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**Reconfiguring “the social” in sustainable development:  
community, citizenship and innovation in new urban neighbourhoods**

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In April 2014 London's Royal Society of Arts (RSA), a 250-year old organization that describes its purpose as finding innovation and practical solutions to today's social challenges, organized a conference titled *“Developing Socially Productive Places”*. The event brought 100 delegates to the RSA's central London office to debate how investment in the built environment can strengthen local communities by contributing to economic and social productivity. Among the conference delegates were urban planners, architects, property developers, housing associations, local government officials, social enterprises, and a former housing minister. The RSA's Chief Executive, Matthew Taylor, introduced the conference by calling on delegates to consider the importance of gaining a deep understanding of how communities work and how people understand their own places in order to make investments in the built environment more effective. He invited delegates to collectively develop new approaches, policies, and potentially institutions, to make this happen.

The RSA's conference is one of a growing number of debates taking place in the UK advocating new approaches to urban development that pay greater attention to local understandings of place and to the social outcomes of change in the built environment. These debates take a variety of forms from online groups and blogs, often led by individuals with a personal and professional interest in progressive urbanism, to events, conference workshops and reports that present institutional

perspectives on the need for change in built environment professions. For example in 2011, the Berkeley Group, a major UK house-builder, hosted a debate and published a report titled *"Putting the S-Word back into sustainability: can we be more social?"* (Dixon 2011) arguing that the social pillar of sustainability was in danger of dropping out of planning vocabulary in an era dominated by environmental concerns. In the same year, the Young Foundation, a social innovation centre in East London, published *"Design for Social Sustainability"* (Woodcraft et al. 2011) proposing that the social infrastructure in new communities should receive same attention as the physical infrastructure. In 2012, the architecture practice John Thomson & Partners hosted a debate as part of London's Festival of Architecture about the role of design in supporting social sustainability. In 2013, Tina Saaby, Copenhagen's City Architect, addressed the Academy of Urbanism's *"Digital Urbanism"* conference with a call to "consider urban life before urban space; consider urban space before buildings".<sup>i</sup> There are many other examples of this debate in action to be found in blogs, articles and events in and around the UK.

The language of these debates is fluid. Political concerns, policy issues and popular discourse are frequently re-assembled to frame arguments for changing the way people and places are understood in planning policy and in practice. For example, the challenge of meeting housing needs in an era of austerity and public sector spending cuts is cited as a reason to pay greater attention to the relationship between the physical and social fabric of the city (John Thompson & Partners 2013). Investments in the built environment are portrayed as needing to work harder (RSA 2014), and, in this context, previous mass-housing initiatives like the UK's suburban New Towns and urban Modernist council estates are cited as examples of where the planning and architecture professions have struggled, and sometimes failed, to fully understand the relationship between space, place and social experience, resulting in problems that range from social isolation to crime (The Berkeley Group 2012; John Thompson & Partners 2013). For a short while in 2011 and 2012, following riots in London, Birmingham and Manchester, the narrative was expanded to connect the potential for social unrest to urban

inequality as materialised in London's affordable housing crisis and concerns about regeneration and the displacement of residents in low-income neighbourhoods (Space Syntax 2011; The Berkeley Group 2012).

Behind the fluid language there is a consistent narrative that planning and development processes do not adequately take account of the social dynamics, needs and experiences of urban neighbourhoods, and should, as one architect described, "be more social". Social sustainability, social productivity, social innovation or collaborative placemaking are proposed as conceptual and practical frameworks to re-insert the social as an operational category in planning practice. In this sense, the debates and events taking place in London are connected to a wider critique of sustainable development, which is acknowledged both to have become the dominant discourse in city governance and urban planning (Castells 2002; Evans 2002; Bulkeley and Betsill 2005; Whitehead 2003; Brand and Thomas 2013) and to have made poor progress on addressing social issues (J. Agyeman and Evans 2004).

