NEW URBAN LANGUAGES
Tales and images of spatial justice

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INDEX

SESSION II
The city of the rich (and the city of the poor): political organization of space and spatial segregation

Claudio Pulgar Pinaud
When Spatial Justice Makes the Neo-Liberal City Tremble Social and Seismic Movements in Chile after Disasters

Kay Obwona Aber
Landscape Urbanism and Spatial Justice in the Rapidly Urbanising Cities of the Global South; The Case of Johannesburg

Sherrin Frances
In Carnegie's Shadow: The Biblioteca Popular as a biopolitical exception

Marialessandra Secchi
Restructuring the Swiss city: urban regeneration is not for everyone

Maria Luisa Giordano
Making the city sustainable at the local level: critical issues and prospects from European examples

Chiara Toscani, Arian Heidari Afshari
Twin cities as european design urban laboratory

Ana Carolina Lima e Ferreira
Theater of the Oppressed as a hope to fight against the exclusion in Belo Horizonte: the case of homeless paper collectors

Sarah Bissett Scott
Measuring justice outcomes of regeneration programme

Emil Pull
Warewolves on the Swedish housing market – On antagonism and the urban homo sacer;

Anna Tertel
Water and Land City of Szczecin

Mariana Gallardo
The Communication Processes as a Civic Renewal Agent in the Public Space

Giovanni Ottaviano, Flavia Bianco
The public green space project, between urban re-newal and gentrification

Elazzazy Mohamed
The Modernization of Cairo and Its Impact on the Formation of Exclusive Communities: Zamalek As Elite Residential District

Igor Pessoa
Brazilian Metropolitan Dynamics: from spatial fragmentation to social inequality

Penny Koutrolikou
Manufacturing ghettoes – manufacturing consent in inner-city Athens in 'crises'

Wiebe Ruijtenberg
Isolated in Luxury: The Case of Gated Communities in Cairo

Tanzia Islam
Dhaka, the city of the rich and the poor

Diego Luna Quintanilla
Facing Growth through permeability Adrià Carbonell Social Antagonism as Dubai's Architectural Legacy

Adrià Carbonell
The political project of a new metropolis

SESSION III
Utopian images of spatial justice: are architects and planners designers of the just city?

Riccardo Alongi
Utopias, dystopias and reality. First steps towards a popular critical reading of the utopian urban image
Hamed Zarrinkamari, Maryam Moayery Nia
A history of utopia: from religions to styles
Anna Papadopoulou
Women's Potential as Active Agents in the Configuration of Urban Form
Mohamed Alaa Mandour
Urban-Topia
Klio Monokrousou, Maria Giannopoulou
Sustainable Urban Development: Methods and Strategies
Aliaksandra Smirnova
From concepts to the reality: Post-war reconstruction of Minsk, Belarus and its current urban development
Taylor Dave
"Iconicity of Difference": The aesthetic tension of Medellín's branded image
Miriam Tedeschi, Ansaloni Francesca
Demiurgic versus rhizomatic planning. Towards an ethical understanding of the urban realm
Marco Bovati
The tree on the rooftop. The Nature's role in contemporary language of architecture: metaphor of spatial justice, or urban marketing tool
Rainer Johann
Vital urban knots of soft infrastructure in Amsterdam & Berlin
Enrico Cicalò
Dreaming Utopia. Images from a better world

SESSION IV
Multiplicitous Representations of the Thirdspace

Rossella Salerno

The power of images and representation of space

María José Martínez Sánchez, Mariana Sastre, Adriana Marín Urrego

The theatrical representation of spatial justice.

