

Sustainable city branding narratives: a critical appraisal of processes and outcomes

Sustainable
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narratives

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to explore whether adopting a sustainability narrative in city branding and urban development strategies results in more inclusive governance arrangements (process) and a more pluralistic approach to generating sustainability value (outcome), in line with the triple bottom line approach advocated by the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The authors argue that a necessary step to enable meaningful sustainable urban development is to rethink the way in which “value” and “value creation” are being interpreted in urban development policies and city branding narratives.

Design/methodology/approach – Mixed-methods case study of New York City's (NYC) urban development and city branding strategies (2007–2019) combining analysis of academic and grey literature on NYC's urban development and city branding, value hierarchies in NYC urban development strategic plans and local media reports covering NYC's development and branding processes.

Findings – Despite claiming commitment to urban sustainability, NYC's urban development and branding narratives reveal a clear dominance of interpreting “value” primarily as “exchange value”, thus prioritising economic growth.

Research limitations/implications – In the authors' view, a systemic, systematic and structured approach to generating “sustainability value” is necessary if city branding is to become a governance tool to support sustainable urban development. A “tetravaluation” approach is recommended as a practical, structured framework that can bridge across the ideas of “sustainability value” and “pluralistic governance”, ensuring effective implementation. Further investigation in additional urban contexts is required.

Originality/value – The research contributes to current scholarly debates towards more balanced and pluralistic conceptions of “value” and place branding as a more holistic, participatory and democratic governance model for sustainable urban development.

Keywords City branding, Urban governance, SDGs, Sustainability, New York City, Citizen participation, Sustainable development

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

Cities, a specific form of localised geographic community incorporation, are increasingly engaging in and publicising their “sustainability” credentials and seeking to brand themselves as “sustainable”. Managers of the world’s metropolises are starting to recognise the importance of framing development around concepts such as “triple-bottom-line” and “circular economy” and potentially “just transition”, that implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, claim to be integrating sustainability’s three social, economic and environmental dimensions (Fratini *et al.*, 2019). Some cities have even incorporated sustainability into their urban development and city branding narratives and begun to benchmark themselves against the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Ripoll González and Gale, 2021). As yet, however, we do not know if these claims to urban sustainability exert any real effects, as both underlying theory and practical impacts remain under-researched.

The meaningful embrace of the goal of sustainability at the urban level should result, we argue, in two significant shifts. Firstly, across a *process* dimension, the expectation would be that a sustainable city would adopt more participatory and collaborative approaches to developing city brands to ensure sustainability’s three economic, social and environmental imperatives are appropriately integrated. Logically such integration can only be fully achieved when city branding and planning processes converge, broaden and become more inclusive, as otherwise specific interests will dominate. Secondly, and as a corollary of the first shift, across an *outcome* dimension, the expectation would be that both planning and branding documents reflect a shift from a narrower focus on economic exchange value linked to tradable goods and services and competitiveness to a pluralistic and integrated conception of “sustainability value” that encompasses social and environmental value components. In the absence of any notable shifts in processes and outcomes, the claims a city is making to being or becoming sustainable should be viewed sceptically. Despite even the best intentions, such efforts may constitute deliberate or inadvertent “greenwash” (Andersson and James, 2018; Greenberg, 2008), defined as foregrounding a small number of positive actions while ignoring the many others that are generating environmental and social harm and externalising costs on to others (Delmas and Burbano, 2011).

To investigate the potential of branding to support more inclusive, sustainable forms of urban development, we conducted a critical review of current conceptualisations of “value” in sustainable urban development processes, with special emphasis in city branding. We illustrate our analysis through a case study of New York City (NYC), a metropolis that makes explicit claims to be embracing sustainability in its city branding and urban planning. NYC has attempted to establish itself as a world leader in urban sustainability after becoming the world’s first city to voluntarily report its sustainability outcomes against the SDG framework. To analyse the *process* dimension, we reviewed government, the degree of democratic participation sated in government city planning policies and strategies, and the perceptions or evaluation of those by business and civil society through a local media analysis. To analyse the *outcome* dimension, we used a deductive, quantitative, content analysis of the City’s three major strategic urban planning documents – PlaNYC (2007), PlaNYC (2011) and OneNYC (2015) – to assess the degree to which they reflected the embedding of a progressively more pluralistic conception of economic value in city plans.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section presents a critical review of developments using the *new* urban sustainability narrative, deriving two implications from a sustainability perspective for urban development processes and outcomes: the expectation that urban development and planning processes will embrace greater participation from multiple stakeholders; and that the conception of value embedded in urban development and planning documents is broadened to include economic, social and environmental categories.

We then outline our research design and the particularities of the NYC case study, followed by a presentation of our findings. Finally, we discuss the implications for urban sustainability and city branding. Specifically, we suggest that claims that a city that is branding itself as sustainable or moving in the direction of sustainability should be treated with scepticism in the absence of clear evidence that it has embraced meaningful participatory multi-stakeholder approaches to branding and planning processes and ensured a broader and more pluralistic conception of economic value is driving decision-making. Finally, and after noting some methodological limitations with our study, we outline the contours of an alternative “tetraevaluation” approach to branding for urban sustainability as a potential pragmatic and practical way forward.

Urban sustainability and city branding: developing a sustainability narrative

Cities are being recast under the *New Urban Management* paradigm (Jensen, 2005) as “eco-cities”, “digital cities”, “green cities”, “information cities”, “intelligent cities”, “knowledge cities”, “liveable cities”, “low carbon cities”, “resilient cities”, “smart cities” and “sustainable cities” (Garcia-Lamarca *et al.*, 2021; see de Jong *et al.*, 2015, for a comprehensive review). Such labels offer different visions of the urban realm and their relationship to sustainability, defined as a systems’ approach to endogenizing and integrating economic, social and environmental consequences and imperatives, is not always clear. Smart cities, for example, promote investments in human and social capital and embrace ICT to generate sustainable economic development and a high quality of life (Caragliu *et al.*, 2011). Yet, from a sustainability systems’ perspective (Liu *et al.*, 2007; Byrne and Callaghan, 2013), the vision gives rise to questions about the responsibilities a smart city has for the extended supply chains of its burgeoning ICT industry will promote and depend on. Will the city ensure that the ICT businesses it attracts does not negatively impact other people in other places via globally connected supply chains, for example? If its ICT businesses import coltan, an ore rich in the element tantalum that is a crucial component of lithium-ion batteries that power the smart city vision, should city managers be concerned? Is it acceptable to argue that, although coltan is very unequally geographically distributed, with large amounts sourced from the Democratic Republic of Congo, a country credibly linked to child- and forced-labour and extensive government corruption, this is “someone else’s problem”? (Haider, 2017). Since similar questions get raised with other city visions, those promoting such visions should have good answers to them beyond the conventional idea that responsibility for negative outcomes stops at a city’s borders. Such a quaint idea is contradicted by the idea and reality of sustainability. The fate of a city’s residents does not depend only on what happens inside its borders but on how well Earth’s natural systems are functioning. If a city is complicit in the degradation of those systems, how can it meaningfully claim to be “sustainable”? Despite its potential for bringing about narrow, positive changes to environmental practices at the urban level, the dangers of constructing a city narrative around sustainability are that it will overlook key aspects of its systems’ embedded meaning (Long, 2016; While *et al.*, 2004) and visit harm elsewhere. It may even harm locally as, for instance, green boosterism rhetoric does when it has a negative effect in city affordability, exacerbating class, ethnic, age and gender inequalities (Garcia-Lamarca *et al.*, 2021).

