



Seminar of urban planning agencies

Should I stay or should I go?
Urban sprawl, density, and a new
planning agenda for Europe

29-30 MAY 2024

HIGHLIGHTS AND TAKEAWAYS



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Brussels, 30 May 2024

Highlights and takeaways - plenary

CONTEXT



Through the Belgian presidency of the EU, Perspective wishes to foster collaboration between public agencies and municipal urban planning departments across Europe. To this end, Perspective organised a European seminar for urban planning agencies on 29 and 30 May 2024 on the subject of urban sprawl and qualitative density, under the auspices of the Belgian presidency of the EU. This seminar brought together more than 60 participants from public agencies and municipal departments in charge of spatial planning in different European cities and metropolises. Exchanges aimed to learn from one another and explore collaborations.

KEYNOTE

Philippe Bihouix, AREP



In the face of climate change, we have to rethink the way we plan our cities. Urban planners must adapt, rethink concepts and amend models. How can we build cities using fewer carbon-based materials? How can we build cities while leaving enough space for them to grow and function? Can we end urban sprawl and land take?

Philippe Bihouix (Managing Director of AREP) takes a closer look at the unsustainable growth of our cities and deconstructs a series of concepts that have been going around for some years, like the dense city, the smart city and the resilient city. He proposes solutions and a vision to consider the end of urban sprawl as an attainable objective. In short, we need to build less and build better. This means finding innovative ways to create new square meters of useful space without constructing new buildings. The ways are many: reuse, renovate, rehabilitate, adapt, transform the "already here", and use our built heritage better. Public authorities have an important role in inciting, facilitating, and supporting those paradigm shifts. We already know what to do and how to do it. However, we need to amplify our efforts significantly to start making progress!

RATIONALE

Gert Nys, Perspective



Faced with common challenges, strategies sometimes differ from city to city. But urban planning and sustainable land use are crucial to developing sustainable, strong, and caring cities, that can fulfil our ambition to have a sustainable, strong, and caring EU.

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ROUNDTABLE

- Be it directly or indirectly, regulations and policies affect the governance, content, and practices of spatial planning. However, the directions of the land-use impacts of key EU policies and regulations can diverge as their objectives translate into space differently.
- Urban planners' role is to translate EU objectives for 2050 into urban actions while navigating between high EU expectations and local political commitments.
- Planners are often unaware of 'the hidden world of (EU) policies' that impact planning. This calls for better information for the planning field on EU policies and the involvement of planning experts when discussing and preparing EU regulations and policies impacting planning.
- The EU needs to listen to planners to solve transversal challenges: transversality and the integration of sectoral dimensions are in the DNA of urban planners.
- Urban planning agencies should broaden their scope by building wider networks and alliances with local, national, and European partners.



REACTION

Thomas de Béthune, European Commission

- The European Commission is aware of the impact of EU regulations on cities and has developed tools to have the voices heard.
- Strong territorial dimension of the cohesion policy and European programmes to help cities find new paradigms when developing solutions fit to their needs.
- Multilevel governance means also discussion with the national level.



A MOMENTUM

Antoine de Borman, Perspective

Most of the challenges we have in our cities will not be solved without strong cooperation between European urban actors: exchanging, sharing, confronting our views and learning from each other is more important than ever.

Planners should engage more and better with European institutions: to have their messages heard, and to relay their expertise on EU regulations and policies having an impact on land use and planning.

The Belgian presidency will share these messages in its conclusions.

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Highlights and takeaways - workshops



COMBINING A BUILT ENVIRONMENT AND NATURE

- Before any transfer attempt, cities should adequately prepare by considering and resolving any preconditions (legal, operational, etc.) that could obstruct or prevent the good practice transfer.
- The success of any good practice transfer depends on the ability and willingness of both the good practice city to share the knowledge and solutions, and the transfer city to understand, adapt, and implement the good practice under their conditions.
- Connect all types of support, provide it in a more structured form, promote it, and proactively provide ample opportunities to all interested cities.



NEW WAYS OF LIVING AND DWELLING

- Cities cannot stop urban sprawl, but they can make the quality of public life so good as to limit the benefits of living on the fringes.
- Strong communication, engagement and concrete evidence are necessary while an ambitious plan is being launched.
- Wide community support helps create engagement around the planning process and reduce the typical tensions that public authorities face when presenting plans.
- Leadership is critical but the role of a leader will depend on the problem or context.

PLANNING TOOLS FOR A SOUND GOVERNANCE

- Urban planning agencies are instrumental in helping local authorities navigate the ways of achieving complex goals, such as No Net Land Take.
- Levers: what is already there; agriculture to preserve open spaces and support local economies; effective planning policies
- Challenges: pressure from land owners and the housing market, financial gaps, social acceptance in smaller cities
- A need for standardized terminologies and definitions at the European level.



More information on the agenda of the seminar, workshops and speakers on: <https://perspective.brussels/en/studies-and-observations/presidency-council-european-union/european-seminar-urban-planning-agencies>