American cities can be seen as exponents of neoliberal planning concepts implemented throughout the last half century. Also cities worldwide have followed similar or related urban development strategies for establishing economic growth. But are American cities still fit for the 21st century? Are they able to take the lead in building more sustainable urban futures? This article explores some American ‘survival’ strategies to cope with the economic realities, societal changes and environmental challenges of our times.
American cities have been, and continue to be, subject to a wide variety of planning studies: they inspire and fascinate us. They are the podium at which economical, social and environmental issues come at display. An early frontrunner of thinking about city life was Jacobs (1962). She thought about the position of humans and communities in cities, and advocated for vibrant mixed-use neighborhoods. In essence, this was a plea against the ‘incestuous’ decisions made by local planning authorities and property developers which focused on economical growth at the expense of environmental and societal localities. Jacobs’ thinking has immensely influenced both planning practitioners and academics. But also in real life Jacobs was successful as she won the battle with New York’s chief planner Moses against the development of a freeway (see Flint, 2009).

The underlying reason for her opposition was to change the perception of the roles of public, private and civic institutions in American planning. Unlike Europe and Asia, these roles are culturally rooted in (neo) liberal ideas. For instance, Cullingworth & Davies (2006) argue that planning culture in the US is characterized by strict market regulation and ‘development control’ instruments such as zoning. These public instruments are in place to regulate the ‘entrepreneurial’ development industry in cities (see Harvey, 1989). Moreover, the role of civic society, as a result of the minimal role of government, is more active and organized (see Van Dijk, 2009). But, unquestionably, the dominant governance mode of American development practice continues to be based on neoliberal principles (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). These principles are characterized by decentralization, deregulation and privatization, amongst others.

Hence, these characteristics influence the creation of space. It resulted in an increased emphasis and importance of (local) urban projects as spatial answers to economically compete with (global) cities. Hackworth (2009) argues that one of the foundations of ‘neoliberal governance’ at the local level was the rise of public-private partnerships. Also, city governments were increasingly expected to serve as market facilitators, rather than salves for market failures. A notion also adopted by Adams & Tiesdell (2010), who introduced the concept of ‘planners as market actors’ who’s primary role is to regulate, shape, stimulate and activate markets.
America’s urban development practice in the way actors cooperate on urban projects? These are some questions underlining this article aimed at showing how different American cities (re)act to become more sustainable resilient cities. The insights are based on a research trip through North America in April/May 2011. It included site visits, interviews, and literature reviews (see planetizen.com for projects) published in a blog (see gebiedsontwikkeling.nu). Hence, the article does not paint a complete picture of contemporary urban development in America. Rather, the cases function as ‘sources of inspiration’ for new development strategies that cope with the economic realities, societal changes and environmental challenges of our times.

Moreover, it brought forward a power shift towards more market influence in planning. Hence, for decades in the USA, the result of planning decisions made by neoliberal alliances was ‘property-led development’, considered with ‘what’ actors wanted to build based on supply-driven approaches. Moreover, as a result of market forces, development investment in US cities over the last 30 years followed a similar pattern (see Hackworth, 2007): revalorization of inner cores, devalorization of inner suburbs, and suburban expansion. These neoliberal spatial policies and investment strategies have had some drawbacks. As Glaeser (2011) argues, American cities witnessed a near death in the 1980s, becoming highly unlivable, unemployed, unequal, and vacant places.

So, does this neoliberal model still create sustainable cities, or do we need to follow another path? Florida (2010) argues that we live in an age of change, “The Great Reset”, a transition period in which a ‘system shift’ is taking place. Hence, the recession and sovereign debt crisis have resulted in gradually rethinking the future of society, businesses, and cities. According to Green (2007) they become increasingly ‘socially-led’. Companies apply more human-centered business models, people become more responsible for their environment, and government finally transforms into governance. In this regard, Boelens (2009) advocates for an “actor-relational approach for urban planning” more focused on network interaction rather than on hierarchical steering. This also means a change in ‘urban leadership’ which becomes more transparent, fragmented and complementary (see Heurkens & Louwaars, 2011). For cities, as Glaeser (2011) argues in his “Triumph of the City”, this means embracing more ‘market-friendly planning policies’ which embrace the essential elements of ‘urban reinvention’: industrial diversity, entrepreneurship, and most important: an educated workforce. Florida (2010) calls for an ‘idea-driven economy’, creating more intensive use of space, creating more quality of life within cities. In this evolving paradigm, ‘big game projects’ no longer have a place as people begin to value and experience differently.