This chapter explores how planners, architects, property developers and policymakers engaged in these debates construct "the social" in sustainability debates and how social sustainability as a discursive space frames professional practice, enabling the materialization of some imagined futures while limiting others. It attempts to offer an anthropological perspective on sustainability as a key dynamic in the social and political organization of urban space and social life, a field that is currently understudied by anthropologists. Arguably, anthropology remains on the periphery of urban studies in spite of significant theoretical and methodological works on urban social life and the processes of city-making, notably, work on urban space and place (S. Low 2001; S. M. Low and Altman 1992; S. Low 1996; S. M. Low 1999), architecture (Buchli 2000; Buchli 2006; Buchli 2007; Buchli and Lucas 2006; Yaneva 2012; Yaneva 2008; Yaneva, n.d.), urban planning (S. Abram 2011; S. Abram and Weszkalnys 2011) and urban social networks (Hannerz 2004; Hannerz 1980; Wallman 1984). Elsewhere, many anthropologists are engaged in work on climate change (Fiske 2009; Haenn and

Wilk 2006; Crate and Nuttall 2009), but the two research agendas are yet to come together to offer a cohesive perspective on how sustainability policies and practice shape urban landscapes and social experience.

The chapter begins by, first, exploring social sustainability as an emerging discourse that seeks to materialize certain forms of urban space and sociality, and second, following the theme of this volume, discussing what anthropology can contribute to studies of sustainable development as part of a social science of sustainability. The observations and arguments put forward are based on data from 18-months of PhD fieldwork, primarily participant observation and semi-structured interviews, carried out in 2012-14. My research is concerned with what it means to plan, design and build a sustainable community in contemporary London and explores how sustainability discourse shapes planning and design processes to configure and embed ideas about social relationships in the urban landscape. My fieldwork focuses on a group of regeneration managers, planners, architects and property developers working on the new residential neighbourhoods being created in London's Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park (QEOP). Creating sustainable communities has been identified as an important element of London's Olympic legacy (Olympic Park Legacy Company 2010; London 2012/LOCOG 2010; Mayors Office 2011) and up to 10,000 new homes will be built by 2030. Following the planning and design process for QEOP's new neighbourhoods has therefore involved multi-sited research: observing public consultation events, planning meetings, residents meetings and site visits in East London, and undertaking a series of interviews with regeneration officers, planners, architects and urban designers. Engaging with sustainability discourse - how it is constructed and how it shapes planning and design practice - has proven to be a more dispersed research process, which has involved engaging with a series of events and debates taking place across the city and online, and with the texts and policy documents that are shaping how my informants understand and operationalize sustainable communities. This chapter focuses on my experience of following, and sometimes actively participating in, the events and debates that are producing and shaping social sustainability discourse in London. My work

engages with discourse as a form of social practice (Rydin 1999; Brand and Thomas 2013) that expresses shared values and has material outcomes, and draws on work by Shove et al (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012) on the socio-material entanglements of practices to provide a theoretical framework.

## **1. Situating social sustainability**

Cities have become key sites for political and social action on sustainability over the past 20 years (Rydin and Holman 2004; Meadowcroft 2000; Cook and Swyngedouw 2012; Brand and Thomas 2013; Evans 2002; Bulkeley and Betsill 2005) driven by urban population growth and concerns with liveability and resource management. The idea that cities could and should be sustainable has become a new urban paradigm (Whitehead 2003; Brand and Thomas 2013), which has been widely adopted by governments in the developed and developing world, since it was first identified in the Brundtland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987).<sup>ii</sup> There is “near universal recognition” (Bulkeley and Betsill 2005) among city authorities, public agencies and other advocates of sustainable development that sustainable cities are desirable and are capable of generating positive social, economic and ecological outcomes. In this sense, sustainable development can be understood as a key dynamic in the social and political organization of urban space and social life.

As this edited collection shows, sustainability and sustainable development are essentially contested terms (Connelly 2007), which are widely acknowledged to be ambiguous, interchangeable and loosely applied to a variety of contexts (Vallance, Perkins, and Dixon 2011; Gunder and Hillier 2009; Davoudi et al. 2012; Rydin 1999). Critics of sustainable development describe it as a neoliberal project (Raco 2005; Brand and Thomas 2013; Evans 2002) that has succeeded in integrating environmental concerns with economic interests, thereby enabling a discourse of ecological entrepreneurialism, or economic growth and technological innovation in the name of environmentalism, to dominate policymaking and practice (While, Jonas, and Gibbs 2004). It is widely acknowledged that poor

progress has been made on addressing the social dimensions of sustainable development - social equality, inclusion and poverty reduction - in many cities (Julian Agyeman, Bullard, and Evans 2003; Julian Agyeman 2005; Vallance, Perkins, and Dixon 2011; Brand and Thomas 2013). While this is recognized by some authors to undermine the concept of sustainable development, philosophically and practically, (Julian Agyeman 2008; Julian Agyeman, Bullard, and Evans 2003; Cook and Swyngedouw 2012) the power and reach of sustainable development discourse does not appear to be limited by the evident inconsistency between rhetoric, policy and lived experience (Brand and Thomas 2013).

