

SDC 2018 Annual Meeting Abstracts

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Title: Urban Unsustainability as a Chronic, Manageable Disease? Alternatives to the “Cure” of Restoring Equilibrium to City-Nature Systems



This paper critiques the prevailing conception of sustainable urbanism as “curing” urban society of environmental degradation and restoring equilibrium. I propose an alternative view: treat environmental unsustainability as a chronic manageable disease. The two share core characteristics: slow onset, long latency period, denial, delayed diagnosis, incurability, and complex origins in risky human behaviors (many linked to modern affluence, overconsumption and inactivity). Unsustainability is not a temporary alien infection, but endemic and intrinsic to urban-industrial society.

Methodologically, I examine the inconsistencies between current urban sustainability assumptions and the actual dynamics of industrial urbanization, and adapt concepts from public health (acute versus chronic; demographic and risk transitions) to rethink sustainability. A more robust conception of sustainability embraces (not avoids) dynamism, unpredictability, volatility: characteristics of complex, open-social systems (Zellner, Campbell, 2015). Sustainability is plagued with internal contradictions not just because of the planner’s triangle conflicts of economic growth, equity and environmentalism (Campbell 1996, 2016), but also because a static, equilibrium view of sustainability is contrary to the modern urban-capitalist condition of restless adaptation through unceasing expansion, upheaval and disruptions.

I connect this alternative view to two emerging public debates. First, resilience research has spurred sustainability advocates to acknowledge volatility — even if the resilience literature itself often reveals a stalwart belief in equilibrium. The second is climate change, which has upended the adequacy of sustainability-as-equilibrium maintenance and validated adaptation (once rejected as cowardly acquiescence).

And the implications? This model of managing chronic tensions better matches the internal contradictions of planning. Our pragmatic-reformist profession works to both aggressively expand metropolitan boundaries and erect greenbelt bulwarks to conserve natural landscapes; we both submissively serve the elite urban growth machine and advocate for impoverished urban dwellers (Campbell 2013). These activities are not primarily about striking a balance, but rather about managing conflicting priorities, capitalizing on overlapping interests, seeking temporary, durable solutions. Second, chronic unsustainability leads to hybrid landscape management strategies: carve out habitat niches that support life, in a volatile world, for a diverse array of populations with a minimum of misery and disparity. We minimize damage and buy time to enable adaptation and partial restoration.