



Ubiquitous Eco-Cities? A critical assessment of the internationalisation of eco-city practice

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The mainstreaming of urban sustainability has brought about a new global phenomenon: the so-called 'eco-city'. Recent years have witnessed an impressive proliferation of eco-city practice, from Masdar, the self-proclaimed 'world's first carbon-neutral, zero-waste city' in the United Arab Emirates, to Tianjin Binhai Eco-City (China), one of a reported one hundred or so eco-cities currently under development in China, and from France's thirteen *écocités* to India's four eco-cities planned for the Mumbai-Delhi Industrial Corridor. Altogether, according to the most recent global census (2011), there are a total of 178 eco-city initiatives worldwide. Following on from an earlier generation of sustainable cities in the 1980s and 1990s, the growth of this new breed of eco-cities has been particularly pronounced since the mid 2000s, and especially across Asia.

This phenomenon, then, prompts a number of questions: what do these initiatives have in common, and is it meaningful and indeed possible to define 'eco-cities', given the apparent diversity and fast moving development? More importantly, what insights can we gain from the various experience to date? What challenges arise from locating, designing and implementing eco-cities?

One compelling way of reading the current eco-city phenomenon is to understand it in terms of a confluence of factors that have contributed to the increasing internationalisation and standardisation of urban sustainability concepts and practices – that is, the 'ubiquitous' eco-city. What is meant by this is not just that the phenomenon has become more widespread globally, but that in the course of doing so an international narrative has evolved that is distinct from both previous urban sustainability discourses and particular local practices. This narrative has the following characteristics, among others: a preponderance of CO₂/GHG targets and a related focus on energy systems ('low-carbon' eco-city, 'solar city' etc); the emergence of new coalitions of governmental, non-governmental and private actors involved in international knowledge and policy transfer (e.g. Climate Positive Development Program/C40); a strong technology focus ('smart city'); and the underlying discourse of 'ecological modernisation'.

The emergence of the 'ubiquitous' eco-city has to be understood as a gradual process within the context of evolving urban sustainability policies. While there is a clear rationale for this, it nevertheless invites critical questions about likely drawbacks, such as the apparent imbalance between various aspects of urban sustainability, the potential loss of local identity, and the risks to democratic urban politics.

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