

Distr.
RESTRICTED

HBP/R.301
15 July 1993

ENGLISH
Original: FRENCH

COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SETTLEMENTS

WORKSHOP ON URBAN FORMS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Report prepared by the delegation of France

INTRODUCTION

1. The workshop was held at Poitiers, France, from 6 to 8 May 1993. It was organized by the Ministry of Equipment, Transport and Tourism (Permanent Secretariat for Urban Planning) in conjunction with the City and District of Poitiers.
2. The workshop was attended by approximately 100 experts from the following countries: Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Morocco, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Sweden, Tunisia, Turkey and the United Kingdom.
3. The workshop was opened by Mr. Santrot, Mayor and Chairman of the District of Poitiers, who emphasized the main lines of the District's policy. He stressed the advantages of compact built-up areas and of improving the living conditions in town centres.
4. At the opening meeting, papers were presented on the following topics: the history of the renovation of the centre of Poitiers, the city's development over the last 30 years and the problems posed by comparative studies of urban forms in Europe.
5. The participants were able to acquaint themselves with town-planning activities in Poitiers by means of one of the three technical visits proposed: urban policy in an old city centre; contemporary architecture in an old city centre; peripheral aspects of development.

6. The overall aim of the workshop was to reflect upon formal trends in towns from the angle of sustainable development, and in particular to analyse the urban sprawl, which has been characteristic of urban development, particularly in France, in recent decades. The hypothesis advanced as a basis for discussion was that compactness is generally beneficial for sustainable urban development. The workshop was divided into four sub-topics to debate this hypothesis:

Sub-topic I: The relationship with nature

Chairman: Mrs. M. Schulman (Sweden)

Rapporteur: Mrs. A. Querrien (France)

Sub-topic II: Sociabilities

Chairman: Mrs. F. Navez-Bouchanine (Morocco)

Rapporteur: Mrs. D. Prost and Mrs. A.M. Fribourg (France)

Sub-topic III: Economic development

Chairman: Mr. W. Strubelt (Germany)

Rapporteur: Mr. Ch. Bachofen (France)

Sub-topic IV: Equipment and services

Chairman: M. B. Duhem (France)

Rapporteur: Mr. C. Maudet (France).

7. At the beginning of the closing meeting, Mr. Tutenuit (France) read out a message from Mr. Bosson, Minister of Equipment, Transport and Tourism. In addition to expressing his support for all the efforts under way to identify, through dialogue, ways and means of sustainable development, the French Minister underscored the challenge posed to town planning by the need simultaneously to take into account the needs for space, quality of life and ease of access to the various facilities offered by conurbations. He sketched out a number of practical actions to meet that challenge: improving the environmental characteristics of town centres and inner suburbs, preserving urban continuity, and rediscovering the meaning of urban structure on the outskirts of towns.

I. SUMMARY OF THE WORK OF THE SUB-GROUPS

Topic I: The relationship with nature

8. The groups objective was to analyse the evolution of urban forms from the viewpoint of the relationship with nature and, in particular, to highlight possible contradictions between the general hypothesis and the requirements of nature. The group chose to summarize its conclusions under the heading: "From static planning to an interactive process".

9. The provision of a natural environment is fundamental to urban development. It has to be taken into account from the very inception of the planning process. It is by no means a marginal issue: open spaces are as important as buildings or infrastructure. One may even speak of a natural infrastructure, a term that comprises not only public green areas but also open spaces used for other purposes. The latter are under threat from compact urban development.

10. The multiple uses that can be served by the natural infrastructure deserve recognition: leisure, health, technical uses, as a wildlife habitat ... It must be recognized that it is not merely a question of preserving, improving or creating open spaces. The inhabitants' perception of their natural environment, by distinguishing its various forms, uses and values, must be both understood and improved. The planning process should serve as a tool to develop such an understanding.

11. Specialists should direct their attention to the most successful achievements of this kind in the various European countries. In order to do so, however, they need to agree on a number of definitions and concepts.

12. The dialogue between users and those responsible for creating and maintaining this natural infrastructure has to be ensured and facilitated, if sustainable development is to be achieved. This presupposes an effective legal framework, linking national and local policies and maximizing the individual responsibility of users.

Topic II: Sociabilities

13. The group's objective was to consider the links between urban forms and sociabilities and, in particular, to discuss possible assessments, in terms of social relations, of peripheral urban development.