The above reflections are important when considering city branding as a governance tool for urban development (Eshuis and Edwards, 2013). About 30 years ago, city branding practitioners borrowed concepts from the branding and corporate literatures to develop marketing and strategic communications to enhance a positive place image and generate competitive advantage, to support urban growth in an increasingly interconnected world (Anholt, 2007). However, following the shift towards entrepreneurialism under the New

Public Management (NPM) (Denhardt and Denhardt, 2000) and drawing from an increased understanding of the power of appealing to emotions to affect behavioural change through branding campaigns (Fombrun and van Riel, 2004, p. 95 in Wæraas and Byrkjeflot, 2012, p. 20), public administrators themselves then turned to branding motivated by the prospect of developing a positive city image, maintaining a good reputation and gaining a competitive advantage over neighbouring or competing territories. A public brand as a “symbolic construct that consists of a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of these, created deliberately to identify a phenomenon and differentiate it from similar phenomena by adding particular meaning to it” (Eshuis and Klijn, 2012, p. 19) is, therefore, considered “a strategy for communication and image building among target groups” (Karens *et al.*, 2016, p. 486).

Historically, the branding approach mostly embraced the neoliberal model within which it was embedded, was growth (of exchange value) focused, and adopted the managerial, top-down and instrumental processes it licensed (Harvey, 2012). Locked into a competition for residents, tourists and investors, city branding became an important tool for advancing a city’s increasingly narrow, commercial interests (Kubiszewski *et al.*, 2013; Pasquinelli, 2014) at the expense of marginalised collectives (Belabas *et al.*, 2020; Tsavdaroglou and Kaika, 2021). The new social objective of sustainability, requiring systems thinking, endogenizing practices and cross-sectoral integration, is challenging this neoliberal, NPM approach that demotes the value things have directly to those obtaining or experiencing them (use value) in favour of the value things have because they are exchangeable for other things via the medium of money (exchange value). Public administrators and policymakers, at the frontline of responses to the numerous theoretical and practical challenges faced by urban sustainable development, are wrestling with the implications (Zinkernagel *et al.*, 2018). On a theoretical level, there is a need to challenge the discourse of never-ending growth measured in exchange value terms (Daly and Cobb, 1994) and accept a more pluralistic conception of value inherent in the SDG framework. However, a NPM approach to city branding means that the complexity of places and all their inherent use values are reduced to targeted positioning aimed at specific market segments aimed at *boosterism* to earn exchange value (Demaziere, 2020; Therkelsen *et al.*, 2021). Too often, the complex “layering of spatial identities” and overlapping or conflicting views and aspirations of places are downplayed in favour of specific commercial interests (Andersson, 2016; Boisen *et al.*, 2011; Oliveira, 2015).

Critics have highlighted the instrumentality of such approaches by analysing the narratives and values embedded in urban development and branding strategies, policies and plans (Ginesta and de San Eugenio, 2021; Vallance *et al.*, 2012). As Gazzola *et al.* (2019, p. 889) note, cities adopting greening approaches “seem to better fit a narrative that looks at the reconciliation or realignment of environmental protection and economic growth in a way that fits an understanding of ecological modernisation as a policy discourse”. In line with ecological modernisation, such smart approaches are human and technology centric, focus on the efficient use of scarce resources and, critically, ignore system-wide effects. After 30 years of using such “weak sustainability” approaches – that trade off natural against other forms of capital – no significant improvements to sustainability are evident. Across a range of social and environmental metrics – carbon emissions, biodiversity loss, income inequality, health outcomes – outcomes have continued to deteriorate.

Value(s) in city narratives

The above analysis implies that sustainability requires a broadening in urban policymakers’ attention from a narrow focus on reaching potential consumers, increasing competitiveness and growing exchange value towards a more inclusive approach that simultaneously

strengthens place communities, protects and enhances their distinct identities and recognises a city's embeddedness in larger, nested subsystems and systems and wider ecologies and networks (Govers, 2018). To some extent, this is already happening. Building on the Millennium Development Goals (2000–2015) and in pursuit of a more holistic and global agenda (Le Blanc, 2015; UN, 2015), UN member states negotiated and adopted the SDGs in 2015 to provide national guidance to all stakeholders to achieve sustainable development (UCLG, 2015). As centres for human activity facing a challenging future, cities have emerged as major laboratories for the localisation of the SDGs framework. The focus on cities is further supported by the inclusion of a specific “cities goal”: SDG 11, “Sustainable Cities and Communities” and UNESCO’s New Urban Agenda (Caprotti *et al.*, 2017), which call on cities to rethink urban planning and development based on the three social, environmental and economic dimensions of sustainability, including a reassessment of the governance systems underpinning sustainability, justice and equity (Parnell, 2016; Stafford-Smith *et al.*, 2017; Valencia *et al.*, 2019). Accordingly, cities that recognise that sustainability requires a more systems-based, integrated and visionary SDGs agenda will need to adapt their urban development and place branding narratives to integrate economic, environmental and social imperatives while avoiding externalizing *any* costs onto other parties *anywhere*.

To date, however, the required integration, endogenization and coherence to achieve the new legitimate social purpose of sustainability is not being achieved within cities (and most other incorporated units) because urban development is being driven by a conception of economic value derived from 19th century political economy and 20th century economics. Embedded conceptions of economic value are too narrow and focused only on the value things have when they are exchanged. The problem is that much social and ecological phenomena do not enter into exchange relations and are treated as lacking economic value. The standard solution to the integration and coherence problem has been to “monetize” social and ecological relations through the application of cost-benefit analysis, often using contingent evaluation techniques like willingness to pay, an approach termed by Michael Sandel (2005) as “the marketisation of everything”. This monistic approach to economic value has been increasingly challenged in the past two decades in the development of alternatives such as “shared value” (Porter and Kramer, 2011), “public value” (Benington and Moore, 2011), “value co-creation” (Sheth and Uslay, 2007) and “value(s)” (Carney, 2021). A broadening in the concept of value is also seen in the American Marketing Association’s definition of the term “marketing”, which has shifted from a purely “economistic” focus to one that also recognises wider, societal interests (Hereźniak and Anders Morawska, 2021; Thomas, 2020; Re *et al.*, 2021).

Despite gesturing towards more pluralistic conceptualisations of economic value that embrace additional use, environment and governance values, markets and exchange value continue to dominate. In Porter and Kramer’s (2011, p. 66) approach, for example, the importance of exchange value is embedded in the very definition of shared value as the “policies and operating practices that enhance the competitiveness of a company while simultaneously advancing the economic and social conditions in the communities in which it operates”. Similarly, from a service-dominant logic of marketing perspective, Vargo and Lusch (2008, p. 5) conceptualize value as the result from interactions among consumers and producers (both involved in the co-creation of value) and state that “the purpose of exchange is to mutually serve”. As Dembek *et al.* (2016) note, the non-systemic, firm-centric and managerial approaches taken mean that corporations can deliver both shared value and social and environmental damage *simultaneously*, given the former consists of discrete actions taken within a larger corporate strategy.