Kensal Voices and the development of the community identity

Delaram Ashtari, Seyed Mohsen Habibi

Spatial Justice in the Metapolis: An investigation on the effects of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in notion and representation of spatial justice in urban spaces

Clemens Nocker, Clara Archibugi

Informal Space and the Superhistorical City

Hikoyat Salimova

The Emergence of Ippodrom Bazar in Context of Indigenous Space Production in Post-Soviet Tashkent

Maria Faraone

Gaining clarity through the outsider: re representation through practice

Adrià Carbonell

Territorial Ecologies: A New Ground for Spatial Justice

Ossama Hegazy

"Towards a European mosque":

Applying Socio-Semiotics for Initiating a Contextual "Formsprache beyond Objectivity"

Francine Sakata

"Open Spaces and Public life Brazil – Caieiras Island and Augusta Park"

Francesca Lotta, Maria Luisa Giordano, Bruno Buffa

"From alternative representations to prospective visions"

Matteo Romanato

The neo-liberal narrations in the urban imagery

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What is Spatial Justice and why should we discuss it?

I don't think the term "spatial justice" is widely understood. But in my opinion, this is one of the pivotal concepts in urban development today. We can start to understand spatial justice by realizing that justice happens between people organized in societies and that societies have an eminently spatial dimension.

But here is our first challenge: what is justice? And what is the relationship between justice and space?

It is outside the scope of this text to offer a definition of justice. There are numerous philosophical traditions in the discussion of justice (utilitarianism, retributivism, restorative, distributive, etc.). But in all of these traditions, it is possible to find a spatial component, related to how societies organize themselves.

Plato's monumental "The Republic" is a description of justice in the city, that is, a description of the just city-state and the just man who inhabits that city. For the Greeks, the Polis was the place where citizens would congregate to govern their lives for the common good. The Polis is the space of shared decision-making, otherwise known as 'politics'. An astute observer of his own society, Aristotle concluded that "man is a political animal": we can only achieve the good life by living as citizens in a city or a state and in doing so we become fully human (as opposed to animals in a state of nature).

In fact, the spatial dimension of justice is a consequence of the spatial dimension of politics itself and the result is the city or a state (an organized political community living under a single system of government on a given territory).

Much like the Greeks and their Polis, Hannah Arendt's conception of politics is based on the idea of active citizenship, that is, on the value and importance of civic engagement and collective deliberation about all matters affecting the political community. This civic engagement happens in the city, where men and women must live together. By doing so they create a political space where they can formulate demands, engage and associate. In this political space, men and women formulate a "social contract", in the words of Rousseau, in which rights and duties are established.

The concept of "Right to The City", first formulated by Lefebvre (1968), is firmly inscribed in this logic. More recently, Harvey has extensively written about it (Harvey 2008, 2012). According to Harvey, the Right to the City is much more than the right to be in the city. It is the right to actively shape the city to one's needs and desires, thus exercising one's full citizenship. Harvey defines the right to the city as follows:

The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights (Harvey, 2008).

In liberal democratic societies, public involvement in the affairs of the city is largely taken for granted, through elected officials or through direct participation. But even in liberal democracies, the ability of citizens to interfere in the affairs of the city is limited by the belief that only technicians and experts are able to do so in an effective way. Obviously, technicians and experts are the first to feed in this belief. Foucault has explored how expert knowledge has come to dominate the narratives on how to make cities and has excluded non-expert knowledge as irrelevant (Foucault, 1972, 1980, 2000). This is of course part of a much larger movement, in which people get further and further separated from the products of their work (Marx's theory of alienation). In this case, we might argue that as people become further and further separated from city making, they become less and less political, and perhaps less 'human'.

As a result of the belief in the supremacy of technicians and experts, architects and urbanists seem to dodge issues of democracy, justice and participation and concen-

trate instead on the technical or aesthetic aspects of their activities.

This will not do. Cities and regions that are socially, economically and environmentally sustainable and fair are not a "given", they are an achievement and a continuous struggle. Spatial planning and design are at the very core of this achievement and my argument here is that these disciplines need to come closer to the "common citizen", so as to incorporate their "non-expert" knowledge in city-making. By promoting participation in city-making, planning and design might help citizen truly achieve their "right to the city", an idea that I will develop further. Hence, urbanists, planners and designers must understand and accept the eminently political nature of the city and get off the high horse of their expert knowledge.

