Abstract

The proclaimed aim of EcoDensity, an initiative of the former mayor of Vancouver, Canada, was the achievement of a more sustainable city development through densification of existing neighbourhoods. Since the invention of EcoDensity in summer 2006 it has become a highly debated topic. This paper aims at a critical analysis of how a planning strategy of densification tried to tie itself onto a discourse of sustainability, and also how it had to re-invent and reform itself through contestation and public debate in order to gain acceptance. Thus, the development of the strategy and its contestation are the focus of this paper. Theoretically informed by the theory on hegemony by Laclau and Mouffe, the paper shows why EcoDensity has been—although eventually approved by Council—a failing hegemonic strategy. By referring to a theory on hegemony, the paper theoretically captures practices and struggles around a particular ‘urban sustainability fix’.

1. Introduction

Just a few days before the opening of the World Urban Forum held in Vancouver in June 2006, Vancouver mayor Sam Sullivan launched a new initiative: EcoDensity. The proclaimed goal of the initiative was to achieve sustainability, affordability and livability by means of “high quality densification” (City of Vancouver, 2006, p. 4) especially in low- and middle- density parts of the City of Vancouver. This would, according to the EcoDensity initiative document, reduce housing costs, increase housing choice, reduce urban sprawl, alleviate traffic congestion and reduce fossil fuel emissions, preserve industrial and agricultural land as well as green space, make transit and community amenities more viable, keep taxes low and the local economy vibrant and healthy, reduce Vancouver’s ecological footprint and keep Vancouver’s high rank in the quality-of-life surveys. In sum, EcoDensity was to make Vancouver “healthy, clean and green” (City of Vancouver, 2006, p. 2).

Marit Rosol is in the Department of Human Geography, Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt am Main, Grüneburgplatz 1, Frankfurt am Main 60323, Germany. Email: rosol@geo.uni-frankfurt.de.
From the beginning, the initiative had been accompanied by a lot of passion, controversy and confusion, by both approval and concern, by mistrust and fear that awkwardly separated and united individuals and interest-groups in an unforeseeable way. Some praised it as the best tool in order to achieve a sustainable city, others contested it as the ‘greenwashing’ of a developer’s agenda. Some saw it as a continuation of existing city policy, others as a fundamental break with it.

The struggles around the EcoDensity initiative are the focus of this paper. It aims at a critical analysis of how a planning strategy of densification is tied to a discourse on sustainability. I would like to show with a concrete example, how a top–down sustainability campaign was pushed, but also how it has had to reform itself through contestation and public debate. And although Council finally approved it in June 2008, I will argue that the initiative failed to achieve a broad consensus on densification.

Gibbs et al. (forthcoming) call smart growth an ‘institutional fix’, that claims to unite environmentalists, developers and civic boosters alike by promoting development that serves the environment, economy and community; in my empirical analysis, I want to show an example of how this is pursued and contested. Thus, an analysis of the introduction, promotion and naming of the initiative and its critique becomes important. For that purpose, I will draw on Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of hegemony. I will argue that the contestation around EcoDensity can be made intelligible if we analyse it as a struggle for achieving hegemony over popular understandings of current urban problems and solutions by means of a particular discourse. Hence, by referring to a theory on hegemony, I aim at theoretically capturing practices and struggles around a particular sustainability fix. Thus, in this article, I will analyse EcoDensity primarily as a discursive strategy aimed at making densification hegemonic. I do not intend an analysis of its ability to achieve sustainability or other proclaimed goals.

After briefly discussing the theoretical background of this paper, I will analyse the invention of EcoDensity as a hegemonic strategy and contextualise it by showing the salience of real estate development and sustainability in Vancouver. Subsequently, I will present hegemonic strategies of opponents, including their critique of EcoDensity content and process. Finally, I discuss successes and failures of the initiative.

The paper is based on original empirical work conducted in 2007 and 2008, using analysis of newspapers, policy documents, open letters and websites, observation of public workshops and public hearings on EcoDensity, as well as interviews. I draw on interviews with 15 residents, three (former) councillors, two current planning staff and two former directors of planning, conducted by myself from January 2008 until July 2008. The interviews were conducted as part of a wider study on Vancouver CityPlan Community Visions. The newspaper analysis included a systematic analysis of all articles within The Georgia Straight and The Vancouver Courier that mention EcoDensity from the first time in June 2006 until November 2009.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 The ‘Urban Sustainability Fix’

Almost since the concept of sustainability rose to prominence in the mid 1990s, a debate evolved around the question of the concordance or tension between capitalist accumulation and sustainability. In an early critique, sustainability was identified as a ‘discourse of rule’ (Eblinghaus and Stickler,
1996). Later the debate focussed on the relation between neoliberal policies and sustainability. Critical work on sustainability points out the ‘sphere of convergence’, where sustainability “may not be an obstacle to capitalist accumulation but rather a constituent part of it” (Gibbs and Krueger, 2007, p. 103). Others have analysed sustainability similarly as ideological ‘putty’ for neoliberal restructuring (Brand and Görg, 2002) in its roll-out phase, which ultimately serves as a “recipe for the survival of capitalism” (Keil, 2007, p. 46).