One consequence of this tension is the emergence of social sustainability as a distinct concept concerned with the social aspects of sustainable development that have been marginalized in mainstream discourse, policy and research (McKenzie 2004; Murphy 2012; Vallance, Perkins, and Dixon 2011). A growing body of literature explores how social sustainability is broadly interpreted and operationalized. Some authors explore the multiple dimensions and definitions of social sustainability: Sachs (Sachs 1999) and Agyeman (Julian Agyeman 2008) argue that social sustainability must be grounded in equality, democracy and social justice; Barbier (Barbier 1987) and Koning (Koning 2002) focus on the preservation of social and cultural values and ways of life; Littig and Griessler (Littig and Griessler 2005) address relationships between society and nature; while Vallance et al (Vallance, Perkins, and Dixon 2011) discuss the importance of meeting basic social needs such as water, food and housing, before wider issues of environmental sustainability can be addressed. Suzanne Hanchett in this volume also situates the development of social sustainability in this scholarly body of work. Other literature addresses the diversity of settings in which social sustainability is being applied including: fair trade certification and organic food (Casula Vifell and Thedvall 2012), forest management (Boström 2011), organic farming (Shreck, Getz, and Feenstra 2006), public health (Hancock 2012), sustainable tourism (Klintman 2012), sustainable buildings (Ole Jensen et al. 2012), and participatory environmental monitoring of a Brazilian mining company (Devlin and Tubino 2012).

In the UK a discourse of social sustainability is emerging in urban planning and development that seeks to establish a relationship between processes of change in the built environment, specifically regeneration and new housing development, and the creation of wellbeing, social capital and certain practices of citizenship at the neighbourhood level (Colantonio and Dixon 2010; Dempsey et al. 2011; Weingaertner and Moberg 2011; Magee, Scerri, and James 2012; Murphy 2012). In this context, social sustainability is loosely defined as the capacity of places to provide residents with a good quality of life now and in the future (The Berkeley Group 2012; Colantonio and Dixon 2010).

A number of the architects and property developers involved in my research describe social sustainability as a new iteration of the sustainable communities' policy agenda, which was introduced by the New Labour government in 2003. The Sustainable Communities Plan (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 2003) identified the renewal of urban neighbourhoods as a vital element in repopulating cities and stimulating economic growth. It recognized the need to pay attention to the nature of urban sociality, as well as the material infrastructure of cities, in response to a perceived crisis in urban social relations (Forrest and Kearns 2001). Social exclusion, in particular the marginalization of deprived neighbourhoods from mainstream society, rising anti-social behaviour and fear of crime, falling levels of democratic and civic participation, and anxiety about the impact of online social interaction on face-to-face social relationships, characterized political representations of social decline (Forrest and Kearns 2001) at the time. Urban neighbourhoods were prioritised for intervention because of the contextual effects of concentrating poverty and deprivation in certain areas of cities, primarily social housing estates, and political recognition that improving the built environment could address anti-social behaviour and increase social interaction at the neighbourhood level. Raco, argues New Labour's focus on increasing neighbourhood social interaction represents an adoption of the Communitarian idea that "communities represent the essential building-blocks of social harmony and progress" (Raco 2007).

The Sustainable Communities Plan introduced the sustainable community as a socio-material concept, defined as a place that provides good quality housing, infrastructure and public services; a thriving local economy; neighbourhoods that are safe, inclusive, cohesive and foster a sense of belonging & attachment; and local civic and democratic involvement in an area-based model (Department for Communities and Local 2004; Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 2003; Raco 2007). The Plan established housing development and the planning system as the main policy instruments for creating sustainable urban communities. Environmental concerns were also linked to housing development through discussion of sustainable construction methods, energy efficiency and sustainable transport networks.