Thus, does this mean we have moved beyond the neoliberal city? Are we beginning to change our view on developing places, turning towards demand-driven user-centered development? Do we now focus on the ‘why’ in stead of the ‘what’? Can we encounter such a ‘paradigm shift’ in
Chicago: financial city

Chicago, over the last 20 years has successfully developed itself as a trading center for grain and cattle. Building on these economic assets, the city grew into a financial center establishing itself amongst other 2nd Global Cities such as Shanghai and Mumbai. Nevertheless, it ranks 6th on the ‘Most Global Cities’ index of Kearney, whose most important criteria are business activity, human capital, information exchange, cultural experience, and political engagement. Despite the favorable circumstances, remarkable examples of urban development projects to learn from are few. For instance, Millennium Park, the city center’s plaza, can be seen as a straightforward ‘public-private partnership’ development. It boosted the real estate values of adjacent offices, but has not caused any spin-off for the surrounding declining inner suburb areas. Here, we still notice the influence of the ‘neoliberal fix’, focusing on inner-city ‘flagship’ projects, which nonetheless had a positive effect on the city’s image. But, the Chicago City Council now has published “The Chicago Plan for the 21st Century” which embraces sustainability. However, this plan has no official status for developers and investors as it is merely indicative. Also, there are plans of greening the roofs of buildings, but this can hardly be considered as sustainable as it does not incorporate economical or societal issues. However, some smaller developments like University Village show universities (UIC in this case) are capable serious development actors as well. Nonetheless, Chicago is not an example of the 21st century sustainable development, yet.
Detroit: creative city

Detroit is a striking example of a ‘mono-industrial city’ who failed to reinvent itself over time. As a car-manufacturing city Detroit grew exceptionally as an industrial giant until the 1970s. The ‘Big Three’ (General Motors, Ford, Chrysler) had tremendous power over city development; cars became the means and reason to plan and develop the city. Public transport was abandoned completely for the sake of the car (industry), symbolizing the ultimate American Dream. Moreover, it resulted in a huge ‘urban sprawl’ with low-density housing neighborhoods. Due to the introduction of foreign cars in the US demand dropped steeply, causing job losses and a flea of people to other cities. The dependency on the car industry left Detroit with no fall back option; it shrank from 2 million (1965) towards 0.7 million inhabitants (2011). It left the city, and especially the inner suburb, with an incredible amount of vacant properties and land. Detroit is the example of a solely economy-focused neoliberal model, governed by both public and private actors. Nowadays, Detroit offers opportunities to experiment with ‘bottom-up planning experiments’. The development strategy of ‘urban farming’ can be seen as quite promising for shrinking cities; consider it the new Detroit export product. At least it encompasses a sustainable physical approach in which social, economical and environmental development goes hand in hand. For instance Recovery Park, a development managed by the civic SHAR Foundation, focuses on bringing together space, revenue, green economy, and human capital. Also it brings opportunities for creative industries, as artists and young entrepreneurs find enough affordable places to start businesses. Hence, a sustainable city strategy is missing, but maybe the key to success is not having one at all. It is interesting to monitor whether these bottom-up approaches result in new economic growth over time.

“Public transport was abandoned completely…”
Boston: university city

Boston is one of the oldest cities in America, the birth place of America’s independence, and the economic heart of New England. Boston mainly was an industrial port for centuries but has developed itself towards a diversified high quality life city. Importantly, the city has two world renowned universities, Harvard and MIT. The city’s combination of quality of life, diverse economy and educated young people has resulted in a healthy metropolis. Although, the quite densely built city center has not been accomplished by a ‘comprehensive’ development approach. In Boston spatial planning mainly occurs through ‘piece meal developments’ which are often mixed-use on a plot level rather than on area level. Nevertheless, one exception is the ‘Big Dig’, a $22 billion inner-city development project which consisted of bringing an elevated highway underground and developing the vacant land with the Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway. Although it has resulted in a healthier urban environment, it has not yet become a vibrant place. Possible adjacent future office and housing developments studied by the Boston Redevelopment Authority could improve this situation. Again, this is a form of a ‘big game project’ carried out in a time in which public and private investment seemed limitless. Nevertheless, still the city has plans to reclaim land for a large development called Seaport Square. More interestingly with regard to new development approaches is University Park. MIT heavily and consciously invested in the growing knowledge market of ‘research and development’. Moreover, they capitalized this by creating a mixed-use area which contains offices, retail, housing and public parks, connected to the existing urban fabric. It shows that a demand-driven approach focused on knowledge-related development by an unusual suspect like universities can be an opportunity to create sustainable urban areas.

“...one exception is the ‘Big Dig’...”
New York City: green city

New York needs no further introduction. It is regarded as the global city, and has fought its way back from urban decline, which has a lot to do with its diverse economy and society. In the 1980s New York’s quality of life was running downhill due to air pollution and low quality public spaces. Here ‘incentive zoning’ effectively failed to condition private development. But recently NYC has returned with an increasing environmental awareness. The city center has welcomed green development initiatives from private and civic organizations to create new public spaces. This is supported by the Department of City Planning’s “Vision 2020: New York City Comprehensive Waterfront Plan” and “PlaNYC 2030”. These city-wide planning documents are constructed under leadership of Mayor Bloomberg with public participation aimed at creating a more sustainable city. They focus on stimulating, shaping and activating markets to invest in ‘priority areas’.