Recently, the debate has focussed on the urban scale and on urban governance. Drawing an Harvey’s concept of ‘spatial fix’, While, Jonas and Gibbs attempt with their concept of ‘urban sustainability fix’ to capture some of the governance dilemmas, compromises, and opportunities created by the current era of state restructuring and ecological modernization (While et al., 2004, p. 551).

Sustainable development for them is part of the search for a spatio-institutional fix to safeguard growth trajectories in the wake of industrial capitalism’s long downturn, the global ‘ecological crisis’ and the rise of popular environmentalism (While et al., 2004, p. 551).

Concerning the relation of sustainable development with capitalism, they go as far as claiming that the search for an ‘urban sustainability fix’ is becoming a necessary rather than contingent condition of the contemporary political and economic form of urbanization in capitalism (While et al., 2004, p. 554, emphasis added).

They include in their analysis changes in political discourse as well as material change (While et al., 2004, p. 554). In so doing, the concept does not deny progress on ecological issues, but draws attention to the selective incorporation of ecological goals in the greening of urban governance (While et al., 2004, p. 551, emphasis added).

2.2 The Concept of Hegemony by Laclau and Mouffe

In order to capture this contested nature of sustainability fixes, I will draw on Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s theory of hegemony (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985/2001). Grounding their concept in the work of Antonio Gramsci (Italian political theorist and Marxist), Jacques-Marie-Émile Lacan (French psychoanalyst) and Ferdinand de Saussure (Swiss linguist), Laclau and Mouffe define hegemony as

> The achievement of a moral, intellectual and political leadership through the expansion of a discourse that partially fixes meaning around nodal points (Torfing, 1999, p. 302).1

Highly influential for our contemporary understanding of hegemony have been the writings of Antonio Gramsci. Different from conventional accounts of hegemony, which equate it with dominance, Gramsci identifies hegemony more with leadership and consensus. Hegemony in his sense means that “modern forms of rule rest significantly upon consensus—i.e. that societal institutions … need to be supported also by the oppressed” (Buckel and Fischer-Lescano, 2007, p. 11; authors’ translation). According to Gramsci, consensus is created in the civil society, which he understands as part of the ‘integral state’. It is here that a social group needs to devise a political project and seek broad public support for it through
compromises and concessions (Buckel and Fischer-Lescano, 2007; Demirovic, 2007, pp. 32–33). Nonetheless, domination and coercion are not absent in hegemonic relations. The coercive power of the state is always present and “imposes discipline on those who do not consent, either actively or passively, to the dominant group” (Glassman, 2009, p. 81).

Gramsci developed his concept of hegemony while he reflected upon why and how “the majority of citizens gave support to a repressive social order” (Flint, 2009, p. 327)—i.e. class rule—and analysed limits and failures of working-class struggles in Italy. He uses and develops the concept of hegemony both for devising a revolutionary strategy of the working class—how can a proletarian hegemony be won?—and for an analysis of capitalist societies (i.e. the hegemony of the bourgeoisie) in the West (Anderson, 1976, pp. 7–44; Elfferding and Volker, 1979).

In their project of developing a concept of ‘radical democratic politics’, Laclau and Mouffe start from there, but transcend and refresh Gramsci’s notion of hegemony. Marchart (2007) identifies four important shifts in their theory: a weakening of Marxist determinism, a sensitivity towards political struggles and subjectivities that are not determined by class, notably expressed within the New Social Movements, and their pluralism—i.e. the need for an articulation of relatively autonomous demands of different groups within a broader common movement (see also for a summary of their political and theoretical project, Laclau and Mouffe, 1981).

Finally and most importantly here they point to the salience of discourses, processes of signification and meaning for an understanding of hegemony and provide a discourse-analytical operationalisation of it. Hegemony, then involves more than a passive consensus and more than legitimate actions. It involves the expansion of a particular discourse of norms, values, views and perceptions through persuasive redescriptions of the world (Torfing, 1999, p. 302).

Hegemonic practices are thus “attempts to articulate a discourse which can bring about a moral, intellectual and political leadership” (Torfing, 1999, p. 302). More specifically, their theory can on the one hand describe discursive strategies, which assure the coherence of a discourse formation and on the other describe a hegemonic relation (Marchart, 2007, p. 114). A hegemonic relation in this discourse-theoretical operationalisation hence requires

- the production of tendentially empty signifiers which, while maintaining the incommensurability between universal and particulars, enables the latter to take up the representation of the former (Laclau, 2000, p. 207).

Central for their concept is that the terrain for these hegemonic practices is constituted by power. The production of tendentially empty signifiers, of particulars taking up the representation of the universal is by no means a voluntaristic or arbitrary activity. Instead, it is rooted in the unevenness of the social and hegemonic relationships

- Not any position in society, not any struggle is equally capable of transforming its own contents in a nodal point that becomes an empty signifier (Laclau, 1994/1996, p. 43).