Anthropological work on planning acknowledges it to be a bureaucratic and political process of ordering space and social relationships (S. A. Abram 2000; Epstein 1973; Holston 1989; S. Abram and Weszkalnys 2011; S. Abram 2011). The sustainable communities policy agenda introduced two initiatives intended to reconfigure urban populations and create new citizen subjectivities. First, the Mixed Communities Initiative (MCI) was launched in 2005 with the goal of transforming deprived, mono-tenure, mainly inner-city neighbourhoods, by changing the housing stock to attract new populations to previously run-down areas (Lupton and Fuller 2009). The idea of mixed communities is not new in British urban planning; Garden Cities and post-war housing estates were designed to house people from different class backgrounds. However, the MCI is acknowledged to be different because of the scale of tenure diversification it intended to achieve, and the reliance on partnerships with private sector housebuilders to fund new social housing through the development and sale of private housing (Silverman et al. 2005; Tunstall and Lupton 2010; Lupton and Fuller 2009). Area effects theory, which puts forward the argument that day-to-day co-existence of people from different backgrounds can increase social interaction through use of shared services and spaces, underpins the mixed communities principle (Silverman et al. 2005). Social interaction in the neighbourhood is thought to lead to the development of local social relationships,



thereby increasing the likelihood of low-income households have access and exposure to “more advantaged and aspirational social networks” (Silverman et al. 2005) and reducing distance and prejudice (Atkinson and Kintrea 2001; Allen et al. 2005).

Second, is the “creation, identification, and mobilization of active communities and citizens” (Raco 2007), understood as individuals involved in local volunteering and democratic participation, and strong social networks at neighbourhood level to encourage community self-help (Seyfang 2003). Sometimes described as a post-welfare political ideology (McGuirk and Dowling 2011), active citizenship is intended to encourage citizens to take greater responsibility for their own welfare and that of their communities based on the logic that “more developed communities and communities with more capacity are safer and healthier places to live” (Kelly, Caputo, and Jamieson 2005). Sustainable communities policy therefore places significant emphasis on increasing social interaction in neighbourhoods, both informally, through casual day-to-day interactions, and formally, through civic and democratic participation, to build trust and foster the local social capital needed to underpin the goal of self-sufficient communities and to ward off the risks of social isolation and decline in urban neighbourhoods.

The built environment is understood, in policy and practice, to be constitutive of the everyday social interactions that are thought to be the basis for building local social networks. Significant emphasis is placed on the arrangement and design quality of public spaces in the neighbourhood, including streets, open spaces, local parks and informal, semi-public meeting places like shops, cafes and pubs, in order to encourage low-level social interaction (and inhibit anti-social behaviour) and a sense of local identity. Streets, parks and local open spaces are ascribed an important role in social cohesion and promoted through government policy and planning documents, such as this report published by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, a public body created in 1999:

“Public spaces are open to all, regardless of ethnic origin, age or gender, and as such they represent a democratic forum for citizens and society.

When properly designed and cared for, they bring communities together, provide meeting places and foster social ties of a kind that have been disappearing in many urban areas. These spaces shape the cultural identity of an area, are part of its unique character and provide a sense of place for local communities.” (CABE Space 2004)

The sustainable communities’ policy agenda has received widespread criticism from urban studies and social policy scholars. The validity of area effects theory has been questioned in the UK where there is some evidence that cross-tenure social interaction does not occur in mixed income neighbourhoods (Lupton 2008). Some authors have argued the mixed communities principle is a form of state-led gentrification, which leads to the displacement of lower income households (Lees 2008; O’Hanlon and Hamnett 2009), while others claim the sustainable communities agenda problematizes deprived communities by seeking to establish a connection between social need and unsustainability (Raco 2007). Nevertheless, the sustainable communities concept, along with mixed tenure and active citizenship have become institutionalized in planning policy (Department for Communities and Local Government 2012; Greater London Authority 2011) and urban governance with significant impacts for the configuration of urban populations and the materiality of everyday spaces of the city, in particular residential housing and public spaces in the neighbourhood. In this sense, the sustainable communities’ policy agenda has succeeded in naturalizing certain forms of citizen subjectivity and sociality and establishing a dominant language of community that prioritises a locally spatialized collectivity over other notions of belonging.

Throughout the 2000s, a number of government bodies were responsible for promoting the sustainable communities policy agenda on these terms and developing the capacity of government planning officers to deliver on this new agenda. However, since the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government was elected in 2010 many of these government bodies, such as the Sustainable Development Commission and CABE, have been disbanded or downgraded, and the planning system and has been streamlined. Although the concept of

sustainable communities remains central to government's sustainable development commitments, and is evident in reformed planning policy, the property developers, architects and planners informing my research describe how the coalition government has withdrawn resources and practical support, in the form of policy guidance or best practice programmes, from this area. One property developer describes the result, as:

“a vacuum ... we don't have standards on social so it's a grey area between policy and day-to-day business. Planning authorities don't have the capacity or the confidence to demand a coherent response from developers on social so it's up to us, to the better developers, to suggest what we think makes sense.”