In contrast to these limited conceptions of value pluralism, we introduce the concept of “sustainability value”, defined as “the value that emerges from appropriately structured deliberations that reconcile economic value’s use, labour, function, and exchange value elements”. Sustainability value requires that goods and services be valued not only for their exchange value in markets but also for their other values – the uses they serve, the labour embodied in them and the environmental functions implicated in the extraction of raw materials, manufacturing processes and the wastes deposited (BLINDED). This alternative approach to economic value is pluralistic, systemic and participatory in nature. It highlights the need for a specific type of “deliberative valuation” as discussed by [Howarth and Wilson \(2006\)](#) across its four component elements. We provide more details about the meaning of the term “appropriately structured deliberations” in our discussion of the tetravaluation approach to value brokering later in the article. For current purposes, however, the operational expectation is that:

- meaningful participatory and deliberate processes will be used to determine its meaning in context; and
- outputs will evidence value balancing across exchange, use, labour and function value elements.

The above considerations lead to the expectation that both the processes underpinning city branding and the economic value narratives set out in urban development and planning documents should change significantly to achieve sustainability goals. A city that embraces sustainability *should* see a narrow focus on exchange value give way to a renewed focus on embedding that objective within an enlarged conception of economic value that includes community use, worker labour and environmental function values along with business exchange value reflected in city planning documents. Furthermore, operationalising this more inclusive conception of value would require a more participatory approach to developing the city brand as it would be crucial to include the full diversity of stakeholders in place development discussions, including especially residents, as well as a range of related social movements and associated community groups linked to sustainable food, energy, transportation, work and consumption. In the remainder of this article, we investigate whether and how this is occurring using the case of NYC, selected because it has explicitly claimed to be embracing sustainability and benchmark its performance on sustainability outcomes against the SDGs. Our interest is in whether and how city administrators are altering city branding, development and planning narratives and practices to embed approaches and values consistent with a holistic approach to sustainability and the SDGs in their urban development processes (Maheshwari *et al.*, 2011).

Materials and methods

Choice of New York City

We selected NYC as our case study since it has explicitly committed to becoming a “green city” by embracing the SDGs and pioneering volunteer annual reporting against SDG targets in an urban context. We investigate the interaction between the sustainability strategies and city branding processes NYC used to enhance its “sustainability” vision and whether these deliver a more pluralistic narrative of economic value. We developed and tested the following assumptions: firstly, that pursuant to its sustainability mandate, NYC would begin practising more participatory modes of governance; and secondly, that such modes of governance would see a more pluralistic conception of value embedded in high-level city plans.

Data collection methods

To understand the process of constructing an urban sustainability narrative, we analysed academic and grey literature on NYC’s urban development, city branding, city planning and urban sustainability strategies for the period from 2013 to 2019. This period includes any pre- and post-SDG city development strategies and allows for contextual observations linked to any potential changes in sustainability narratives over time. The findings of this process stage were supported by a second output stage quantitative analysis of NYC plans from 2007 to 2019, coinciding with the latest three iterations of major urban development plans. We investigated the evolution of economic value narratives and value hierarchies in NYC strategic plans through a deductive, manifest, quantitative content analysis of keywords (White and Marsh, 2006; Elo and Kyngäs, 2008; Boyle and Schmierbach, 2019) using Atlas.ti, a proprietary software package, to code and quantify our data. Four sets of synonyms, representing exchange, use, function and labour value types, were used to capture sustainability’s more pluralistic idea of value (Table 1). The approach enabled us to assess the relative weighting of each of the four value types in each of the City’s three plans and determine whether later plans are communicating a more balanced and pluralistic understanding of economic value than earlier ones. Finally, using Leximancer, a software to qualitatively analyse natural language in media, we also undertook a thematic analysis of media reports in main local outlets (*New York Times* and *Gotham Gazette*), covering NYC’s planning and branding processes for the period under study to further reflect and expand parts of the analysis (see Figure 1).

Value type	Proxy terms	Examples of variants	Value type	Proxy terms	Examples of variants
Use value	Community	Communities, community-based, community-level, community-supported	Exchange value	Market	Market-based, marketplace, markets
	Local	Localized, locally, locally-grown		Trade	Trades
	Resident	Residencies, residential, residents		Growth	Growing, grown, grows, grow
	History	Historic, historical, historically		Economy	Economic, economics, economies
	Place	Place-based, place-making			
	Citizen Participation	Citizenship Participating Participant			
Labour value	Worker Labour	Workers, workforce Labour-related	Function value	Biodiversity	n/a
	Welfare	n/a		Climate change	Climate-related
	Poverty	n/a		Nature	Natural, nature-based
	Wage	Wages		Ecosystem	Ecosystems
			Pollution	Pollutant, pollutants, polluting	
			Environment	Environmental	
			Sustainable	Sustain Sustainability Sustaining	

Table 1.
Initial proxy terms and variants for assessing sustainability value (white boxes); additional proxy terms for sensitivity analysis (grey boxes)

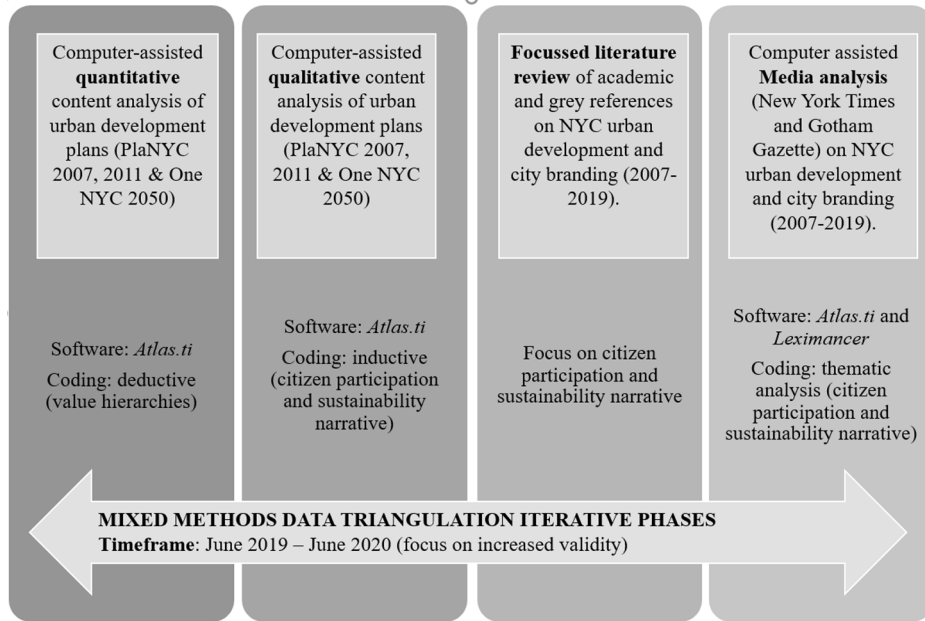


Figure 1.
Outline of research process

Source: Authors' own elaboration

The combination of grey literature findings, planning documents analysis and media analysis increases the validity of our findings by comparing and expanding how the sustainability narrative is constructed across official documentation, how it has been received and interpreted by experts, managers and academics and in the public sphere (media).

Case study context: New York City

An analysis of the history of NYC's branding efforts highlights the influential role of key actors in the city branding campaigns and processes (Greenberg, 2008). Past branding has reflected a culture of boosterism in efforts to transform the City's image from a post-industrial city with deep structural problems such as high levels of crime and substance addiction to a more positive one (D'Cruz, 2016). Boosterism was replaced by more "coordinated, consistent and capital-intensive" branding, highlighting the economic importance of tourism and the need to include stakeholders in the process (Greenberg, 2008). For instance, a private sector group, the Association for a Better New York, mounted the memorable *Big Apple* campaign in 1971, arguably constituting the first public-private partnership for city branding in NYC (Greenberg, 2008). The Big Apple campaign was followed by the successful *I love New York* marketing campaign featuring local talent and creative genius Milton Glaser, resulting in a "shift in sensibility" by New Yorkers (Glaser in Stubbs, 2009). This campaign was the start of "emotional" public branding (Eshuis *et al.*, 2014), the aim being to convey a *feeling* towards the city rather than simply the city's identity or essence. The "I love NYC" brand was replaced in 2007 by branding strategist Wolf Olins' *Only one, but no one NYC* campaign and a renewed brand design.

