National Urban Park - a Model for a Sustainable City or a Legislative Cage for Development?

The balance between nature and city, continuity and change, are the cornerstones of sustainable urban planning. However, urban densification and aspirations for infill development are reshaping this balance and setting new criteria for sustainability. Even if green areas and historical environments are regarded as valuable, they are concurrently questioned. This paper addresses the concept of the national urban park (kansallinen kaupunkipuisto), defined by the Finnish Land Use and Building Act, as a planning tool in cities under densification. The national urban park (NUP) may be established to protect significant cultural or natural landscapes and their historical, scenic and recreational values in urban context. The Ministry of the Environment supervises the establishment process and the fulfilment of the criteria of the NUP. So far, eight NUPs have been established in Finland since 2000. In addition, several cities are aiming for NUPs. In spite of the amount of NUPs and over 15-year-long experience of the concept, there is only little research about how the concept functions in practice and what kind of negotiations are embedded in the process of establishment.

This paper sheds light on the NUP-process by analysing the planning of NUPs in Tampere and Helsinki. Both cities are considering establishing a NUP: Tampere began the process in 2013 and Helsinki in 2017. In both cities the process has generated strong views both in favor of the NUP and against it. The aim of the study is to explore the conflicting arguments about the NUP and examine, what kind of lines of argument are used in the process and what objectives, values and stakeholders are related to these. The research is based on the NUP-debate including planning and policy documents and discussions attached to them.

The paper demonstrates that the NUP can be seen either as a model for sustainable urban planning or a legislative cage for urban development in big cities. The main lines of argument address 1) the restrictions of preservation, 2) the agenda of urban planning, 3) the added value through the NUP, 4) the ownership of decision making power and 5) the ownership of the process itself. On the one hand the NUP is regarded as restricting development, emphasizing past and static preservation, bringing no real added value for big cities, transferring municipal decision making to the Ministry and engaging primarily environmental and heritage stakeholders. On the other hand the NUP is considered a long-term tool of urban planning, safeguarding the identity of the city for future citizens, contributing to tourism and local pride and engaging broadly different authorities and stakeholders. The research brings forth that the NUP-process reveals topical negotiations between nature and the city and continuity and change in rapidly growing cities. It also discusses how to gain a deeper understanding in this negotiation and use the NUP-process to promote sustainable urban planning in a constructive way.

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