The vacuum they describe has created space for a new discourse of social sustainability to emerge. While holism is an important characteristic of sustainable communities policy, (for example, the Sustainable Communities Plan (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 2003) recognises that a community is more than housing by acknowledging the interaction of social, material and political factors), social sustainability discourse attempts to reconfigure “the social” as a separate domain. In the next section, I describe how my research has attempted to explore the purpose of this separation by engaging with social sustainability discourse ethnographically to understand the situated meanings and practices that are embedded in language and thereby enable certain futures and interventions to become thinkable and operational. This ethnographic approach is also extended to the notion of community, which is frequently invoked by my informants to describe real and imagined places, social practices and a state of being. Community is a problematic term for anthropologists. As Amit (Amit and Rapport 2002) identifies, it is highly contested and comes with theoretical and methodological baggage of a discipline that has a history of conflating place, people, identity and culture. The view of community constructed in sustainable communities policy and discourse speaks directly to Tönnies' (Tönnies 1957) ideal of community as traditional, face-to-face collectivity, in which the

neighbourhood is the primary setting for social relationships and practices that support a collective sense of belonging and attachment. In this sense, the “sustainable community” as a policy construct and a planning goal can be seen to negate other forms of identity, such as race, ethnicity, culture and gender. My work suggests that in the context of urban planning, sustainable communities policy imposes an imagined homogeneity on urban life and space that denies the contested nature of places and privileges the neighbourhood as the locus of identity and belonging. Yet community is ever present in my fieldwork and therefore cannot be ignored in spite of the theoretical and methodological issues it raises.

## **2. What is the point of social sustainability?**

It is early Spring 2014 and I am sitting with a group of architects discussing the model for a new urban neighbourhood in East London. The conversation turns to the question of what makes a sustainable community and one of the architects describes his relief that the “green bling is over” and architecture practices are no longer competing on the grounds of environmental sustainability: “Environmental can just be done now. Green is embedded in policy so it has to be embedded in design. It doesn’t have to be a point of difference anymore,” he adds. This perspective arises frequently in my fieldwork encounters with property developers, planners and architects. Environmental sustainability has become highly institutionalized and consequently, is described as a taken-for-granted element of planning and design practice. In this sense, it no longer offers organisations’ a competitive advantage. Social sustainability, however, is seen as a new space for architects, planners and developers to differentiate themselves in a highly competitive market. Social sustainability is an “unclaimed territory”, as one property developer describes:

“Environmental sustainability is a hygiene factor now everybody else is doing it. It doesn’t mark you out at all and you have no choice anyway. Being sustainable ... in future, it won’t be about environmental. That leaves

economic: not easy to deliver but easy to define and count jobs, apprenticeships, and you have to do it. And social: hard to count, hard to define, not assumed to be our expertise.”

In this context, social sustainability is a discursive space that signifies innovation. The debates described at the beginning of this chapter can be examined as one part of a process to construct “the social” as a domain that is not well understood and demands attention, and action, if wider sustainable development goals are to be achieved. Analysis of social sustainability discourse, in texts, events and day-to-day practice, reveals two distinct elements: first, an effort to problematize a lack of professional and practical knowledge about how the material and social dimensions of the city interact and shape local social experience. Second, to connect this lack of knowledge to the failure of previous housing initiatives to create safe and thriving urban neighbourhoods. The RSA frames the problem in relatively mild terms: “With some notable exceptions, the property and development industry has struggled to quantify the value of the relationship and the nature of interaction between the ‘hardware’ and ‘software’ of socially productive places.” (RSA 2014)

Some of my informants are bolder in their assertions that planning and architecture professions still fail to fully appreciate the inter-dependency between the social and material dimensions of place. In the debates I attend, and in several conversations with my informants, post-war mass housing programmes are frequently cited as examples of where planned development has failed to create thriving new places because of the lack of understanding about, or attention paid to, how communities form. Both low-density suburban estates and high-rise Modernist towers are criticized as urban forms that do not support the kind of social interactions that create a sense of community; the former because of over-reliance on cars and inability to support neighbourhood services, and the latter for claims of alienating architecture. Avoiding the failures of the past is an important characteristic of social sustainability discourse and can be found in texts (The Berkeley Group 2012; Woodcraft et al. 2011; John Thompson &