Beyond public marketing efforts, several reviews and rankings classify NYC as a leader in sustainability, resiliency, climate change adaptation and “going green” (see, for instance, *Arcadis Sustainable City Index*, the *Economist Intelligence Unit Green City Index* and International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives [ICLEI]). Historically, NYC’s transition towards sustainability has been influenced by the political vision of two recent mayors as well as by key events such as the 9/11 *Al Qaeda* attacks and the devastating effects of tropical storm *Sandy*. During the right-wing, business-minded administration of Mayor Bloomberg (2002–2013), a multi-stakeholder Sustainability Advisory Board composed of locally elected officials and local and national experts with backgrounds in environmental justice, green buildings, environmental policy, real estate, business, labour, energy and urban planning was set up to contribute to the development of PlaNYC 2030; and in 2006, the Office of Long-Term Planning and Sustainability (OLTPS) was established. PlaNYC 2030 responded to several pressures: a growing population, infrastructure deficiencies, climate change effects and economic concerns (Johnston *et al.*, 2013, p. 191). The plan’s strategy was further reviewed by the OLTPS in 2011, giving rise to “PlaNYC–A Greener, Greater New York”. In claiming to be guided by the principles of long-term sustainability, PlaNYC became a model for urban sustainability policy frameworks, which has led other large cities around the world to develop similar plans (i.e. Barcelona, Sydney, Buenos Aires). It has contributed to perceptions of NYC as a leader, both nationally and globally, in the fight against climate change. In 2012, and in the wake of Hurricane Sandy, the City also embraced a resilience narrative and launched the “Rebuilding and Resiliency” initiative, which focused on preparing for and protecting against the impacts of climate change (New York City Council Special Initiative for Rebuilding and Resiliency, 2020).

In 2015, a year after Bloomberg’s successor, the labour-minded, left-wing administration of Mayor Bill de Blasio took office, the City committed to becoming the most resilient, sustainable and equitable city in the world through the replacement of PlaNYC with the OneNYC 2050 strategy. The strategy labelled *One New York: The Plan for a Strong and Just City*, reflected De Blasio’s democratic socialist political ideals. Whereas Bloomberg had emphasised sustainability’s economic exchange value dimension, De Blasio aimed at a rebalancing by focusing on community use values such as social justice and equity and environmental (function) values. The Mayor even promoted the Plan as NYC’s “Green New Deal” (New York City Council, 2019) to better resonate with emerging social democratic ideas (Holden and Gambino, 2019). Targeting enhanced growth, equity, sustainability and resiliency, OneNYC emerged as the discourse of resilience was gaining currency with academics and practitioners in urban policy (Davidson *et al.*, 2019). Proponents of resilience argue that the complexities of managing sustainability implied more effective and legitimate forms of governance: “sustainability prioritizes outcomes; resilience prioritizes process”, claimed Redman (2014, p. 3).

Subsequently, on 11 July 2018, NYC became the first city in the world to report progress against the SDGs to the UN through a Voluntary Local Review (VLR), chosen to coincide with Global Goals Day (City of New York, 2018). The global and local benefits of doing so were significant. Not only did it consolidate NYC’s high status and leadership role in organisations such as the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, but it also reinforced locally De Blasio’s community building *We Are Taking Action* campaign (City of New York, 2019). During her remarks to the UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development introducing the initiative, Ms Penny Abeywardena, NYC’s Commissioner for International Affairs, stated that the VLR “is part of [NYC’s] ongoing efforts since 2015 to highlight the synergies between the SDGs and OneNYC, our local sustainable development strategy. This innovative effort to localise the SDGs at an urban level sparked an emerging worldwide

movement, with many cities and municipalities seeking to develop their own VLRs” (UN, 2021). The following sections analyse whether this 14-plus years of growing urgency and high-level engagement in “sustainability” have resulted in any significant shifts towards participatory processes and pluralistic value outputs.

Findings

Participation in New York City planning processes

We observe conflicting reviews of the “inclusiveness” of 2007 PlaNYC, with praise by some groups being countered by claims by others that it did not represent the complexities of local communities; ignored the effects on equity, access and diversity; and that its concept of “sustainability” was aimed mostly at branding real estate development (Agnotti, 2008a; Finn, 2008). An analysis co-written by the influential advocacy organisations ICLEI and Local Governments of Sustainability USA (ICLEI, 2010) claimed that PlaNYC was inclusive and praised its stakeholder engagement component. Among the 10 factors cited in the report as contributing to PlaNYC’s success were “a methodical, transparent, and inclusive planning process”, “an external Sustainability Advisory Board provided best practice advice and guidance” and “a comprehensive public outreach process [which] generated broad public support and helped to educate the general public about climate change and sustainability issues” (ICLEI, 2010, p. 6). The report claims there was “broad public outreach” to “more than 70 stakeholder groups” accompanied by the education of “the general public about climate change and sustainability issues” (ICLEI, 2010, pp. 9–10).

Yet, despite the praise, the ICLEI report also identified some weaknesses in the level of engagement in the development of the Plan. For example, despite being informed by external consultants and preliminary research from other agencies, *and* having this information reviewed by the Advisory Board, it was the OLTPS that set the sustainability goals and communicated them to citizens through a “public outreach campaign”. A community consultation effort was conducted from November to December 2006, inviting approximately 50 key advocacy organizations to listen to their ideas regarding environmental and infrastructure issues (ICLEI, 2010, p. 24). The goal of the public outreach campaign was to “ensure that the public *felt* included in the planning process with the hope that they would therefore support the plan once it was released” (ICLEI, 2010, p. 26, *our* emphasis). According to researchers and the local press, however, the aggressive branding and accompanying Public Relations campaigns were conducted without meaningful participation (Agnotti, 2010; Katz and Baron, 2011), that would correspond to the lower rungs of Arnstein’s Ladder of Participation (Arnstein, 1969).

In contrast to ICLEI’s very positive assessment, Paul (2011) highlights the “corporate character” of NYC plans and the lack of real engagement with NYC’s citizens, community boards and neighbourhood representatives. He argues that although submissions by community members were encouraged and sometimes included, for instance, incorporating some of the feedback as indicators to the PlaNYC 2007, overall stakeholder engagement was selective and that the City’s Mayor, Michael Bloomberg, focused on an (apparently successful) communication campaign to “convince” citizens to support the plan. Similarly, TwynstraGudde (2018), a Dutch planning consultancy firm, which analysed PlaNYC 2007 based on, among others, the opinions of several US planning practitioners, concluded that the process of engaging stakeholders was non-transparent and fragmented. This view was echoed by Professor Agnotti (2008a, 2008b, p. 3), who argued that the City’s 59 community boards were:

still invisible in the 2030 plan [. . .] They can post comments but play no role in setting priorities or initiating change [. . .] They are not consulted until after the fact, yet they are often criticized for

only reacting. Civic and advocacy groups, including many that started fighting for a greener and greater future decades ago [...] are similarly sidelined.