Justice and fairness in urban development must be continuously and critically discussed, or else we risk forming generations of young urbanists who are unprepared to face the challenges ahead. Dodging the subject will make urbanists irrelevant in the long run. Urbanists must be able to articulate spatial visions and foment active citizenship as a tool to achieve spatial justice.

But why is that so? Spatial interventions and designs do not happen in a vacuum. They happen in real governance structures where there are power struggles, disagreement and continuous negotiation. There is also disparity of power: some actors have a voice, while others do not. Hence, designing and planning the built environment are profoundly political activities. "There are no purely value-free or 'technical' solutions to spatial problems: all decisions in spatial development are political decisions insofar they must involve choice, negotiation, friction and divergence and occasionally agreement that enables action" (Rocco, 2013). Again, this is known as politics. The figure of the neutral and unbiased planner or designer who has ready-made solutions for urban problems is a fallacy, because every planning and design decision must be negotiated.

Moreover, the most recent financial crisis has highlighted one fact: cities all over the world are becoming more unequal and socially fragmented, even in the developed world (UN-Habitat, 2013). Neo-liberal policies are failing to deliver just outcomes everywhere (Ostry et al. 2016). It is becoming widely accepted that economic growth alone is not enough to promote well-being: equality is important too. There is plenty of evidence showing that inequality is socially and economically unsustainable in the long run (Berg and Ostry, 2011).

Inequality is associated with bad social indicators in developed countries. In other words, even if a country is rich, inequality seems to have a disproportionate impact on social indicators. The United States is an example of high GDP per capita and under performing social indicators (UN-Habitat, 2013).

But we must leave the dry world of statistics and try to understand inequality where it happens: in space. In order to advance with the discussion, we need to explore some key issues of equality and justice.

In my own conception, spatial justice refers to the general access to public goods, basic services, cultural goods, economic opportunity and healthy environments through fair, inclusive and efficient spatial planning, design and management of urban and rural spaces and resources. Hence, spatial justice is closely related to notions of procedural justice, or in other words, it is closely related to HOW cities and regions are planned and governed. Therefore, in order to achieve spatial justice, we must work towards sustainable governance, fair redistribution of resources, equitable distribution and access to spatial benefits and opportunities. These things will be more easily achieved through democracy and participation (UN-Human Rights, 2014, Wigmans, 2001, Papadopoulos, 2007, Avritzer, 2010), but also through planning systems and practices that allow citizens to exercise active citizenship.

Spatial planners and designers have a very central role in achieving spatial justice, as shapers of innovative spatial and institutional relationships between civil society, the public sector and the private sector and designers of inclusive processes of planning

and design. Spatial planners and designers can act as enablers of the right to the city.

The right to the city implies a kind of radical democracy where citizens are able to get profoundly involved in the management of their cities. But there are challenges to participation, even in the most robust democracies. Not the least, the alienation of citizens is one of the greatest challenges of advanced democracies today. In the developing world, on the other hand, formal structures of citizenship are not accessible to all and people often need to fight to be included in the formal structures of citizenship (Holston, 2009).

But for the first time, radical democracy is possible in practice (Dahlgren, 2009). New technologies and practices have made wide participation possible and sometimes unavoidable. Spatial injustices like the redevelopment of Gezi Park in Istanbul or the lack of affordable and efficient mobility in great Brazilian cities have led to gigantic popular demonstrations. These movements were not understood by authorities and were toughly repressed, leading to further unrest (Rocco, 2013). Radical democracy implies that pubic authorities must find new ways to react to popular demands that are legitimately formulated. Authorities themselves must embrace radical democracy and be able to manage differences and divergences. Democracy seems inescapable as more and more people join the network society.

But as we know, democracy is not only the will of the majority. Democracy is about the fair management of differences and the search for possible consensus (Crick, 2002). Differences of opinion and divergent interests must be managed in the democratic arena, and those who have no voice must be heard and their needs must be tended to as well in the name of justice.