Partners 2013) and in debates like the RSA's *Developing Socially Productive Places* conference, where Mark Prisk, former housing minister and keynote speaker, identifies the need to learn from past experience:

“Housing is going to be one of the top issues at the next election ... the need to build more homes has become sufficiently pressing it has become top priority for all parties ... so this renewed political focus is welcome but I put alongside it a significant caveat ... in an election year there is the danger that the political parties seek to outbid each other in how many homes can we build in the next five years ... real prospect that we repeat the old mistakes of building quickly and cheaply and building without really understanding what it is that makes a community and what it is that people want.”<sup>iii</sup>

In these debates the “social” in social sustainability becomes a problem of knowledge and capacity – *What is the ‘social’ in sustainable development? How do changes in the built environment influence social experience? What makes an estate into a community?* - that can be addressed by developing new insights and emergent design practices grounded in a situated knowledge of local social experience. This framing provides a logic for seeking to separate and reinterpret the social dimensions of sustainable development as a distinct category that requires specific strategies and actions. Problematizing social sustainability enables proponents of the discourse to argue that development that pays attention to social need and supporting local social relationships will create social, as well as financial, value by producing places that can thrive and a healthier, happier citizenry. At a time of austerity and planning reform, this narrative has broad appeal to local authorities that are under increasing pressure to address London’s housing shortage and cope with widespread budget cuts. In this sense, engaging with social sustainability discourse enables property developers, architects and planners to demonstrate innovation and to frame urban development as an intervention that supports wider social policy goals, such as public health and wellbeing.

Configuring social sustainability as a value-generating practice follows an established logic in sustainable development practices. Several authors (Cugurullo and Rapoport 2012; While, Jonas, and Gibbs 2004; Brand and Thomas 2013) describe the emergence of entrepreneurial modes of urban governance in the UK during the 1990s and 2000s, which have seen cities competing to attract investment. Urban sustainability projects have figured significantly in this space (While, Jonas, and Gibbs 2004), in particular landmark projects like eco-cities or sustainable architecture. Cugurullo and Rapoport's study of the ideological landscape of urban sustainability projects identifies that they offer a way of fitting environmental considerations into "a tool that is largely about property development" (Cugurullo and Rapoport 2012) and is grounded in the belief that sustainable development "can and should be a profit generating activity" (Cugurullo and Rapoport 2012).

For the architects, housebuilders and planners involved in my research, "the social" is seen as elusive and intangible, in the sense that it cannot be mapped following the rational logic of planning and does not have the solid materiality of a building or a street. This prompts me to explore what constitutes "the social" in this context? Where can the social be found and who decides what becomes part of this category? This has become a central theme of enquiry in my research and here I will describe one of these exchanges with two architects and an urban designer. For this group "the social" is understood as the forms of urban sociality found in "a proper community ... you know, like knowing your neighbours, maybe helping each other out sometimes, having a pint in a local pub". We compare the sociality of our own, primarily urban, neighbourhoods to the notion of "proper community" where people know and trust their neighbours, talk to each other on the street, and maybe even help each other out in times of need. This view of "the social" sphere of sustainability as a collection of locally spatialized social practices is widely held among the architects, property developers and planners that I met with, to the extent that it is felt to be self-evident and not really worth discussing. My enquiries about what is or isn't categorized as social are often brushed aside in favour of discussing the real problem, which is "how to do social sustainability".

Considerable effort is dedicated to identifying interventions to encourage people to talk to their neighbours and feel like they belong to their neighbourhood. Timebanks, street parties and ‘meanwhile’ projects, temporary initiatives from pop-up cafes to mobile community gardens, are increasingly being incorporated into large-scale urban development projects to create a sense of community and foster the social ties that are much sought-after by policymakers.

