design that integrates resilience into cultural practices. *"We must design with natural principles,"* he concluded, *"not merely mitigate problems."* Kumaraku, invoking Guy Debord in 'The Society of the Spectacle,' where he cites Lewis Mumford, *"increasing communication increases distance,"* warned that *"increasing communication increases distance."* The virtual metropolis, although uniting us, can exacerbate our isolation. He proposed that the issue lies in maintaining human closeness in an era of digital mediation. Purini, revisiting the concept of meaning, contended that each city encapsulates a plethora of interpretations. Central Park, he stated, is not merely a park but a palimpsest of memory - a reconstruction that maintains the concept of wilderness inside an urban framework. *"Likewise, the linear system of Tirana,"* he continued, *"is a monument not only to the city but to the nation - connecting mountains to sea, east to west. It is a sacred sign that must be restored."*

The above observations lead to the conclusion that sustainability is a reflection of the inner state of the city rather than an additional layer added to urban life. Anonymity, alienation, and excess are not merely symptoms of modernity but they serve as indicators of a profound cultural schism. Thus to preserve a city means to uphold acknowledgment, discourse, and remembrance. When architecture no longer communicates with the public, and the city neglects its own narrative, sustainability becomes devoid of significance. The objective then is to reconstruct the grammar of relations: to envision cities where proximity is reinstated, where natural and human rhythms harmonize, and where space transforms into a medium of connection rather than division.

Designing the Future

The discussion culminated in the question: *Can sustainability be designed?*

Purini resisted the word itself *"I don't like how sustainability has become a media message,"* he admitted. For him, the task is not to repeat the term but to reinterpret it, to understand what no longer works in the city and what can evolve. *"It's not about preserving; it's about knowing how to move forward."* Skayannis emphasized purpose *"The key question is who we design for."* He called for principles of inclusiveness that respond to climate, technology, and demographic shifts. Kuma-

raku's response was almost paradoxical *"There is hope only for those who have no hope."* To him, innovation may lie in returning to tradition - not in form, but in method, in how we think about space and continuity. For Luarasi, the synthesis was clear: city-making is an art, not a formula, - *"We can only speak of principles in art,"* - he said, by adding that *"formulas are the problem."* Designing cities, he proposed, is the art of moderation - the ability to resolve tensions without destroying what makes the city human.

Ultimately, these viewpoints demonstrated that sustainability should be fostered rather than built; it is a discipline of interpretation rather than a production. Purini's appeal for critical renewal, Skayannis's ethical pragmatism, Kumaraku's emotional inversion, and Luarasi's aesthetic moderation all led to a similar understanding that the city's survival depends less on exciting new developments and more on the art of caring. The sustainable city, from this viewpoint, is characterized not by relentless expansion, but by its ability to pause, reflect, and reorganize through discourse. Planning transforms into an act of empathy, and designing becomes a practice of active listening. This area of mutual acknowledgment opens the door to the potential for a truly sustainable urban future.

Afterthought

The outcome of the Polis Urban Forum was characterized by a constellation of ideas rather than a consensus. Sustainability was not delineated, but it was reconceptualized as a discourse between memory and creativity, between autonomy and connectivity, between the city we inherit and the one we have yet to build. The round table emphasized that urban sustainability is not merely a technological accomplishment but rather an ethical and cultural endeavor. It depends on our capacity to listen, inquire, and nurture the unseen connections that drive a city.

Throughout the discourse, it became evident that sustainability cannot exist as an isolated concept, instead it necessitates continual reinterpretation through experiencing contexts. The discussions at the round table encompassed not only architecture and infrastructure but also themes of belonging, identity, and the delicate equilibrium between continuity and change. Their ideas converge on a common appeal to restore the human dimension in architecture and planning, to reclaim significance, intimacy, and empathy in the creation of space.

This appeal seeks to reconnect mind and space, knowledge and duty, transforming sustainability from a mere objective into a practice of responsibility, fostering a continuous civic conversation that preserves the city's life.

**This text is based on the round table "Exploring Sustainable Urban Futures: Challenges, Concepts, and Principles," held during the Polis Urban Forum / Tirana Planning Week 2024, co-organized by Polis University and Heinrich Böll Stiftung Tirana.*