The fixing of discourses and the stabilisation of meaning are thus political actions and matters of hegemonic contestation (Marchart, 1998, p. 11).

Hegemonic contestation for their part needs the creation of chains of equivalences to other struggles
The strengthening of specific ... struggles requires ... the expansion of chains of equivalence which extend to other struggles (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985/2001, p. 182).

Through the chain of equivalence all the differential objective determinations of different struggles will be lost and the identity of a certain struggle "can only be given either by a positive determination underlying them all, or by their common reference to something external" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985/2001, p. 127). This again is no arbitrary act, since "the chains of equivalence will vary radically according to which antagonism is involved" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985/2001, p. 131).

In what follows, by drawing on this concept of hegemony, I will try to make sense of the contestation around the EcoDensity initiative and—on a more abstract level—shed light on the contested nature of sustainability fixes.

3. EcoDensity as a Sustainability Fix for Vancouver?

3.1 Development of the EcoDensity Initiative

Mayor Sullivan launched the EcoDensity initiative to much surprise on the part of oppositional councillors (see Bula, 2006) and without prior presentation to, let alone approval of, Vancouver City Council. Only afterwards, in July 2006, was the support of Council sought for the development of an EcoDensity Charter—including a budget. In order to promote the EcoDensity idea, a massive public relation programme was undertaken in 2006/07. A second round of public consultation in the beginning of 2008 became necessary because the draft versions of an EcoDensity Charter and Initial Actions faced strong opposition.

Anxiety over what EcoDensity would mean for their daily lives led to open protest against EcoDensity in a number of neighbourhoods. All this became especially visible in a Special Council Meeting on 26 February 2008 that was supposed to adopt the EcoDensity Charter and Initial Actions. The meeting had to be extended for six more nights until April, because 151 speakers lined up, wanting to express their approval or their concerns directly to Council. Even before the Public Hearing such strong opposition was voiced—at workshops and meetings, through letters, feedback forms and emails—that the Director of Planning advised Council not to adopt the draft charter and initial actions but instead to direct staff to revise them again (Howard, 2008).

Despite the opposition, on 10 June 2008, Vancouver City Council finally adopted—the again amended and further revised—(fourth draft) EcoDensity Charter unanimously. Some initial actions were opposed by the oppositional councillors; nevertheless, the motions were carried by the majority (City of Vancouver, 2008e). The adopted Charter contains a list of eight commitments by the City of Vancouver. These are

(1) An overarching environmental priority;
(2) Towards an Eco-City;
(3) A greener, denser urban-pattern;
(4) More housing affordability, types and choices;
(5) A greener and livable design with a 'sense of place';
(6) Greener and livable support systems;
(7) Neighbourhood voice, neighbourhood responsibility; and
(8) How will the city use this charter and meet its commitments? (City of Vancouver, 2008f).

Two initial actions (A 1–2) were immediately adopted as new policy (City of
Vancouver, 2008d). First, a rezoning policy for greener buildings according to the LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) standard and, secondly, a rezoning policy for greener larger sites, which require further sustainability measures and—where applicable—the consideration of a range of types and tenures to increase affordable housing opportunities. Other actions relate to directions to include in existing work programmes (Actions B 1–3) or represent an authorisation for staff to work on the next steps towards implementation (Actions C 1–11). Up until December 2009, three additional actions and zoning changes had been approved by the subsequent City Council.4 Most of these actions were not ‘invented’ by the EcoDensity initiative, but had been discussed long before. Laneway housing, for example, has been discussed as ‘coach houses’ at least since the 1980s (Punter, 2004, p. 103).

3.2 EcoDensity as Hegemonic Strategy

If we analyse EcoDensity in terms of a struggle around hegemony, we can identify the aim of the initiative in the creation of a hegemonic discourse around densification. This means that the proponents of EcoDensity try to make their particular discourse of density a universally accepted and desirable solution for current urban problems. Thus, they aim at “moral, intellectual and political leadership” (Torfing, 1999, p. 302) in defining and shaping the future development of the city. In order to make their understanding and enactment of densification hegemonic, the hegemonic practice of attaching ‘densification’ to sustainability, livability and affordability is used—i.e. the attempt of creating chains of equivalence to these in Vancouver already-hegemonic discursive elements. Or, as one of the advocates argues in an interview

By putting the dirty word of density with the very sweet and tasty word of Eco, you launder the dirty word (interview, former Director of Planning, 5 February 2008).

S/he also sees EcoDensity as basically continuing existing policies, but highlights the new name as one of the main merits of the concept

Because we liked the idea that there was a political branding of pro-active and progressive planning policy. You got to remember, that planning policies are inherently boring … But EcoDensity begins to bring a PR thing, makes it more interesting. It’s on the edge (interview, former Director of Planning, 5 February 2008)

Why was such an extensive programme for the promotion of density necessary and why did a fixing of density onto sustainability seem so promising? In order to understand the rationale of EcoDensity, we need to take a closer look at the Vancouver context—more specifically the role of density, growth and sustainability in the city.