Although it is presented as self-evident, social sustainability is highly mediated and relies on the selective inclusion of policy goals and professional practices to make it an operational category in urban planning and development. Work, employment and local economic development are not configured as part of the “social” in social sustainability discourse, for example, although they are acknowledged to be vital in creating functioning neighbourhoods. Similarly, other major policy goals, such as improving public health, improving educational outcomes or tackling spatialized poverty tend to be excluded. My informants describe how the regulation of economic and environmental categories in sustainable development enable these distinctions to be drawn, although this does not account for the exclusion of health and education from the social domain. Another, possibly more compelling, explanation is about where the responsibility for sustainable development lies. Government, in particular local government, is widely perceived to have responsibility for the quality of public services, opportunities, growth and development of local communities. Austerity and government’s reliance on private corporations to drive urban development and provide housing has shifted the balance of this responsibility and the relationship between the state and private sector. In response, house builders are selecting some dimensions of social experience that can be influenced by built environment interventions for inclusion in social sustainability discourse and rejecting others; a process of selective inclusion also applied to environmental sustainability goals that While et al. describe as an “urban sustainability fix” (While, Jonas, and Gibbs 2004). For example, some house builders have put forward the argument that addressing health and social equity are beyond the control and influence of developers and should be the responsibility of government (The Berkeley Group



2012). While this may be the case, the effect of this argument is to marginalize concerns with social equity in social sustainability discourse and to legitimize social sustainability as an emerging planning and design practice that privileges quality of place and social capital over spatial justice. In this sense, social sustainability, which theoretically is a concept about equity and fairness, has been made safe through a discursive process of reinterpretation that allows it to be accommodated in dominant political and economic structures.

The architects, planners and property developers involved in my research almost all describe social sustainability as a fluid concept that is not widely understood or operationalized in the UK, yet has broad appeal because it succeeds in synthesizing an array of established and emerging policy priorities. Rydin (Rydin 1999) writes about the language games of sustainability politics in the context of climate change and environmental policymaking. Ambiguity, she argues, arising from the loose language and fuzzy boundaries of over-arching terms like sustainable development, creates space for different actors to disguise conflicts of interest and negotiate positions that enable concrete policies and interventions to come to fruition. Green growth through technological innovation has neutralized potentially threatening arguments for limiting consumption and limiting growth and legitimized environmental sustainability as a practice. Social sustainability discourse is similarly controlled to limit what constitutes the social as a category and field of action and in so doing, to “transform the perceptible into non-obvious meanings” (Rydin 1999).

### **3. Conclusion**

This chapter attempts to demonstrate how anthropology can bring a situated perspective to the analysis of sustainable development that reveals the tensions and disjunctures between rhetoric and practice. Analyzing social sustainability as an emergent discourse and practice from the perspective of a loose network of planners, architects and property developers working on large-scale urban development projects in London has highlighted the instability of categories like social and sustainability, which appear to be fixed yet are highly mediated and

contextually specific. By focusing on the reconfigurations, slippages and ambiguity of sustainability language, this chapter has attempted to explore how social sustainability is constructed as a nuanced reinterpretation of an established policy agenda and can be understood as part of an effort to create a new discursive space, and an emergent form of design practice, that signifies innovation, leadership and value and seeks to justify interventions in the built environment. The UK government's emphasis on housing development as a means to achieve the broader goals of thriving cities and economic growth, and in turn on private sector property developers to provide housing, gives rise to deeply unequal power relationships in urban neighbourhoods. Sustainable development can be understood as one of the "subtle forms of power that saturate everyday life, through experiences of time, space, and work" (Ortner 2005), in the sense that it is shaping the material spaces of the city and citizen subjectivities in ways that are not immediately evident.

Sustainable development practices in urban settings are understudied by anthropologists yet arguably require close attention. From an anthropological perspective, social sustainability can be interrogated as a socio-material practice, which seeks to bring about certain forms of urban space, sociality and subjectivity using a diverse array of discursive and material processes. It relies on the selective incorporation of policy goals and theoretical concepts to construct a dominant view of sustainable communities as socially cohesive, self-sufficient and safe, which conversely structures need and deprivation as unsustainable. Anthropology can make an important contribution to a social science of sustainability by highlighting the political and institutional contexts that shape discourse, practice, policy and sustainable development as a field of knowledge. Anthropology's grounded research methods can illuminate the inconsistencies and uncertainties generated in the process of translating sustainability as a normative concept into everyday social and professional practices.

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## End notes

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<sup>i</sup> From "Urbanism and the Unlearning of Architecture" lecture given by Professor Tina Saaby, Copenhagen City Architect at Academy of Urbanism "Digital Urbanism" conference in Bradford on Thursday 16 May 2013.

<sup>ii</sup> See Chapter 9, The Urban Challenge, The Brundtland Report (*Our Common Future*) (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987)

<sup>iii</sup> For a video of the keynote address see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U4Yd5n9y7eM> (accessed January 2015).