A similar mixed assessment of the engagement process emerges for the 2015 OneNYC plan (Giambusso, 2015). Commissioner Abeywardena (2018) claimed that “The consultative process to develop OneNYC, which began in late 2014, involved 71 NYC agencies, and included New York residents and businesses as well as an advisory board comprised of civic leaders, policy specialists, and community leaders”. Yet, despite these claims of greater outreach and engagement, and the fact that the city launched an online survey to gauge citizens’ opinions, officials conducted few meetings with community leaders in the boroughs. The advisory board of key stakeholders included mainly representatives from the real estate industry, environmental advocacy and business. Writing for the sustainability consultancy Urban Fabrick, Werner (2017) claims that, “Despite the proud claims in the OneNYC report that substantial input from the general public and various stakeholders was solicited, received and incorporated, the ‘word on the street’ is that OneNYC, similar to *One City: Built to Last* before, was largely produced behind closed doors”. Dupuis and Greenberg (2019) also point out that the strategy behind the OneNYC plan cherry-picked affordable housing, the reduction of carbon emissions and social inclusion as main foci.

Ebrahim (2019) contrasts the top-down, business-centred, expert-driven approach of Bloomberg in delivering PlaNYC with a more bottom-up, worker-centred, community-driven approach of De Blasio in delivering OneNYC. From his and other analyses, it can be concluded that the OneNYC plan emerged from a more participatory governance process than did PlaNYC. Yet, this is not saying a great deal given how hierarchical the process was in developing PlaNYC. The question is, therefore, less whether OneNYC adopted a “more” participatory process than PlaNYC as whether the process was, in fact, participatory in the right way – that it enabled a significant level of deliberation across sustainability’s economic, social and environmental imperatives (Werner, 2017; Dupuis and Greenberg, 2019; Ebrahim, 2019).

To overcome the representative dilemma and widen the voices included in civic processes, Mayor De Blasio established the City Civic Engagement Commission (CCEC) in 2019 with a mandate to strengthen democracy and elevate the voices of New Yorkers in decision making (Khurshid, 2020). As established in Chapter 76 of the NYC Charter (2019), the aims of the CCEC are:

- to run a participatory budgeting program guided by an advisory committee;
- partner with community-based organisations in developing civic engagement initiatives and increase awareness of city services;
- develop programs to increase language skills in migrants; and
- assist community boards.

However, the CCEC’s format did not seem to provide significant innovation towards participatory governance in urban sustainability beyond its predecessor, the City Planning Commission, established by Mayor Bloomberg (Katz and Baron, 2011); and nor did it extend engagement in decision-making beyond consultation. From the above analysis, therefore, it can be concluded that, while NYC may engage in greater participatory urban processes than before and elsewhere, its efforts nonetheless remain inadequate. There is ongoing criticism of the lack of meaningful engagement with civil society, including marginalized groups (Agnotti and Morse, 2019) accompanied by often pro forma attempts by planners to “listen” to communities without any obligation to act on what they hear (Stein, 2019).

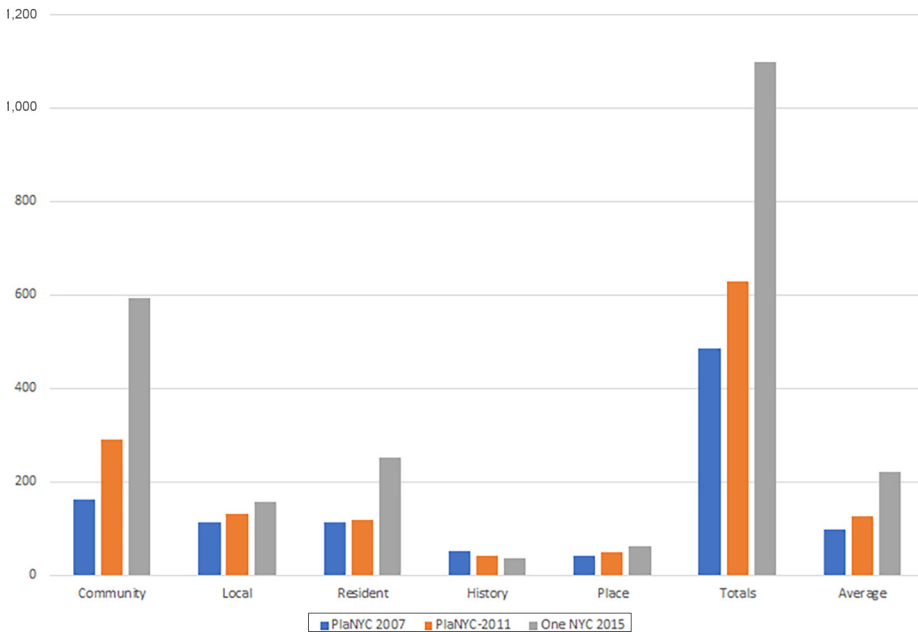
New York City plan outcomes: from monovaluation to value pluralism?

To examine if the shift from Bloomberg's neoliberalism to De Blasio's democratic socialism is reflected in the values expressed in their respective City plans, we also analysed the City's three high-level planning and branding documents using a deductive, quantitative, manifest-coding method. A recognised, if basic, coding method, this approach ensures higher reliability and efficiency at the cost of concerns over validity (White and Marsh, 2006; Elo and Kyngäs, 2008; Babbie, 2010, pp. 338–339; Boyle and Schmierbach, 2019). The documents analysed were PlaNYC (2007), PlaNYC (2011) and OneNYC (2015). Each was loaded into *Atlas.ti* software enabling the proxy terms for each of the four economic value concepts set out in Table 1 (initial analysis, white boxes) to be counted and entered as hits into an Excel spreadsheet. These hits were grouped, totalled, averaged and ranked to better understand whether and what changes occurred in value hierarchies across the three plans. The hypothesis tested was that Bloomberg's plans would contain more words addressing exchange value in PlaNYC (2007) and PlaNYC (2011); while De Blasio's plan would contain more words relevant to labour value with a focus on workers and marginalised communities in OneNYC (2015). It was also hypothesised that the two mayors' respective ideologies would result in other values, notably the environment's function value, being depreciated. Consequently, word counts for environmental values were expected to be the least frequent.

The selected terms were benchmarked in a preliminary study using the Manifesto Project (MP) database. The MP database "covers over 1000 parties from 1945 until today in over 50 countries on five continents" (MP, 2022). It was hypothesised that political parties competing in elections would differentially use terms to signal their dominant political economic values to the electorate. Thus, it was expected that the proxy terms for exchange value would appear more frequently in liberal party manifestos than words associated with the three other community use, worker labour and environmental function values and similarly with the other political parties. Using Australia as the test case given the frequency of its electoral cycle (every three years) and using data from 1996 to 2016 over eight election cycles, the findings of the benchmark study supported these hypotheses. Briefly, labour value proxies occurred more frequently in Australian Labor Party (ALP) manifestos than in manifestos published by the Liberal Party of Australia (LPA) or the Australian Greens (AG). Likewise, exchange value proxies were more common in the LPA's manifestos than in the ALP's or Greens' manifestos; and environmental function value proxies appeared much more frequently in AG manifestos than in ALP or LPA manifestos.

To further ensure the construct validity of the terms used in our NYC case study, a post-study sensitivity analysis was conducted at the request of one of the reviewers to assess the impact of document length and the addition of other proxy terms (e.g. adding "environment" and "sustainability" (and their variants) to the Function Value construct) and "citizen" and "participation" (and their variants) to the Use Value construct) (Table 1, grey boxes). We first discuss the original results and then consider the impact of the sensitivity analysis for our findings (Figure 2).