14. It goes without saying that no urban pattern is capable in itself of determining any type of sociability but, on the other hand, some patterns may impede sociability or its development. Thus, the medinas in the cities of the Maghreb - which represent models of compact development par excellence - are currently suffering, like other places (such as large housing developments) from a crisis in social relations. They are encountering difficulties in coping with changes of all kinds and, in particular, with problems linked to the departure of the well-off classes. On the other hand, strong and well-structured communities have shown themselves capable of taking over areas regarded as unsuited to sociability (this has been the case in France of the Jewish community in Sarcelles and of the Chinese community in the Thirteenth Ward of Paris).

15. Sociability is a complex idea that always needs to be discussed. For the participants in this group, it conjures up the social bond, vitality of public life, community participation of various kinds, neighbourhood dynamism, the necessary interpenetration between the running of the day-to-day affairs of the town and of larger areas. However over and beyond these diverse meanings, it became apparent that, for a minimum degree of sociability to develop, there must be common projects and interests and, a sense of existence in time and of the history of the place, regardless of the status of the inhabitants. Thus,

the temporal continuity of the town's development is desirable; the nature of a town is such that it builds on itself, incorporating the past, without petrifying forms and social relations. Sustainable construction is neither conservatism nor a tabula rasa policy; it is comparable rather to sedimentation.

16. As regards forms, there seems to be a need to distinguish between compactness and density, and to put into perspective the quantitative data that may be used in this regard. There are quite a number of received ideas that need to be questioned regarding the densities of various types of urban fabric. Moreover, it should be possible to introduce the subjective aspect of the perception of density: the same type of concentration may be deemed positive or negative according to the possibility of controlling interactions with other people.

17. From the viewpoint of sociability, sustainable development is also, and above all, responsible development. The quality of the social bond is thus a prerequisite for such development and the basis for citizens to play an active role in their quarters and their city. Such community participation should not serve as a pretext for the State to withdraw, whether for financial reasons or out of fear of the political dimension that such participation may assume.

Topic III: Economic development

18. This group's objective was to examine those characteristics of economic development that help to shape urban forms, and the means whereby planning can influence such characteristics. Four specific aspects were put forward for consideration by the group: commercial distribution, enterprises and logistics, offices, and housing.

19. The group essentially tackled the question of the relationships between economic development and urban forms from the angle of transport infrastructures, motorways and rapid public transit; clearly, the current logic underlying the location of economic activities, and beyond them, the formal shaping of territory is essentially determined by considerations of ease of access and approach and hence by the alignment of and junctions between communication systems. The organizational or disruptive potential of major infrastructures was illustrated by the cases of Saint-Etienne, France, and Namur, Belgium. These case-studies reveal the effects on urban forms of a system that favours the two extremes of territorial organization: comprehensive national and international physical planning by means of the transport infrastructures, and the development of micro-territories, of limited residential areas or areas of economic activity directly connected to the major infrastructures. The absence of an intermediate infrastructure, of what might be called the urban web, comprising a dense road grid around which new territories could be structured, was perceived as a serious distortion of recent urban planning practice.

20. The harmful consequences of its absence are multiple: saturation of the major transport axes, urban fragmentation, the absence of an urban culture associated with the infrastructure and standardization of landscapes. The

characteristics of secondary networks are, on the other hand, their penetrability, easy accessibility and a varied choice of locations for activities.

21. Some cities such as Hamburg have already come out in favour of secondary networks. Such a policy, which obviously goes hand-in-hand with the development of public transport, has made it possible both to bring about a shift in travel habits away from private cars to public transport and, above all, to avoid the development of large shopping centres or activity centres on the outskirts and to redistribute them throughout the internal network, close to residential areas. The proclamation of such a deliberate planning policy struck a sympathetic chord among investors, who discovered that they, too, were interested in playing a role within the complex network of a compact urban space.

Topic IV: Equipment and services

22. The purpose of this sub-group was to examine the problems created by peri-urban development in respect of infrastructure and services and to consider the appropriate responses in terms of technological innovation, appropriate planning or economic regulation. The group focused essentially on planning and endeavoured to develop a better understanding of the situation and trends, the urban models involved and of the requirements for action.

23. The work of the group was largely based on a study of the conurbation of Tours, France, selected by the organizers because of the extent of its peri-urban development and of a revision of its urban master plan which has come out in favour of halting the sprawl in favour of a recentring around seven main poles.

24. The problems of the relative under-equipment of peripheral areas are significant in that they frequently relate to communes that are traditionally rural and have limited financial resources. They are all the trickier in that the inhabitants of such communes demand simultaneously a satisfactory level of service on the spot and access to the city as a whole and, in particular, to the centre.

