

Bridging sustainability and liveability notions through building codes and regulations: an examination of streetscapes shaped by urban renewal, housing and infrastructure policies in Peru

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The discussion about the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the recently approved United Nations global development agenda post-2015, generated an intense debate on the urban SDG (or Goal 11) during the preliminary rounds. Unexpectedly, this debate convened the academic and the policy circles alike, somehow revealing certain alignment in the concerns of both arenas. Although some interpret this alignment as a step forward in closing the pervasive gap between academic research and (global/national/local) urban policy-making, it is apparent that the fulfilment of the main aim of Goal 11's: "make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable" would entail some conceptual and operational trade-offs that need to be addressed during the implementation stage. It can be argued that these trade-offs revolve around the synergies and contradictions of two notions: sustainability and liveability. Defined as the "sustainability vs. liveability" debate by the literature, scalar, temporal, disciplinary and measurement issues have been pointed out as main features to consider when operationalising these notions through policy and planning frameworks. To an extent, the contradictory nature of these issues has not been fully addressed, as revealed by the approaches currently dominating some policy and planning frameworks. In fact, it can be observed that many cities that nowadays are deemed as successful and with high quality of life have shifted their policy and planning agendas from sustainability to liveability approaches in the last decade (e.g. Vancouver, Toronto, Seattle, etc.).

Considering the relevance of these issues for cities in developing countries, it is against this backdrop that this paper finds its motivation. The main objective is to analyse the extent to which sustainability and liveability notions can be bridged conceptually and operationally by examining the ideas embedded in legal mechanisms such as building codes and regulations of housing, infrastructure and urban renewal policies, paying special attention to the way these mechanisms shape public space, in general, and streetscapes, in particular. The paper is centred in the analysis of the Peruvian case. The rationale for the selection of the features, case study country and policy sectors is two-fold. Firstly, it can be posed that one aspect where the synergies and contradictions between sustainability and liveability notions are more apparent is in the provision of public space and streetscapes. Both features closely contribute to the good quality of the physical structure and functionality of cities as well as to the appealing of the urban environment. More specifically and as explained by the UN Habitat Programme, public spaces, and, streets, are the backbone of the city since the way these are shaped is central to the process of urban development and quality of the built environment. Even more relevant for cities in developing countries, in shaping public spaces and streets, it is crucial to “get it right” before this infrastructure locks the large-scale urban form and the fine grain scale physical pattern for the next decades.

Secondly, it is noticeable that this view of the importance of public space and streets in shaping a good quality living environment remains overlooked in many developing countries. Peru is a case in point. As many other countries in the South, Peru underwent a structural adjustment process that led to the adoption of the market economy at the beginning of the 1990s. The urban policy and planning frameworks, then, were deeply modified in order to: (1) bolster private investment in the provision of housing, facilities and services; (2) increase local competitiveness and; (3) cover the public funding gap in urban infrastructure. In particular, three policy sectors, i.e. housing, infrastructure and urban renewal, were greatly adjusted under neo-liberal interpretations of urban development, as demonstrated by the deregulatory perspective and the economic-led approach of the new urban legislation and other regulations and building codes. Although these legal mechanisms are very advantageous for the private building sector, it can be affirmed that their application

has led to the virtual disappearance of public space and even more, to the deterioration of streetscapes at, especially, the neighbourhood scale.

The study applies a mix method approach. Qualitative methods such as documentary analysis were used to depict the extent to which sustainability and liveability notions are embedded in housing, infrastructure and urban renewal policies, as well as to uncover the orientation of corresponding building codes and regulations. Quantitative methods such as spatial analysis of blocks and streets layouts and photograph de-layering of streetscapes were used to identify the ways these policy approaches, codes and regulations were materialised at the neighbourhood scale. The paper concludes by presenting a framework for assessing the extent to which building codes and regulations of housing, infrastructure and urban renewal policies realise the aims of sustainability and liveability and offers some alternatives to re-direct the orientation of these legal mechanisms so as to improve the quality of streetscapes at the neighbourhood scale in cities that need to deal with the demand to bolster private urban development and to maintain local economic growth.