3.3 Situating EcoDensity: The role of Density, Growth and Sustainability in Vancouver

Density and growth. Vancouver is a fast-growing city, characterised by an affordability crisis and widespread environmental awareness. Between 1991 and 1996, Vancouver was the fastest-growing metropolitan area in Canada with a 14.3 per cent growth rate (City of Vancouver: 15.6 per cent). Between 2001 and 2006, the growth rate dropped to 6.5 per cent, but there is still an average increase of 6500 people a year just in the City of Vancouver. Traditionally, Vancouver’s urban form is
characterised by a dominance of single-family homes, while commercial activities are restricted to main streets, a business district in the downtown and light industrial lands along coastal and river shores. The change in urban form had already started with the erection of residential towers in the downtown’s West End in the 1960s and with the creation of mixed residential communities on former brownfields in False Creek South in the following decade (Ley, 1980). From the late 1980s to the present day, another massive increase in residential densities was experienced in the downtown and along False Creek, being now characterised mostly by condominium towers (Ley, 1996; Punter, 2004). These mega projects bear testimony that Vancouver started early with brownfield redevelopment and vertical expansion in its urban core. High residential densities are hence not new to Vancouver, but mostly restricted to the downtown. This is also related to the fact that land for development in the Vancouver region is limited.

The solution to this growth problem, already presented by the planners in the 1980s, was to accommodate growth outside the downtown in low-density neighbourhoods. This of course was also in the interest of the development industry that was always looking for vacant space and was pressing for the redevelopment of single-family areas. However, attempts at intensification—i.e. rezoning—were resisted by homeowners and other residents in these areas, who wanted their neighbourhoods to remain as they were (McAfee, 1997; Mitchell, 2004, ch. 4; Punter, 2004, pp. 149–156). They demanded even more restrictive zoning and design guidelines. In this situation, in the early 1990s a new approach was taken: the elaboration of a city-wide plan whose task it was to accommodate growth in the low-density neighbourhoods with the consent of the residents of Vancouver. After three years of extensive participation, CityPlan: directions for Vancouver was approved by the Vancouver City Council in 1995 as a “broad vision for the city to guide policy decisions, corporate work priorities, budgets, and capital plans” (City of Vancouver, 1995). The chosen scenario, a ‘city of neighbourhood centres’, approved of growth in to-be-created neighbourhood centres within the low-density parts of the city. After CityPlan set the framework, the task of the still on-going Community Vision process (initiated in 1996), has been to take CityPlan to the neighbourhood level and develop detailed local Vision Directions. Although a success in terms of creating consensus around intensification and diversification of housing stock in low-density neighbourhoods (see for a longer discussion, Rosol, 2010), because of slow and incremental implementation the actual impact of CityPlan Community Visions regarding intensification is seen as only modest (Punter, 2004, pp. 166–167; Seelig and Seelig, 1997; and interview, former councillor, 11 March 2008). CityPlan is relevant for the EcoDensity discussion here because both sides refer to it: the proponents claim EcoDensity to be a continuation of the CityPlan Community Vision process; opponents see it as disruption (see later).

The role of sustainability and environmentalism. Vancouver is often cited as a poster child of urban sustainable development (Berelowitz, 2005, p. 34). This is based on its densely populated downtown area, its walkable and mixed-use neighbourhoods and its apparently happy coexistence with its natural surroundings. Vancouver offers breathtaking views of the mountains, inviting beaches and ample green space including the mostly publicly accessible waterfront. The city is very proud of its natural setting and its
environmental activist history. The Freeway Defeat in the 1970s, for example, is omnipresent in the public memory and also the invention of the concept of the ecological footprint in Vancouver is often cited. Environmental awareness and stewardship are further shown by the fact that Vancouver is the founding city of Greenpeace and Canada’s first Green party. Moreover, we find a high esteem of outdoor leisure activities (for an early account of this west coast lifestyle, see Ley, 1980, p. 245).

The latter already links to sustainability as lifestyle and consumer practice. In Vancouver, green consumption advertisements and green living magazines, high-end organic supermarkets, healthy eating and yoga classes are omnipresent (Quastel, 2009, pp. 714–717). Together these practices add to an image of “ecology, leisure and ‘liveability’ [which] feeds off the consumption preferences of professionals in a service economy” (Zukin, 1991, p. 7, quoted in Kear, 2007, p. 327). According to Kear, sustainability is playing an important role in Vancouver. The notion of sustainability is, Kear writes, “both obscuring and legitimating the socionatural ‘fixing’ of space” (Kear, 2007, p. 326)—i.e. occluding the broader context of urban development in Vancouver. The marketing potential of environmental leadership has also been discovered in the real estate industry (Quastel, 2009, pp. 711–717).