The results broadly support the hypothesised outcomes. From Figure 2, it is observed that the frequency of proxy terms for those living in the City (community, local, resident, history and place) increased over time. The term "community" occurred more frequently in the 2011 plan compared to the 2007 plan; and even more frequently in the 2015 plan. While the use of "local" and "place" increased slightly, and "history" declined marginally, the 2015 plan used the term "resident" much more frequently than the 2007 or 2011 plans. Overall, the totals and averages in Figure 1 signal that later plans placed greater weight on those living in NYC through references to community, residents, local, place and history.



Sustainable
city branding
narratives

Figure 2.
Shifts in use value
proxies in NYC Plans
2007–2015

A similar increase is apparent for proxies of economic value: “market”, “growth”, “trade”, “economy” and “competitiveness” (Figure 3). Compared to the 2007 Plan, the 2011 Plan uses the terms “growth” and “economy” more frequently, while “competitiveness” declines. There is a marked increase in frequencies in these terms in the 2015 Plan, very surprising given Mayor De Blasio’s social democratic rhetoric. Also surprising, “Trade” turns out to be an unrevealing proxy, being minimally cited in any plan.

Turning to data on labour proxies, Figure 4 depicts a significant shift from the 2007 and 2011 Plans of Mayor Bloomberg to the 2015 Plan of Mayor De Blasio. There was a significant increase in the frequency of use of the terms “worker”, “poverty” and “wages” in the 2017 Plan over the earlier plans. Overall, the frequency of labour proxies in the 2015 Plan is almost seven times greater than those in the 2007 and 2011 plans, a clear reflection of the different political ideologies of the two mayors.

Finally, with respect to environmental values, Figure 5 highlights an overall decline between 2011 and 2015. Surprisingly, perhaps, given NYC’s claims to becoming a sustainable city, the frequency of references to “climate change”, “nature”, “ecosystems” and “pollution” are all lower in the 2015 Plan compared to the 2011 Plan.

Table 2 provides a summary of the value rankings using a range of metrics: the per-value number of hits, average number of hits, adjusted average hits and a sensitivity analysis (grey boxes). Focusing first on the white boxes in Table 2 (the initial assessment), a largely similar plan ranking emerges regardless of the metric used (raw, average, adjusted), signalling a degree of stability in the overall architecture of NYC’s values. Plans have continued to prioritise community use (U) over business exchange (E), environmental function (F) and worker labour (L) values over the past two decades. The values’ ordering in 2007 was use-exchange-function-labour (UEFL), shifting to use-function-exchange-labour (UFEL) in the 2011 Plan and to use-exchange-labour-function (UELF) in the 2015 Plan. Comparing the three plans, those running

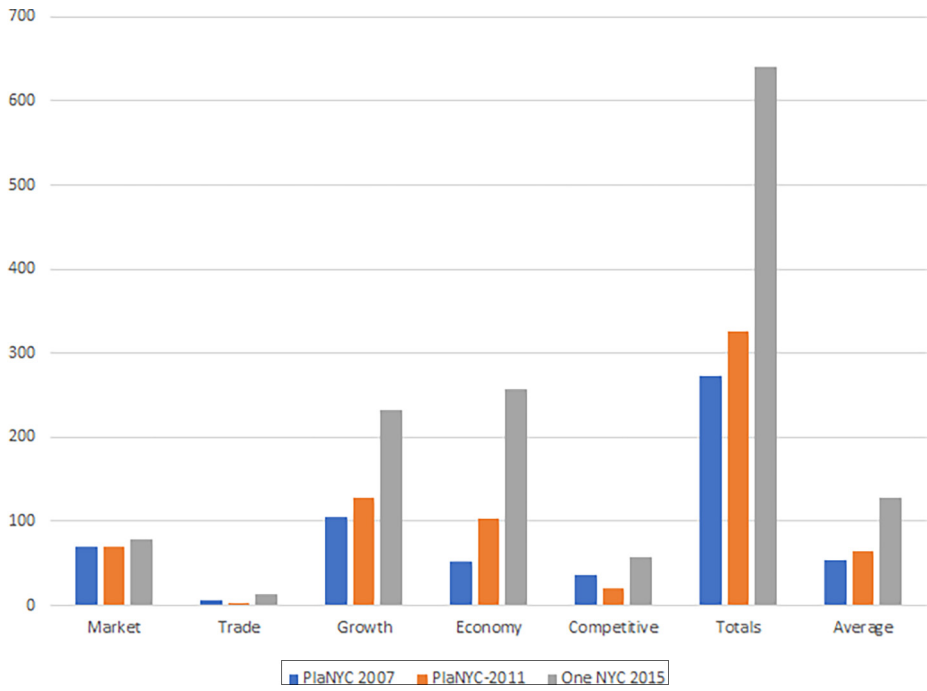
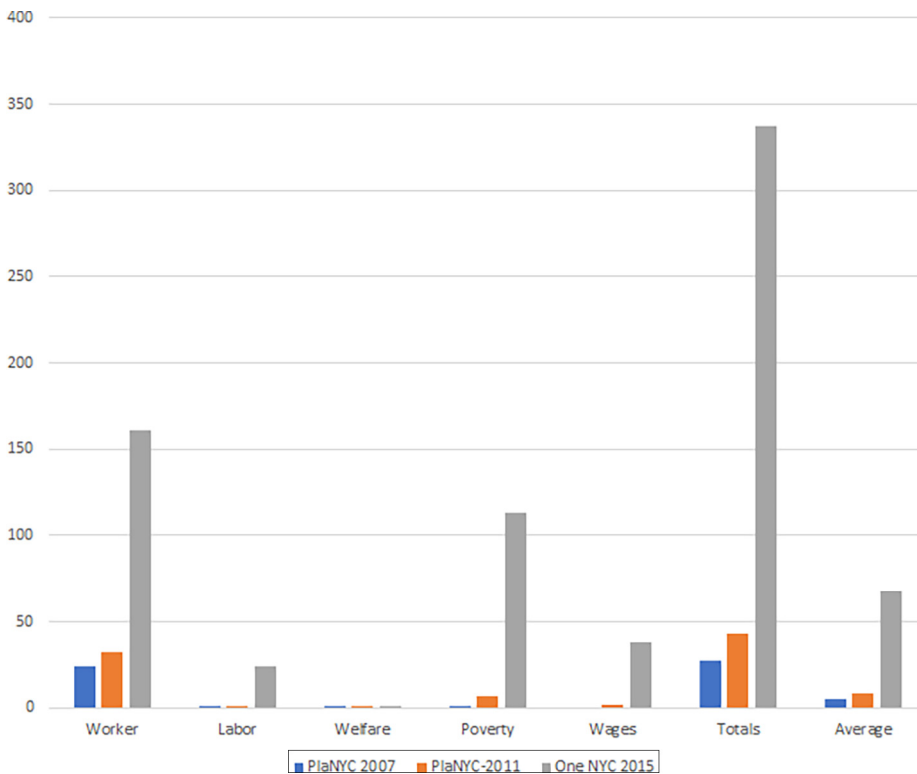


Figure 3. Shifts in exchange value proxies in NYC Plans 2007–2015

NYC first and foremost respond to residents’ concerns regarding community, place, history and locality and downplay concerns about workers labour values. Across the three plans, it is notable that labour values ranked last in 2007 and 2011, and second last (third) in 2015. In contrast to the relatively stable rankings of community use values and workers labour values, business exchange values and environmental function values are less stable, the former ranking second in the 2007 plan, third in 2011 plan and second in the 2015 plan; the latter, third in the 2007 plan, second in the 2011 plan and fourth in the 2015 plan. The latter result is very surprising given the 2015 Plan coincided with the announcement that NYC would be benchmarking itself against the SDGs.