This is specifically relevant for issues of sustainability. Let us not forget that "for sustainability to occur, it must occur simultaneously in each of its three [constitutive] dimensions: social, economic and environmental" (Larsen, 2012). Social sustainability refers to the continuity and resilience of our democratic institutions and finally to the quality of our democracies.

The right to the city is the base for an inclusive polis where all citizens have the right to interfere in the affairs of the city and hence, to be fully human. This is a radical idea in view of the growing exclusion promoted by neo-liberal ideology in our cities.

Here, I would like to argue that spatial planners and designers must look for new roles in the new network society in which they can deepen their role as articulators of spatial visions and plans, as suggested by the pioneering work of Karina Sehested (Sehested, 2009). They must understand the new processes through which space is being produced and they must act to construct news ways of participation and co-design to help authorities cater for radical democracy. It is our task to come up with innovative ways to articulate differences and divergences. It our task to give a voice to those who have difficulties being heard when it comes to urban development. We must also come up with ways to animate and include those who feel alienated or indifferent to urban development.

The criteria leading to a correct evaluation of spatial justice are not simple. They are heatedly debated. Even though we all have a pretty instinctive understanding of justice, the way to get there is not always well defined and the relationships between justice and space might not always be clear. This conference was an invitation to debate these issues.

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Visualizing spatial justice

The greatest value of a picture is when it focuses us to notice what we never expect to see.
- John Tukey

An overall look at all the works that are part of this stimulating 'collective discussion' on the challenges of spatial justice allows us to identify some of the crucial issues that ask for a careful reevaluation. Understanding spatial inequalities means, first, to recognize them inside a complex, fragmented and sometimes contradictory urbanizing world. On one hand, it seems clear that defining the conceptual dimensions of spatial justice is probably not the core problem: after more than forty years of academic debate, the issue today seems to be how to go beyond raising awareness, to achieving tangible results through the positive transformations of urban spaces. Moreover, it is increasingly difficult to describe the seemingly endless variations through which spatial inequality can creep, not only into the unruly cities of the developing world, but in particular, in our self-styled 'most livable' urban landscapes.

Paraphrasing David M. Smith, inequality can be defined as a special type of differentiation or variation of characteristics among members of a designated group: very often these differences are part of an evolving spatial framework characterized by many dist inctive aspects (physical social, economic and cultural glass barriers) which share a common feature of being hardly spatially visible, hidden inside a matryoshka of multiple spaces. In other words, it is fundamental, for anyone who wants to promote a more just city, to find empowering techniques and tactics to see injustice expressed in spatial form. From this point of view, most of the traditional spatial analysis, often based on abstract views from above, seems worthless. the invisibility of the different shades of injustice generated inside urban spaces requires new forms of instruments to read them, and careful methodologies to select information. This matter of information selection is certainly crucial in times of big-data and ubiquitous computing hype, when urban studies are invaded by research that is apparently objective thanks to a massive injection data, packaged in seductive visualizations.

We all have to disentangle a ready-to-use sea of information in a way that would have been unthinkable a short time ago,. Nevertheless, this incredible access to updated and growing data sets does not help us to better understand the nature of some urban phenomena. Ben Fry stressed that: "With all the data we've collected, we still don't have many satisfactory answers to the sort of questions that we started with. One of the most important (and least technical) skills in understanding data is asking good questions." (Ben Fry, 2008).

Multiple aspects of inequalities are rooted inside the physical space of the city and it is necessary to focus our attention on the critical selection of our information, on our capability to effectively observe and represent very specific urban space changes, and the importance of understanding research as tool to raise the right questions, rather the providing the right answers. On one hand, the complex interweaving of forces that generate spatial inequality becomes more and more difficult to detect and understand, and on the other, it's hard to deny the importance of maps, images and visualizations as the primary vehicles for spatial knowledge. If we think of the most famous photographs of south American cities, with favelas and rich buildings side by side separated by a simple wall, we are compelled to observe images of something that we only partially understand.

The same thing happened with much of the data-driven analysis addressing spatial-justice related themes in many ways: beautiful interactive maps falsely promise us the neutrality of an information free of side effects.

