

# Sustainable Difference

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Urban planning instruments refer to the global concept of the welfare state as interpreted by time and (country-specific) space. As a consequence, urban environments look more and more generic regardless of which scale is used. This normalization conflicts with the growing demand for the personal or lifestyle benefits of distinction and visibility. Resulting from the city's competition for investors and qualified workforce, this quest for difference equally drives public and private investments into the urban living environment and the urban economy. However, the capacity to effectively influence urban change and to deliver the welfare promise diminishes as the new scales of urban realities are no longer congruent with the reach of urban planning instruments. How can municipal urban policies react to this potentially detrimental ambivalence? How can the capacity to implement a self-determined, sustainable urban change be regained?

To provide responses, urban policies need to critically assess the impact of normative parameters on their future cityscapes, such as lifestyle regimes, the privatization of public interests or resource shortages. Considering these parameters, re-focussing urban policies on the city's demographic characteristics and resources presents a starting point for a sustainable and a self-determined urban change. It is a key to pro-actively manage urban specialization, to increase local identification as well as to minimize social segregation. Unlike the temporary distinctiveness, this process leads to sustainable difference. Applications on different scales suggest that fostering sustainable difference presents a potentially normative approach to foster and implement sustainable urban transformations.

## What Drives Urban Change?

According to latest reports by the UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) almost 3.35 billion people are inhabitants of urbanized areas, i.e., half of the world's population. In some of the world's most competitive regional economies in Western Europe, more than 70% of the population already lives in urban agglomerations. The social and economic motivations of this attractiveness and steady



Fig. 1: Urban vision for Dordrecht, Wielwijk 2006 -2015. Concept.