When additional proxies were included as part of the sensitivity analysis (grey boxes, Table 2), the following stability and shifts were observed. U remained in first place in the 2007 and 2015 plans but dropped to second place in the 2011 plan. Conversely, L remained in fourth place in the 2007 and 2011 plans and also dropped to fourth in 2015 plan. The sensitivity analysis also revealed a degree of stability in the ranking of E. While it shifts from second to third place in the 2007 plan, its position remained unchanged in the 2011 or 2015 plan. F is the value that shifts most in the sensitivity analysis. F moves from third to second position in the 2007 plan, from second to first in the 2011 plan, and from fourth to third in the 2015 plan. The results of the sensitivity analysis are broadly consistent with the initial findings; L, E and U remain relatively stable in rank, with F’s ranking being less stable.

Summarising the results from the initial and sensitivity analyses, NYC has seen a shift in both planning processes and value rankings that is consistent with a shift from neoliberal to more social democratic governance that reflects the values and political ideologies of



Sustainable city branding narratives

Figure 4. Shifts in labour value proxies in NYC Plans 2007–2015

Mayors Bloomberg and De Blasio. However, the evidence is not compelling in support of the claim that NCY is embracing sustainability conceptualised as a more pluralistic conception of economic value. We discuss our process and outcome findings in more detail in the following section.

Discussion

Agnotti (2008b, p. 238) advocated more than a decade ago for bottom-up community planning and its potential to resurrect and transform “the discredited, orthodox, rational-comprehensive planning approaches by making comprehensiveness an open, democratic and participatory process that is no longer the privileged domain for technocrats”. Our analysis suggests that things have not changed that much since and certainly fall well-short of Agnotti’s (2010) vision. On the process side of developing a sustainable place narrative, and despite growing recognition of a need to develop more holistic and collaborative approaches to sustainability planning, our research highlights the pervasiveness of certain hierarchical structures and growth agendas when developing wide-ranging strategic city plans that embed narrowly framed sustainability narratives. Under the neoliberal management of Mayor Bloomberg, a top-down process of planning development was adopted to develop PlaNYC 2007 that interpreted participation as consultation with an independent, high-level stakeholder body that largely ignored resident groups. The election of Mayor De Blasio in 2014 was accompanied by more participatory city planning rhetoric

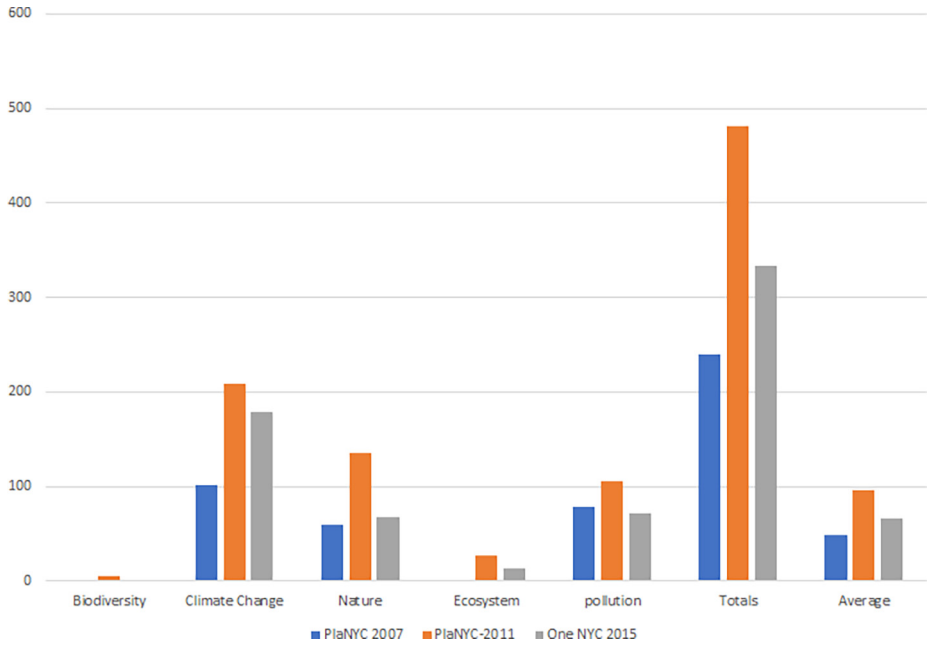


Figure 5.
Shifts in function value proxies in NYC Plans 2007–2015

and the strong embrace of social democratic language. Yet, actual planning processes remained top-down and planning-experts-driven with insufficient community participation from a sustainability value perspective.

In terms of outputs, Bloomberg’s PlaNYC 2007 foregrounded community use and business exchange values, downplayed environmental function values and ignored worker labour values. Four years into the plan’s operation, and with growing evidence of climate change risks around the world, the Mayor and his team upgraded the Plan with respect to environmental function value while continuing to ignore workers’ labour value. In the initial analysis, this upgrade altered the overall values’ ranking from use, exchange, environment, labour to use, environment, exchange and labour. With De Blasio’s arrival in 2014, labour value-related terms (i.e. “workers”, “labour”, “poverty” and “wages”) suddenly became extensively referenced in the new OneNYC plan. Despite the new social democratic language, however, the initial analysis indicates De Blasio only moved labour value up one rank from fourth to third in the values’ hierarchy at best; notably, the sensitivity analysis suggests it may have remained last. This was accomplished by populating the plan with even more references to community use value and economic exchange value. Ironically, while NYC was announcing its intentions to benchmark itself against the SDGs, the initial analysis suggests it was moving environmental function value to the third or fourth spot in the City’s value hierarchy.

We are left wondering why we have not observed NYC embracing a more fulsome approach to participatory planning and explicitly seeking to balance use, exchange, labour and function value in its planning documents given its stated commitment to sustainability and the more inclusive SDGs framework. We believe an important part of the explanation lies in the history of sustainability itself, notably in deficiencies in the 1987 Brundtland Report. While the WCED is rightly lauded for introducing, defining and

Plan	Total Hits (Rank)	Average Hits (Rank)	Adjusted Average Hits (X 1.0) (Rank)	Labour value	Exchange value	Function value	Use value	Totals 1	Function value S	Use value S	Totals S
PlaNYC 2007				27 (4)	273 (2)	240 (3)	484 (1)	1,024	490	519	1,309
<i>158 pages</i>				5.4 (4)	54.6 (2)	48 (3)	96.8 (1)		70 (2)	74.1 (1)	
<i>97,542 words</i>				5.4 (4)	54.6 (2)	48 (3)	96.8 (1)		70 (2)	74.1 (1)	
<i>Order shift</i>				Same	2→3	3→2	Same				
PlaNYC 2011				43 (4)	326 (3)	481 (2)	629 (1)	1,479	846	671	1,886
<i>202 pages</i>				8.6 (4)	65.2 (3)	96.2 (2)	125.8 (1)		120.9 (1)	95.9 (2)	
<i>102,905 words</i>				8.2 (4)	61.8 (3)	91.2 (2)	119 (1)		114.6 (1)	90.9 (2)	
<i>Order shift</i>				Same	Same	2→1	1→2				
OneNYC				337 (3)	640 (2)	333 (4)	1,099 (1)	2,409	694	1,184	2,855
<i>354 pages</i>				67 (3)	128 (2)	66.6 (4)	219.8 (1)		99.1 (3)	169.1 (1)	
<i>142,037 words</i>				46.3 (3)	87.9 (2)	45.8 (4)	151 (1)		68.1 (3)	116.2 (1)	
<i>Order shift</i>				3→4	Same	4→3	Same				

