

Understanding Current Cities Through the Individual Actions of Land Developers: A New Biographical Methodology

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SUMMARY

Urban development is currently carried out within a city-planning framework, which defines the public visions and general trends of a territorial community's future. From this planning framework comes a theoretical and idealized image of the city in the making, which is then instrumented by the adoption of very precise technical standards of urban regulations. Nothing is left to chance and every detail of development projects is regulated. Land-use control instruments, mainly zoning, are very often used to standardize urban development by dividing the soil into geographical zones and assigning them to specific and exclusive functions. These ones are thus separated within virtually hermetic zone, which has the effect of making the urban dweller dependent on transport and daily displacements always longer in distance and time.

But this tendency towards standardization nowadays tends to be watered down, since urban development is increasingly treated individually, project by project, by the production of standards specific to each case. The elaboration of the urban development vision remains a collective practice through planning, but its transformation into reality is the result of the action of men and women, who seize real opportunities for land development, respond to needs and concretize the city by building it piece by piece.

Therefore, the contribution of land developers cannot be neglected in the analysis and understanding of urban development. Their individual initiatives, supported by financial investments and private risk taking, permeate an urban dynamic. To understand their role, an original methodological approach, the land biography, was developed at the Université Laval (Québec, Canada). It was applied to highlight the individual work of a major land developer of Québec City and the collective effects of his action on the urban development since the mid-1950s. Starting with the construction of small walk-up buildings to fulfil the residential needs of young

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professionals hired by the nascent provincial public administration, this land developer has become one of the greatest visionaries of urban development in Quebec, through his talent to detect in advance future residential, commercial and business needs, and especially to locate them at optimum sites. Thus, urban development is a collective responsibility that is carried out piecemeal by individual initiatives.

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