Unfortunately, this main-stream visual rhetoric does not help us to correctly set the question of why it is still important to use visual tools to achieve more correct analytical choices.

"This ubiquity of graphical formats calls for a new critical understanding of the ways we read and process visual information. […] We need to develop a domain of expertise focused on visual epistemology, knowledge production in graphical form in fields that have rarely relied on visual communication" (Druker, 2014)

Research presented in these proceedings uses different sets of images as an essential tool to tell us that picturing spatial inequalities is not only a descriptive exercise but one of the key-steps in spatial knowledge making. The visual storytelling and the representation of spatial and environmental injustices through time-based, qualitative and quantitative data is of capital importance to reduce our knowledge gap of but only by pondering some necessary assessments regarding:

- how and for what communicative purpose are visual languages mixed in the effort to understand spatial justice

- images and maps are based on non-neutral sources that require a high degree of thoughtfulness and verification to be reliable, accurate and complete

- the relationship between text and images is also crucial, while the storytelling about spatial justice deserves careful design.

However, the visual-narrative and the representation of spatial inequalities and their underlying reasons is crucial for the debate not only academic, but also in decision-making support system, in policy-making processes targeting a wider audience and more aware citizens. Here's why the language of representation is a crucial issue: the mediation of visual artifacts simultaneously allows the blending of expert knowledge (often resulting from quantitative information) and the need to communicate the causes, the effects and possible solutions to the problems of spatial inequality in a qualitative way.

Recalling Amin and Thrift: "The new urban planner is posed as the crucial intermediary, helping to mobilize the 'voices from the borderlands', arbitrating between stakeholders and ensuring that the powerful play no tricks; never losing sight of urban social justice as the binding goal." (Amin, Thrift, 1991)

Playing without tricks also means knowing that imagery can only be an effective interpretation tool if we give up its seductive character, so deeply rooted into image communication. On the other hand, it seems useful to remember that the search for visibility of spatial justice allows to clarify some of its main characteristics.

Some rhizomatic[1] arguments persist in the following papers, regarding the difficulties in grasping and making visible, in nuce, the evolution and the modifications of spatial injustice:

Hidden elements
A large number of non-physical and invisible elements, actions and actors are part of the networks that causes and feeds different degrees of spatial inequalities, working under the surface, generating visible changes that are the result of hidden energies. Sometimes we need to question our own interpretative categories to better understand what we see and what we do not comprehend.

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[1]   Rhizome is a philosophical concept developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their Capitalism and Schizophrenia (1972–1980). It is what Deleuze calls an "image of thought," based on the botanical rhizome, that apprehends multiplicities.

Multiple and mixed spatial scales

Our dimensional and quantitative perception of urban space is often the result of consolidated clichés: the units we use to 'measure' the city, the neighborhood, the center, the periphery, etc… are derived from a traditional way of looking, mapping, and clustering the urban environment. We need innovative conceptual tools to look at the intermediate scales of the territory, reinforcing our ability to jump quickly from one scale to another, in order to understand the magnitude of phenomena.

Sliding boundaries

Very often, enclaves on urban inequality appear enclosed by well-defined boundaries, nevertheless we have a duty to overcome the rigid physical aspects of material space and self-evident walls: the areas of influence of urban actors require attention to more dynamic boundaries. Even in this case, it is not easy to find instruments of representation able to capture this kind of border dynamism.

Conflicting dynamics

The social, economic, functional, morphological analysis of our cities clearly show opposing processes, and it is extremely difficult to trace the relationships between conflicting dynamics and transformations of anthropic space.

Is it possible, within this complex and non-linear conceptual framework, to overcome the over simplification of knowledge production using visual methods, while reflecting on the critical interplay between words and images as a methodology to clarify visible and invisible power interactions, spatial inequality and injustice?

This can be one of the fils rouges between the following papers, a path always anchored to the geography of places, urban and human spaces that ask to be understood, through the ways we visualize them.

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