In regional and local planning, environmental goals were early proclaimed. The regularly updated ‘Livable Region Plan’ is an attempt to manage sprawl and channel growth. Other sustainability initiatives include the Vancouver Food Charter (2007), the Community Climate Change Action Plan (2005), the Creating a Sustainable City initiative including the adoption of Sustainability Principles for the city (2002), the City of Vancouver Transportation Plan (1997), the City Environment Policy and Action Plan (1996). As early as 1990, the ‘Clouds of Change’ report aimed at air quality improvement and climate protection by recommending actions such as traffic reduction and energy efficient land use and building policies (Punter, 2004, pp. 150–154). On the other hand, many environmental problems are not fully dealt with or even acknowledged. These include inadequate wastewater treatment, air and water pollution, building on fragile slopes and on seismically unstable land, the lack of energy efficient housing and a car dominated transport system (Berelowitz, 2005, pp. 25–37).

4. EcoDensity: The Critique

The previous shows that neither sustainability nor densification were absent issues prior to the introduction of EcoDensity. What is more, Vancouver proudly sees itself as a pioneer regarding sustainable urbanism. On what basis did critics contest the initiative then and what kind of (hegemonic) practices did they use?

4.1 “Neighbourhoods for a Sustainable Vancouver”

From his first announcement of the initiative, Sullivan was able to present supporters from very different backgrounds like environmentalists, academics, landscape architects and planners, developers, community activists, residents and former and present councillors (City of Vancouver Mayor’s Office, 2006; Smith, 2007a). Critics were equally heterogeneous and included homeowners, community and housing activists, environmentalists, oppositional and former councillors, heritage preservationists, individual residents and even developers. Protest means were as diverse as the opponents and included anti-developers’
rhetoric ("neighbourhoods before developers’ profits"), as well as playing on fear in order to mobilise more residents. Forms of action included workshop participation, filling out evaluation sheets, distributing pamphlets on Vision Committee meetings and in front of EcoDensity workshops and mobilising for the Public Hearing and rallies (Pablo, 2008a). People wrote letters to the editors of local newspapers as well as to the Mayor, Council and the Planning Department. Other means for strengthening their position included the referral to accepted ‘experts’ such as Jane Jacobs and playing on their power as voters.

Despite their heterogeneity, residents were able to form “Neighbourhoods for a Sustainable Vancouver” (NSV), a city-wide coalition of 28 neighbourhood organisations. They subjected the several drafts of the Charter and Initial Actions to a sophisticated critique, requested the end of the whole initiative and developed recommendations for achieving the goal of a “truly sustainable future for Vancouver” (Neighbourhoods for a Sustainable Vancouver, 2007). The alliance was remarkable because it was “the first time in the city’s history that such a diverse, broad representation of neighbourhood groups from across the city have come together to carefully consider and address a City initiative” (Neighbourhoods for a Sustainable Vancouver, 2008a). An interviewee also pointed out the great diversity of opponents.

There is, all the way from the people who don’t want anyone to move in next door, or any densification, through to a number of us who are fine about density but saying, ‘density is one tool’ (interview, ex-councillor, COPE, 6 March 2008).

In an unintended way, EcoDensity had a strong effect on organising and uniting residents. This coalition building can be regarded as an important hegemonic strategy. The NSV try to establish themselves as speaking for ‘the community’ by presenting a map that suggests that opponents come from virtually every neighbourhood in Vancouver (Neighbourhoods for a Sustainable Vancouver, 2008a). Also the name “Neighbourhoods for a Sustainable Vancouver” can be regarded as strategic, since it tried to show that people are not against sustainability per se, but against this specific initiative. With their recommendations on how to achieve sustainability, protesters also actively defended themselves against the NIMBY reproach often announced.

4.2 Critique of Content: Sustainability, Affordability, Livability

Protesters claimed that EcoDensity “deceptively sells densification for profit as livability, sustainability, and affordability” (Anonymous, 2008; emphasis added), thus that a discourse on the environment was only used for legitimising increased density that basically served developers. With their arguments, presented later, they challenged chains of equivalence between (Eco)density, sustainability, affordability and livability. They mostly did not question the latter as desirable aims, but tried to show that EcoDensity would not achieve them. They also pointed out existing policies that already aim at densification and sustainability and therefore rate the whole costly initiative as unnecessary.

Ecological sustainability. Especially concerning ecological sustainability, many critics took the official goal of EcoDensity very seriously and tried to strengthen their own interpretation of it. They questioned, for example, the sustainability of the proposed demolition of old housing stock and the erection of high-rises instead. They demanded low- and mid-rise densification.
that respected the surrounding building forms (for example, interview, ex-council-lor, 6 March 2008). Also, the LEED certification promoted by EcoDensity supporters was discredited because of its relatively low requirements (Pablo, 2008b). Moreover, it was argued that green technology—like energy efficient building technologies—should be required by Council and not bonused with extra density (Anonymous, 2008; Neighbourhoods for a Sustainable Vancouver, 2007). Another line of criticism pointed out contradictory council policies—for example, allowing rezoning for big-box stores (Pablo, 2007a). Thus, they also expanded the sustainability discourse to other policy fields not included in the EcoDensity project.

