



SUSTAINABILITY MATTERS: PROSPECTS FOR A JUST TRANSITION IN CALGARY, CANADA'S PETRO-CITY

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Introduction

Journalists recognize that at heart they are storytellers. Academics tend not to see ourselves as mere storytellers—but we are. In 2010 we took up an invitation to write a regular column on sustainability matters for Calgary’s *Fast Forward Weekly*. We listened to the public conversations Calgarians were having—the collective stories they were telling and retelling. We came to appreciate the power of the stories we tell ourselves, and we realized that even as people begin to lose faith in their stories, without new stories they are reluctant to abandon the comfort of the old.

Facts and figures on their own rarely have the power to move people. In *Sustainability Matters*, we articulate, interpret, and critique stories that we in the West have been telling ourselves for some time now—like the story that all good things come from economic growth, or that technology will solve all our problems. But many of us now believe that we are at an epochal moment in the history of our city and of our species and that, more than ever, we need to craft a new story. This book is a small contribution to that effort.

The original motivation for the collection of essays that form the core of this book (chapters 4 to 13) was to engage Calgarians in discussion, debate, and exploration of current events as they unfolded week to week. We were putting into practice what we believe is an obligation of all academics—to be engaged intellectuals. As such, our goal was to write in an inclusive manner that speaks to all Calgarians, including academics and post-secondary and post-graduate students.

Our goal for the current collection remains the same—to engage and educate readers. These essays offer more than debate and opinion; they

also present evidence via government and not-for-profit reports and websites, as well as peer-reviewed academic books and journals, for readers to investigate issues in more depth.

A core attribute of sustainability analysis is systems thinking. In these essays, we attempt to connect the dots. To illuminate causes, we probe behind the political flashpoints of the day, which can tend to focus on the symptoms. We make the argument that local phenomena like sprawl, auto dependence, affordability, lack of economic diversification, and broken governance are all connected; they are not isolated issues to be dealt with in their respective bureaucratic silos. We argue further that none of these local issues can be divorced from global challenges such as climate change, income inequality, and economic crisis. Instead, they are systemic manifestations of fundamentally unsustainable patterns of human settlement.

The public debates of the time dictated our topics. But as the *Fast Forward* column evolved, we began to see a pattern. The early essays took on some of the most immediate sustainability issues in the city of Calgary, including land use planning and transportation, and the politics and economics of these processes. As the column matured, we found ourselves exploring the technical, ecological, and political dimensions of issues like energy and economic diversification—issues that were still core to our petro-city but were generally perceived as rooted in provincial- and national-scale politics and economics. Our stories got bigger.

In the later essays, we widened our lens once again. Rather than continue to hammer away at the day to day of city politics, we were compelled to connect these debates to issues of global significance. Cities, after all, are not isolated islands. We invited Calgarians to reflect on local issues in a global context and to consider the Sustainable Calgary principle that our bid to achieve sustainability cannot be at the expense of our neighbours—whether they be the family next door or on the other side of the planet. We connected our stories to the stories being told in the global village.

This book is a place-based exploration of the concept of sustainability from the vantage point of Calgary—a fast-growing, wealthy, car-dependent, sprawling, culturally diverse, cosmopolitan urban centre. The book is also the story of a unique period in our city's history. In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, our political conversation has reflected

an understanding of sustainability, but we have struggled mightily to turn that knowledge into action.

The themes articulated in this book transcend Calgary. We offer these matters of sustainability in the city of Calgary as a microcosm of the issues faced by cities around the world, particularly those of the more affluent nations. Furthermore, to the extent that cities are imagined as the engines of growth and creativity in the global human enterprise (more than half of humanity is now urbanized), the issues faced by Calgarians transcend urbanism. In this sense, Calgary—its governance, energy regime, diversity, economic development, and ecological health—is a microcosm not only of cities but of the global village.

The structure of the book emerged rather organically as a praxis—a dialogue of theory and practice. Pedagogically, the book is informed by the tradition of radical education whose practitioners, most notably Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, counsel educators to start where the people are.¹ So while critical theory inspires the book, most citizens are not critical theorists and do not necessarily adhere to radical critiques of the status quo. To paraphrase Freire, educators should aspire to stretch the thread that joins an educator to his or her audience, but not to break the thread.