Notes: “Total hits” reports the total number of proxies found in each plan, “Average Hits” reports the number of hits divided by the number of proxy terms. “Adjusted Average Hits” applies a deflator to “Average Hits” in the 2011 and 2015 plans to account for differences in document length and word count. Data from the sensitivity analysis appears in the grey cells and is based on the addition of two proxy terms each for function and use values (see text). A modest shift in rank orders is evident within and across plans. Community use value remains consistently top-ranked. Likewise, workers labour value is equally consistently ranked in the third or fourth position. Business exchange value oscillates between second and third place depending on the plan and proxies used. In contrast, environmental function value is the variable. It shifts from first place in sensitivity analysis of the 2011 Plan to fourth place in the original analysis of the 2015 Plan

Table 2.
Summary of values’ data in NYC plans

Sustainable city branding narratives

popularising the concept of sustainability and dramatically illustrating why it needed to be applied in diverse sectors to protect planetary health and ensure greater equity, *Our Common Future* did not set out the institutional arrangements required for its delivery. The implication is that existing governance structures are adequate to the task and that achieving sustainability is mostly a technical and policy, not a political economic and systems-thinking task. We argue that after over 30 years of applying the techno-managerial approach, it is time to take stock and reassess.

At the national level, we are seeing electoral democracy deliver only halting steps at best towards sustainability: progressive action by one administration is often stalled or rolled back by the next (Hejny, 2018). Specific to the NYC case, we note how sustainability was interpreted as compatible with neoliberalism under Mayor Bloomberg and social democracy under Mayor De Blasio. Each makes sustainability an add-on to their existing ideological conception of urban development. Alternatively, if as we have argued sustainability requires a step-up in participatory and deliberative forms of democratic governance to deliver a more pluralistic and systems-compatible conception of economic value across its four use, exchange, labour and function value components, then it actually constitutes its own, new, political economic ideology. At the most fundamental level, sustainability is reconceptualising the meaning of “wealth”, “economic value” and “governance”. Wealth is no longer means “more stuff”, “economic value” is not a synonym for “exchange value” and “governance” is far more than “party-political rule”. Instead, sustainability highlights the importance of reconciling a molecular conception of economic wealth and value (each composed of use, exchange, labour and function values) via robust, pluralistic and potentially time-consuming processes of cross-value deliberation. To genuinely develop place narratives that embrace sustainability and prevent costs being externalised to other groups and nature, more participatory and inclusive city governance processes are required (BLINDED).

Conclusion

This article has provided a critical review of current approaches to developing sustainability narratives for city branding and urban development, with particular emphasis on participation and values embedded in the process. To complement our critical analysis, we analysed the extent to which the concept of sustainability, when embedded in city branding narratives and urban development practices, contributes to a shift towards more participatory and democratic modes of governance in the development of urban sustainability plans and delivers more pluralistic economic value outputs. Based on an analysis of NYC’s urban development process(es) and plan outputs, we found evidence otherwise. Despite an increasing interest in incorporating sustainability in city narratives over the period in question – 2007 to 2015 – NYC planning remained more hierarchical than participatory; and city plans continued to emphasise community use and business exchange values over environmental function and workers’ labour values. If NYC is moving in the direction of sustainability, it is taking only baby steps with sustainability’s meaning filtered through, and distorted by, the ideological leanings of the mayor in power. As humanistic philosophies that privilege select groups of people (entrepreneurs, workers) and incorporated structures (firms, unions) over other groups and over nature, modern party-political, winner-take-all representative electoral politics does not deliver the kind of cross-value deliberation that sustainability value requires.

City branding, as a governance tool (Eshuis and Edwards, 2013), should be more vigorously deployed to support sustainable urban development. For that to occur, governments will need to adopt more inclusive, deliberative governance models through co-

creation (Vallaster *et al.*, 2018). While the literature argues that these models better reflect the process of value and meaning creation that underpins brands, a “whole systems” approach to generating place value also needs to be adopted. What our research shows, power dynamics aside, is that so long as city development narratives perpetuate a focus on the growth of exchange value, achieving sustainability at the urban level will be an impossible quest. The good news is that the City has planning capacity and capability, and if the focus shifts from growing economic exchange value to ensuring a balanced approach to sustainability value, a rapid transition could ensure long-term benefits for all – people, business and the environment.

Another important finding from our study is the questions it poses to modern forms of democratic politics. As systems that empower individuals to impose value hierarchies on city narratives and urban development processes, albeit for a limited period, they fail to embed the broader cross-value deliberation sustainability requires. Representative electoral politics, characterised by Lord Hailsham as a form of “elective dictatorship”, has been in crisis for some time and at all levels (Mounk, 2018; Dryzek *et al.*, 2019). In the current case, it empowered Bloomberg to project a neoliberal value hierarchy on New Yorkers leading to a specific form of city development that emphasised the virtues of free markets and business as the main creator of value. Under De Blasio, it has equally empowered a single individual to impose a democratic socialist agenda on the City. Moreover, business benefitted under both approaches as De Blasio’s strategy to assist workers, the poor and marginalised continued to be informed by neoclassical economic ideas emphasising the growth of exchange value.

Our analysis suggests that sustainability is its own ideology, independent from neoliberalism, social democracy and environmentalism, requiring a fundamentally different and more inclusive politics and governance systems and processes for its delivery. From a political economy of sustainability perspective, the state’s new role is to establish effective multi-stakeholder platforms where interests representing exchange, use, labour and function value are able to broker deals that ensure that growth and equity are delivered within local and global environmental limits without imposing externalities on others or nature. This “tetravaluation” approach to governance, which requires systems thinking, balanced representation of interests and multi-stakeholder participation and deliberation, constitutes the “how” of sustainability, the question that the Brundtland Commission shied away from.

While we believe the above conclusions derive from our study, we also acknowledge its limitations. Our intention in providing a case study is not to offer a thorough and exhaustive examination of the case. Rather, we focus on reflecting on the process of constructing a sustainability narrative to highlight two deficiencies: the lack of appropriately structured stakeholder engagement and the adoption of constrained conceptions of economic value. What the case study does achieve is to provide food for thought for the practical application of the innovative model of sustainability value we propose. Further research could include additional quantitative and qualitative in-depth analysis of the normative, subjective, political and *emotional* elements influencing the development of city sustainability narratives and the mechanisms underpinning value choices in urban sustainability processes. Additional qualitative research is also required to more fully specify and operationalise the tetravaluation approach, for instance, using participatory action research to trial various alternative formats of multi-stakeholder platforms for delivering it.

Finally, we appreciate the practices that constitute tetravaluation constitute a radical departure from current politics and policy. However, the quote often attributed to Einstein that “madness consists of doing the same thing over again and expecting different results” is apposite here. It is increasingly evident that achieving sustainability requires not only

technical and policy innovation but also democratic political economic innovation too. The goal, as always, is rule by the people, for the people and of the people. The difference is that the tetraevaluation approach draws more deeply than representative democracy does on individuals' capacity for reflexivity and deliberation. The approach trusts people to listen to relevant experts, debate possible alternative solutions, consider the system-wide impacts of proposals on others and nature and negotiate highest common-denominator deals across sustainability's four-value imperatives of exchange, use, labour and environmental function values.

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