**Affordability.** Today, Vancouver has by far the highest housing prices in Canada (Somerville and Swann, 2008, pp. 2 and 7; Royal LePage, 2009) and an extremely low vacancy rate of under 1 per cent since 2005. In this overheated property market, affordability is an urgent matter that affects not only low-income groups but increasingly also the middle class. Not surprisingly, affordability was one of the main issues in the EcoDensity controversy. It figured prominently in all official EcoDensity documents. Nevertheless, housing activists spoke out against the initiative and tried to deconstruct the connection between affordability and density. The problem was, they argued, that in the EcoDensity rationality, affordability was tied to density solely. Other factors that were responsible for the soaring house prices were ignored. Critiques stated that density did not necessarily improve affordability and so far densification did not make Vancouver more affordable (see also Woolley, 2007). Many people thus thought: “Why accept density, … if what we see is increased prices and condos that seem destined for the rich?” Consequently, former city councillor Louis (COPE) emphasised: “The question is not about the level of densification. … The question is densification for who?” (Pablo, 2007b).

Some residents also warned against the displacement of existing residents caused by EcoDensity. They were afraid that renters would be evicted and homeowners would be ‘taxed out’—i.e. forced to sell their property due to increased property taxes as a consequence of rezoning (Anonymous, 2008). Especially housing activists from the Downtown Eastside spoke out. They opposed the possibility of introducing condominium towers into their neighbourhood, fearing further gentrification and loss of affordable housing in a neighbourhood already under massive socioeconomic and development pressure. Finally, critics argued that affordability needed proactive measures, including preserving existing (rental and social) housing stock and governmental intervention towards new cooperative and social housing (for example, Lee et al., 2008).

Confronted with this kind of criticism, Toderian, the director of planning, had to admit to council that “EcoDensity won’t provide housing that meets average incomes … ‘I don’t think we could affect [housing] supply to the point that prices would go down,’ said Toderian” (Woolley, 2007). Even the staff report accompanying the third draft charter states that affordability was at most indirectly tackled in the initiative, based on a belief in a trickle-down rationality.

While adding more housing most likely will not reduce the cost of housing from what it is today, it can moderate future price increases from what they would otherwise have been (Toderian et al., 2008, p. 6).
This shows that the discursive connection of density and affordability was challenged with convincing arguments.

**Livability.** Critics were also concerned that without an increase in—already insufficient—services and amenities, livability would be sacrificed by more density (Anonymous, 2008; Smith, 2007b). One interviewee explained

I am concerned that as we build out and become more dense, we are going to lose the amenities that makes it such a good place to live ... In EcoDensity, density is the goal. And density is not the goal. Livability, a sustainable neighbourhood is the goal. Density is the tool. And what we are in danger of getting, because the mayor puts all the impetus on density, is very dense neighbourhoods ... And we coined it ‘Green overcrowding’. Because density without amenity is overcrowding (interview, oppositional councillor, Vision, 23 January 2008).

Moreover in an open letter critics demanded from the City not to rely on density bonuses alone or mostly for providing public benefits—thus questioning the market-based model of amenity financing (Smith, 2008). Consequently—and here they pointed out other political scales in the debate—it should secure funding from other levels of government and not accept the downloading of all responsibility onto the city level (Neighbourhoods for a Sustainable Vancouver, 2007).8

**Unnecessary.** Supporters claimed that EcoDensity continued existing policies and just tried to accelerate the process, given that climate change, peak oil and an affordability crisis make sustainable city politics much more urgent. EcoDensity was portrayed as just the next step “to meet the challenge of becoming a truly sustainable city” (City of Vancouver, 2006, p. 2; see also argumentation by Councillor Anton in Smith, 2008, and by Councillor Ladner and Mayor Sullivan in Burrows, 2008).

However, the protesting groups claimed that EcoDensity would not help to make progress on issues of sustainable land use. Therefore, the resources put into the initiative should be used for existing programmes, which already support smart growth principles including increased densities in certain parts of the city and more housing choices. NSV for example write that

EcoDensity has an ‘eco’ part and a ‘density’ part. EcoDensity is not needed for either of them. The City’s Community Climate Change Action Plan (2005) can handle the ‘eco’ part. CityPlan Community Visions and local area plans, implemented through the Neighbourhood Centres Program, can handle the ‘density’ part. The City should simply move ahead with these pre-existing initiatives. EcoDensity, which is unnecessary and not supported, should be withdrawn completely and valuable staff time should not be wasted (Neighbourhoods for a Sustainable Vancouver, 2008b).