Our essay series started with instrumental, liberal, practical proposals for change that would find the light of day within a neoliberal capitalist economic reality. For example, confining debate and discussion to proposals for good urban design may frustrate the critical theorist, but it is the ground on which much of the debate in Calgary begins. Our challenge, moving from essay to essay, was to leverage those starting points and nudge debate onto more critical theoretical terrain. We attempted to do this both within the individual essays and through the arc of the essay series. The reader can judge whether we have been successful.

If critical urban theorists are to bridge the theory-practice divide and contribute to change, then we have to make our theoretical discourse accessible. The arc of these essays reflects a growing confidence in building that bridge. We walked the line between the average citizen discounting our words as academic impracticality and academic colleagues doing the same with the charge of simplistic analysis. Engaging citizens through a journalistic medium, we experimented with the art of storytelling in a way that we hope achieved, in some degree, what Leonie Sandercock, an

urban planner and academic, advocates as the power of storytelling in planning practice and pedagogy.² The book also straddles two fields of inquiry that rarely communicate with one another: the literature on cities, processes of urbanization, and critical urban theory, on the one hand, and the sustainable development discourse that originates in the international development enterprise, on the other.

Chapter 1 outlines, in broad strokes, the challenge of urban sustainability. We review critical commentary on the modern city and processes of urbanization as well as the diverse prescriptions for change that have been proposed since the publication of the World Commission on Environment and Development's *Our Common Future*, popularly known as the Brundtland Report, which introduced sustainable development to the global policy debate.³ We suggest that contemporary themes in critical urban theory are the most productive lens through which to understand cities and processes of urbanization.

For over a quarter century, sustainable development has been a prominent theme in the global conversation about the future of our economy, human societies, our planet, and the cities that most people call home. In chapter 2, we provide a brief overview of the emergence and evolution of the concept of "sustainable development"—its definition, critiques of the conventional use of the term, how and why it has been popularized, frameworks we use to understand it, and some of the tools that have been devised to operationalize the concept in cities. In chapter 3, we provide a brief introduction to the city of Calgary, including key moments in its evolution and a critique of its current trajectory. We introduce a set of five principles of sustainability that emerged from a deliberative citizen-led process. These principles help frame the discussion and debate that we hope will be provoked by the book.

Chapters 4 to 13 comprise an adapted and updated collection of essays that we wrote and published in Calgary's *Fast Forward Weekly* from 2010 to 2015. In these essays, we cover a wide range of topics in a style that is provocative, myth-busting, and evidence-based. Each chapter presents a set of essays under wide-ranging themes that play out not only in Calgary but in most of the world's cities and communities. These themes include public transit, the private automobile, economic growth, sprawl, arts and culture, environment, social justice, governance, and—of particular

importance in Calgary—energy. Within the essays, readers will find references to other cities that are facing some of the same challenges as Calgary, as well as stories of cities and city districts that, while still falling short of the ideal, are widely acknowledged as early adopters and innovators in the sustainability transition. The final chapter takes up the question of why sustainability matters and proposes five defining features of sustainability as a philosophy for the age of ecology.

This book takes the point of view that conventional approaches to how humans make a living on our planet, approaches crafted within the confines of a capitalist economic system, are not working. For all its flaws, the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro convened the global community to create an agenda for sustainable development, because the evidence was undeniable that conventional approaches were failing all species, including our own. Over the past thirty years, the concept of sustainable development has been ubiquitous, and there is much criticism that it can mean anything to anybody. Our position is that sustainability is a radical concept and that an assessment of conventional approaches through a sustainability lens obliges us to take up the challenge as citizens to help create communities, cities, nations, and a global village that are sustainable for the long term.

Through these essays, we invite readers to examine the specific historical forces that have shaped issues like sprawl in Calgary. In the spirit of Peter Marcuse's call to expose, propose, and politicize, many of the essays name and challenge the existing power structures, chief among them the private sector development industry, that maintain the unsustainable trajectory of Calgary's urban growth.⁴ We advocate for an uncompromising and ethically defensible approach to dealing with issues of economic and cultural marginalization in Calgary—echoing past and current formulations of the “right to the city,” as first articulated by Henri Lefebvre and, more recently, by Peter Marcuse.⁵ We focus on making the connections across social, ecological, and economic domains in order to decipher the contradictions, crisis tendencies, and lines of potential or actual conflict that claim the headlines in Calgary, none more so than the future of our energy industry in the face of climate change. Many of the essays go beyond identification of the tensions and critiques of the current reality and propose alternatives, including renewable energy transitions,

transportation futures that decentre the private automobile, non-market housing models, co-operative forms of economy, and non-consumerist models of urban life.