This has created room for green civic development initiatives such as Million Trees NYC, and the ‘coalition-led development’ of urban parks such as Brooklyn Bridge Park. But, most interestingly is the High Line, a redevelopment of an abandoned elevated railway track as an urban park for pedestrians. Hence, the city government aimed at deconstructing it but two residents decided to buy the tracks. They established the civic organization Friends of the Highline which (for 70%) finances, develops and maintains the project on behalf of the city. Moreover, it has had its spillover effects as new real estate has developed along the track. These examples at least show that New York’s actors have transformed themselves in thinking and acting more sustainable. However, other projects like Atlantic Yards shows that developers and local authority still operate according to the ‘quick-buck principle’, failing to involve local residents and businesses in the Brooklyn neighborhood plans.

“...NYC has returned with an increasing environmental awareness.”
Seattle: technology city

Seattle is located in the nature-oriented North West Pacific Coast metropolitan region of 3.3 million inhabitants estimated to grow 40% in population by 2020. It is a technology-driven city known for companies like Microsoft, Amazon and Boeing. Moreover, biotechnology and healthcare are upcoming industries. Historically, Seattle has a (truly neoliberal) small government, but combines this with sustainable development approaches. The city and other institutions invested in a light rail from the airport to the city, in ‘street cars’ (Dutch: trams), an underground transportation system, some environmental aware developments such as Olympic Sculpture Park and Gas Works Park. Also there are plans to deconstruct the elevated highway and to redevelop the waterfront. South Lake Union is one of the major urban developments at the moment, located near the city center in the ‘inner suburb’. This former industrial area is being transformed into a ‘mixed-use biotech-oriented community’ solely realized by development investor Vulcan Real Estate. It is a 120 hectare $3 billion private sector-led urban development project. The local authority only facilitates development with a “Neighborhood Plan” and “Urban Design Framework” made in collaboration with residents and business, and regulates with zoning. Developer Vulcan holds all the financial risks and comprehensively develops the entire area. Hence, due to the crisis Vulcan changed its development strategy into a risk-avoiding demand-driven client-focused development approach (Amazon for instance). Moreover, the civic role of local tenants is remarkable as they initiated to raise finance to increase the frequency of the street car for their employees, supported by private and public funding. This case shows that both private and civic organizations can act responsibly for their built environment. Moreover, it can create economical and social value in areas without the government intervening heavily.
Portland: livable city

Portland is located in the Oregon State and has about 0.5 million inhabitants. It is considered as an innovative nature-oriented city with a high quality of life. From a planning perspective Portland has put the concept of ‘transit-oriented development’ on the map. The principle of TOD is to develop public transport infrastructure together with mixed-use high-density development in order to connect city neighborhoods, increase accessibility, and decrease car dependency, parking and emissions, evolving in a higher quality of life. In general, a public transportation initiative is used to create private development interests often institutionalized in public-private partnerships. Hence, the Pearl District is a prime example of the TOD approach. This $2.3 billion ‘mixed-housing income’ neighborhood has comprehensively redeveloped a former ‘Brownfield site’, with the conversion of warehouses into restaurants, shops and housing. The public Portland Development Corporation collaborated with developer Hoyt Street Properties. They negotiated a “Master Development Agreement” including development densities and public improvements. Hence, critical success factors for this partnership were a stable source of public funding, private commitment towards sustainable targets, certainty and flexibility in plot development conditions, process transparency, and involvement of relevant stakeholders in the design. In a nutshell, these factors can all be seen as conditional for sustainable developments. However, public funding and private investment in current times seem to affect the feasibility of projects most fundamentally. Thus whether this approach can be followed during low demand remains to be seen.
Conclusions

This article provided some insight into some theories on cities and ideas from contemporary urban development projects in America. On the one hand it has shown us that neoliberalism as planning concept at least in the US is not dead, rather it has transformed and evolved itself. Its entrepreneurial nature enables it to incorporate environmental and social driven market orientations. On the other hand, the different cities and cases show a wide variety of development strategies; some approaches indicate old habits and some show promising sustainable signs. Thus, can American cities take the lead in building more sustainable urban futures? Returning to the theme of this magazine, most US cities have shown that new survival approaches and innovation mostly come from private and civic organizations who in their very nature are survivalists. As Florida (2011: 181) states, “one thing is for certain: government is not the prime mover in Great Resets.” Sure, they can take action to mitigate unwanted development effects and set regulatory frameworks to prevent future ones. But, it is the combination of market-oriented social-led urban development which marks the future shift towards more sustainable neoliberal cities.

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