Moreover, critics argued, the city already had the power to pass environmental policies or environmental friendly building standards (interview, ex-councillor, COPE, 6 March 2008). Finally, some even apprehended that the initiative endangers the acceptance of intensification and sustainability in the city. Councillor Deal (Vision), for example, claimed that Vancouver residents “weren’t really scared about increasing residential densities until the mayor coined the term EcoDensity in June 2006”. She concluded: “He [Mayor Sullivan] put the fear of density into people” (Pablo, 2008a).
4.3 Critique of Process: Mistrust, Lack of Genuine Participation, Overriding of Community Planning

This fear also becomes visible as almost all the interviewed residents used the word ‘suspicion’ when they talked about EcoDensity and the intentions of Council. Since the general goals of EcoDensity were basically ‘motherhood and apple pie’ issues that nobody would disagree with (for example, City of Vancouver, 2008b, pp. 3 and 7), people suspected that what was really behind it were developers’ interests and a publicity campaign for the mayor. One interviewee explained:

It’s not that we disagree that some more density in [name of neighbourhood deleted] is feasible and even desirable. It’s the way that the City is going about it. It’s this top–down—you know … And basically, I guess, there’s … a degree of suspicion of what the Council is up to. Are they prepared to sell us out to the developers? … None of us feels that we can trust the way that EcoDensity is being introduced … So I guess you can say, it’s really a suspicion, that is driving the opposition (interview, resident, 11 February 2008).

This is related to the next point: the critique of the inadequate participation process. Critics of EcoDensity saw the process characterised by “extreme haste and little genuine citizen consultation” (Jones et al., 2008). Much of the resentment stemmed from the fact that the initiative was presented as a “done deal” (interview, resident, 19 June 2008). A former director of planning explained the criticism on EcoDensity was mostly with its top–down approach. Although ultimately the aims of EcoDensity was might be a continuation of existing policies, the perception of it differed enormously, resulting in mistrust and hostility (interview, former director of planning, 14 February 2008). The number of public workshops in different parts of the city did not appease critics, because in their view “meetings of the public with city officials and a moderator who skews the public’s comments are a waste of everyone’s time and are not meaningful dialogue” (Anonymous, 2008). This refers especially to the extremely short timeline for consultations on the second draft Charter and Initial Actions of effectively only a month (Neighbourhoods for a Sustainable Vancouver, 2007).

Finally, critics often contrasted EcoDensity with the already mentioned CityPlan Community Visions. The Community Vision process had shown how to plan for smart growth through a neighbourhood-supported process, protesters claimed, but was ignored by the EcoDensity initiative (Neighbourhoods for a Sustainable Vancouver, 2008b). Many residents were now afraid that EcoDensity would override their Community Visions as well as other local plans and would put into question their sometimes hard–achieved consensus on housing form, height and density (see for example, the critique expressed at the Public Hearing (Smith, 2008)). As a form to deal with these criticisms, the finally approved Initial Actions had to include the creation of a new city-wide ‘Eco CityPlan’ (Action C-1) “that builds on and respects CityPlan and the many Community Visions, rather than replacing them” (City of Vancouver, 2008d, p. 11).

4.4 Successes and Failures of the EcoDensity Initiative

In the end, EcoDensity as a discursive strategy—by trying to attach densification to sustainability, livability and affordability, i.e. the attempt of creating chains of
equivalence to these in Vancouver; already-hegemonic discursive elements—was in part successful. As one oppositional councillor explained in an interview: “We have an interesting challenge politically, in how to attack the mayor’s EcoDensity without attacking sustainable growth, smart growth” (interview, oppositional councillor, 23 January 2008). In other words, because concepts of sustainability, liveability, etc. were generally accepted and regarded as desirable in Vancouver, attaching density to them made it difficult to oppose the concept. However, the interviewee went on: “But thankfully … the public is not buying it” (interview, oppositional councillor, 23 January 2008). Thus, I argue that EcoDensity, despite its institutional success—i.e. the approval by Council, has been a failing *hegemonic* project. It was not successful in the expansion of its “particular discourse of norms, values, views and perceptions”; its “redescriptions of the world” (Torfing, 1999, p. 302) have not been persuasive enough to get its critics on board. It was not successful in its attempt to increase popular consent to densification. Why has it been a failure? I argue that it has not been capable of fixing meaning around EcoDensity and articulating density within a chain of equivalence with sustainability, affordability, livability. This is, first, because of the massive interventions that challenge exactly these chains of equivalence and thus the concept itself. Councillor Deal (Vision) is probably right when she suggested, “If Mayor Sam Sullivan had stuck with the word sustainability, neighbourhood associations wouldn’t be feeling anxious about ‘EcoDensity’” (Pablo, 2008a). In fact, as one interviewee summarised the arguments of many critics

Yes, EcoDensity as an idea is fantastic. I think everybody agrees on that. But the *wording*, … people are expressing their concerns that density equals development equals profit to the developers. (…) They’re very supportive of a sustainable Vancouver, but why *call* it EcoDensity? That term just throws everyone off and people are very suspicious (Interview, resident, 2 July 2008; emphasis added).