Leveraging issues of the day, the essays introduce a variety of theoretical concepts that invite citizens to consider issues on a more abstract and critical plane. Embedded in essays on the role of arts and culture and the idea of the “creative city” are critiques of the evolution from a managerialist mode of urban governance to an entrepreneurial mode. Such an evolution sidelines issues of social justice and ecological decay, resulting in what David Harvey calls “a stimulating if often destructive maelstrom of urban-based cultural, political, production and consumption innovations” and what Richard Florida calls “the creative city.”⁶ Harvey was one of the first urbanists to argue that urbanization is first and foremost about endless growth and the centralization of capital.⁷

We used our bi-monthly platform to introduce conceptual tools, including Harvey Molotch’s notion of the urban growth machine; Clarence Stone’s urban regime theory; and interpretations of gentrification by theorists like Lees, Slater and Wyley, and Ley and Dobson.⁸ These offerings invite readers to look beyond the local headlines, coffee shop discussions, and civic forums of debate in order to better understand the forces that shape Calgary and the opportunities for change.

A word on terminology. Already we have introduced the original formulation of the Brundtland Report’s *sustainable development*. We have also used the stand-alone term *sustainability*. To further qualify *sustainability*, we now introduce the notions of “strong” and “weak” sustainability, signifying a divergence of theory and practice since the release of the Brundtland Report.

We equate “weak sustainability” with what we argue is the compromised concept of sustainable development. In our view, the concept holds too much of the old paradigm of development: it maintains allegiance to the idea of economic growth, a technocentric view of where solutions lie, and an unwillingness to address issues of power and neocolonialism in the current world order. Weak sustainability also encompasses the notion of complete substitutability of forms of capital: for example, if we cause the extinction of honeybees, we can substitute that loss with technology.

“Strong sustainability,” in contrast, forcefully challenges whether economic growth is still a viable strategy; argues that change will have to reach deep into social, cultural, and political ways of being on the planet; and calls out inequality, abuse of power, and the neocolonial nature of the current world order. Strong sustainability holds to the notion that very little of nature is substitutable. We use the shorthand “sustainability” to mean “strong sustainability.”⁹

NOTES

- 1 Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary ed., trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 2005).
- 2 Leonie Sandercock, “Out of the Closet: The Importance of Stories,” *Planning Theory and Practice* 4, no. 1 (2003): 11–28.
- 3 World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/5987our-common-future.pdf>.
- 4 Peter Marcuse, “Critical Planning: An Interview with Peter Marcuse,” *Critical Planning* 15 (Summer 2008): 111–20.
- 5 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 1992); Peter Marcuse, “From Critical Urban Theory to the Right to the City,” *City* 13, nos. 2–3 (2010): 185–97.
- 6 David Harvey, *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography* (London: Routledge, 2012), 362; Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: Revisited*, 10th anniversary ed. (Philadelphia: Basic Books, 2014).
- 7 David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London: Verso, 2013).
- 8 Harvey Molotch, “The City As a Growth Machine: Toward a Political Economy of Place,” *American Journal of Sociology* 82, no. 2 (1976): 309–32; Clarence N. Stone, *Regime Politics: Governing Atlanta 1946–1988* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1989); Loretta Lees, Tom Slater, and Elvin Wily, *Gentrification* (London: Routledge, 2007); David Ley and Cory Dobson, “Are There Limits to Gentrification? The Contexts of Impeded Gentrification in Vancouver,” *Urban Studies* 45, no. 12 (2008): 2471–98.
- 9 For a thorough discussion of the concepts of strong and weak sustainability, see Eric Neumayer, *Weak Versus Strong Sustainability: Exploring the Limits of Two Opposing Paradigms*, 4th ed. (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2013). William Rees’s discussion of the expansionist (weak sustainability) and ecological (strong sustainability) world views is also an excellent source. William Rees, “Achieving Sustainability: Reform or Transformation?” *Journal of Planning Literature* 9, no. 4 (1995): 343–61.

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