25. The idea of urban-organization models nowadays gives rise to considerable reservations. A sustainable town is essentially a town capable of adjusting, of adapting itself to trends in behaviour, to social, cultural and economic expectations without whole sectors becoming obsolescent. Natural features, such as hydrography, but also the road networks could constitute a stable skeleton for these adaptable urban fabrics.

26. Without going so far as model-building, it would nevertheless appear that, as far as equipment and services are concerned, sustainable development is to be sought through two principles: the principle of subsidiarity, or rather its transposition into this sphere, requiring that problems be solved as near at hand as possible, at the level of the neighbourhood unit, or of a "user-friendly town"; the principle of accessibility requiring that the equipment and services be planned at the level of a conurbation, to widen the range of choice available to citizens or to ensure the safety and coherence of

the systems. Efforts to identify the most satisfactory balances between these two organizational rationales should involve industry, whose weight in designing technologies is decisive.

27. As far as conditions for action are concerned, two factors appeared to be decisive: the organization of the decision-making authorities on the one hand and planning machinery on the other. As regards the authorities, the French example shows the difficulties generated by excessive fragmentation, which leads to competition between the outskirts and the centre, and among the peripheral communities themselves. As far as planning is concerned, although planning mechanisms vary considerably from country to country, land-use management is a strategic factor everywhere and has a considerable impact on the organization of urban services.

II. OVERALL CONCLUSIONS OF THE WORKSHOP

28. The reasons for examining the requirements of sustainable development are general and worldwide: the exhaustion of natural resources, environmental pollution or destruction, the excessive disappearance of species and climatic imbalances. The major urbanization movement which began in the nineteenth century makes it necessary to determine how urban design could contribute to such sustainable development and, at the present time, to examine urban sprawl which, in varying degrees, has been a marked characteristic of urban development for several decades. However, urban forms are the outcome of multiple factors of a geographical, cultural, political and economic nature, which vary from one country to another and from one region to the next. In accordance with the principle "think globally, act locally" there is a need to seek general recommendations deriving from common problems, while bearing in mind that only local responses - either national or regional - are appropriate.

29. Peripheral urban sprawl is frequently caused by excessive rigidity of the urban fabric - particularly that of the modern period - which thrusts outwards the responses to new needs. The capacity of the urban fabric to evolve, to undergo change, is thus a desirable characteristic. It moreover fosters sociability, which, rather than any particular urban form, requires time, continuity and memory. Continuity does not mean immutability, therefore, and both conservatism and the tabula rasa policy are to be avoided equally.

30. The national or international economic rationale which determines the location of activities and of major infrastructures is too distant from local considerations: the intermediate levels are inadequate. To restore balance to the dialogue it is necessary to promote, by regrouping, territorial units (50 to 150 thousand inhabitants) suitable for defining urban projects that are negotiable with investors and to set up legislative and regulatory frameworks to permit such negotiations. The frameworks, which will naturally be specific to each country, should be given careful consideration, in particular so as to achieve the best possible interlocking of the different levels of decision-making.

31. This is of particular concern to the transport infrastructure, which play a major role in the development of forms and which needs to be studied with special care. As a rule, there is a need to enhance the secondary networks, as they promote the continuity of the urban fabric, variations in density and a mixture of activities.

32. Implementation of the above recommendations should also make possible a more satisfactory economy of urban services and facilitate technical or organizational choices that are more favourable to sustainable development. In particular, the conventional concept of economies of scale should be offset by the implementation of a form of the subsidiarity principle, whereby services are provided, waste treated and anything recyclable recycled as close as possible to territorial units of a reasonable size, so as to limit the complexity of the problems to be resolved and to promote responsibility. The organization of urban services should thus attempt to reconcile the benefits of proximity, of the "user-friendly town" and those of accessibility, which remains a fundamental urban characteristic. In view of the major role played by technology, the industries concerned by these developments should be involved in any examination of or research into this topic.

33. Even when nature has been domesticated and harnessed, its place should not be considered secondary or as belonging only outside the towns. The term natural infrastructure may even be employed so as to demonstrate clearly that its role is not restricted to leisure and aesthetics, but also encompasses climatic, sanitary and technical functions.

34. Making a place for nature within the urban environment comes partly into conflict with compact forms. Hence the need to strike a balance, to come up with development solutions which reconcile the necessary presence of nature with a degree of compactness in the urban fabric so as to favour accessibility and mingling, while minimizing flows and their impact.

Concluding remarks

35. Participants found the workshop very useful and particularly stressed the value of the substantive discussions and the organizational arrangements. Gratitude was expressed to the organizers for their efforts.