Secondly, as shown in the quotes, opponents created their own chains of equivalences, like ‘density equals developers’ profits’, calling it ‘green overcrowding’ or ‘Rico’-Density as COPE councillor Cadman did. Also, the battle against EcoDensity was put in line with the successful battle against the freeways in the 1970s, as in the following statement: “The present livability of Vancouver is founded on citizens’ opposition to planning experts” (Jones *et al*., 2008, p. 1). In the end, opponents were successful in denying the mayor his success story by creating a huge controversy around the initiative. It took two years and four draft versions just to approve a Charter (see also Quastel, 2009, pp. 717–718). It also cost Sullivan his office since he was not nominated again for re-election by his own party (Bula, 2008).

Because of the massive opposition, proponents of EcoDensity were forced to use hegemonic strategies like a much stronger participatory element and other concessions in order to get the initiative approved. Thus, what was started as a strategy for making densification a generally accepted and desirable solution for current urban problems, relying on the broad appeal of the notion of sustainability in Vancouver, turned into something that needed other hegemonic strategies itself. Thus, in the final Charter and final Initial Actions, some issues were dealt with with much more care (for example, the relaxation of height restrictions in the historical core), others were more comprehensively addressed (for example, CityPlan Community Visions). With this, the initiative was able to gain the
consent of the whole Council, and critics were unable to defeat the initiative as a whole. Critics were also not able to enforce the strengthening of other policy initiatives or policy fields, such as affordability, and hence not able to make their alternative visions hegemonic either. The rationale of the intervention of opponents was not necessarily progressive or even just coherent. It was in itself complex and contradictory. It also could not fix meaning over sustainability. Yet it prevented the establishing of an uncontested hegemonic discourse of (eco)density and denied it general popular consent.

5. Conclusions

All environmental-ecological arguments ... are arguments about society and, therefore, complex refractions of all sorts of struggles being waged in other realms (Harvey, 1996, p. 372).

In this paper, I have analysed the EcoDensity initiative as a discursive strategy whose aim was to gain acceptance of densification. With this, I wanted to show by means of a specific example how smart growth as an ‘urban sustainability fix’ is pursued and contested ‘on the ground’. I traced the history of the adoption of this planning initiative and showed the strategies and argumentation of proponents as well as of critics. The analysis of the debate around EcoDensity showed the importance of discursive strategies, wording and meaning. Both proponents and critics agreed on that: for proponents EcoDensity was a way to “launder a dirty word” (interview, 5 February 2008), for critics the wording caused suspicion. The proponents of the initiative tried to push housing density by creating a discourse that fixes its meaning onto sustainability and other hegemonic discursive elements like affordability and livability. Thus, EcoDensity can be seen as a prominent example of how environmental concerns are introduced to neutralize environmental opposition by projecting a value-free vision of ‘win-win-wins’ between economic growth, social development and ecological protection (While et al., 2004, p. 554).

However, this has been unsuccessful, because the opponents challenged exactly this—the equivalence of density with livability, affordability and sustainability. Instead of being able to turn the broad consensus to sustainability in Vancouver into consensus over densification, thus making densification hegemonic, proponents in the end needed to make concessions and finally the voting majority of the party in power just to get the initiative passed. While opponents questioned the interrelation of density and livability, affordability and sustainability, they did not question these concepts themselves or only to a much lesser extent. Therefore, even if the EcoDensity has failed as a hegemonic project, the whole discourse on the environment, on sustainable consuming, on smart growth continues to be hegemonic—and not less problematic as, for example, Quastel (2009) shows in his discussion on ecological gentrification. This can also be seen in that, although the initiative has been continued only half-heartedly, the new Council still tries to promote Vancouver as a sustainable and green city but now with a new initiative. In February 2009, the recently elected Mayor Robertson launched the Greenest City initiative. The use of sustainability discourses to address tensions from the dominant growth model (see also Gibbs and Krueger, 2007, p. 118) is still ongoing in Vancouver.
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Notes

1. A nodal point is

An empty signifier that is capable of fixing the content of a range of floating signifiers by articulating them within a chain of equivalence (Torfing, 1999, p. 303).

A floating signifier is

A signifier that is overflowed with meaning because it is articulated differently within different discourses (Torfing, 1999, p. 301).


3. Sullivan’s centre-right Non-Partisan Association (NPA) held the majority in council from 2005 to 2008. The opposition was formed by four Vision Vancouver (centre-left) councillors and one COPE (social-democratic) councillor.

4. These are: laneway housing, secondary suites in apartments, basements in single-family areas (see www.vancouver-ecodensity.ca/content.php?id=42; accessed 22 December 2009). The November 2008 elections resulted in a victory for Vision Vancouver (seven councillors and the mayor). The remaining councillors came from COPE (2) and NPA (1).

5. For a critique of ‘sustainable’ or ‘green’ consumption as a new form of class distinction and its relation to gentrification, see Quastel (2009, pp. 704–705, 714–717). For a critique of urban environmental management as a form of ‘green governmentality’ aimed at individual responsibility and self-management, see Brand (2007); and for an early critique of the ‘livable city’ as an expression of liberal ideology, see Ley (1980).


8. A more fundamental critique of the concept of livability and its combination of new urbanist and environmental orientations—such as Hagerman’s study of Portland, for example (Hagerman, 2007)—was not part of the discussion.


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