



(ibidem) Planum Readings

#12
2019/2

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by Planum. The Journal of Urbanism
Supplemento al n. 39, vol. II/2019
ISSN 1723-0993
Registered by the Court of Rome on 04/12/2001
Under the number 514-2001

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(ibidem) è un progetto ideato da Marco Cremaschi.

Impaginazione: Francesco Curci
Progetto grafico: Nicola Vazzoler
Immagine di copertina:
Los Angeles River
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Queste giornate rallentate dalla prudenza e dalle precauzioni che ciascuno adopera per proteggere se stesso e gli altri dal rischio di un'infezione virale sconosciuta inducono a riflettere sulla fragilità di un mondo globale che non può arrestare la sua corsa. L'interdipendenza dei processi economici è tale che l'interruzione della fornitura di un piccolo componente meccanico paralizza la produzione degli stabilimenti di grandi imprese multinazionali. Il settore turistico di interi paesi entra in crisi con la sospensione di alcune rotte aeree e con le immagini indelebili di supermercati dagli scaffali vuoti mostrate dai telegiornali *all news* sugli schermi di tutto il mondo. Il settore finanziario sconta le conseguenze della reale incertezza del momento con ondate di vendite che fanno crollare le borse e impennare il valore di beni rifugio come i metalli preziosi. Sono soltanto alcuni esempi tra i tanti possibili. Forse ancora nessuno tra i teorici del globalismo ha pensato alla necessità di un freno di emergenza da usare nelle situazioni estreme, quando la corsa del mondo va interrotta almeno per il tempo necessario a evitare una vera pandemia. La pretesa autoregolazione di un sistema altamente interdipendente – da cui dipendono la salute, l'alimentazione e il reddito di miliardi di persone – è in realtà un azzardo sconsiderato. Il risultato è sotto i nostri occhi nelle strade delle città, sui *social media*, nel chiuso delle abitazioni, laddove va in scena uno spettacolo dell'arte di arrangiarsi con le mascherine improvvisate, ascoltando i pareri di questo o quel virologo, riempiendo la dispensa di generi alimentari a lunga conservazione. La quotidianità stralunata di queste settimane potrebbe essere un monito da cui trarre lezioni per affrontare la prossima emergenza globale.

L.G.

Marco Peverini

Planners of the World, Unite!



Samuel Stein
Capital City:
Gentrification and the Real Estate State
 Verso, London 2019
 pp. 208, £ 9.99

Public action has gradually surrendered to the interests of the political apparatus of real estate, and the capacity of planners to effectively influence urban dynamics towards the common good has reduced. Or, rather, it has changed. What is today the role of planners?

This is the question underlying the book authored by Samuel Stein, a PhD candidate in geography at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, and urban studies instructor at Hunter College.

Published by Verso together with left-wing magazine *Jacobin*, the book positions itself in a literature of radical and critical geography that questions the power relations that shape the city around real estate. It focuses particularly on the concepts of land rent and value, and the contradictory role of public action in allowing (when not supporting) speculation and its worse social consequences: exclusion, gentrification, displacement. The concepts of Marxist analysis, particularly when applied to the city (Harvey, 2003; Madden and Marcuse, 2016), are widely present in text, together with classical theories of rent gap and gentrifica-

tion (Smith, 1979; Jacobs, 2005; Lees, 2012). The author's original contribution, however, is the intensive application of those theories to the recent urban planning history of New York City and the United States and the lessons that can be learnt on a global perspective. To understand its originality, let us look at the book's title: a composition of new and old concepts that deserves some explanation.

'Capital city', or the influence of capital in the urban space
 More and more radical researchers and politicians are concerned with the influence of capital in the making of the city: real estate is now a \$217 trillion dollar industry, a 'Niagara of capital' from financial investments has flooded real estate (Downs, 2007) and is now pushing hard into the urban to find profit through extraction of urban value (Farha, 2014). Looking at both recent and old developments in New York City, the author identifies how increasingly powerful factions of government are able to bend public policies. This political apparatus guided by the real estate sector, Stein notes, is incessantly working to pursue the interest of Capital in the form of land rent (see Ball *et al.*, 1985) and is able to achieve bipartisan political backing. In this sense, New York, as many other global cities in the world, is *capital* (not for administrative reasons) due to its will to attract Capital and ability to please its need of profit.

Gentrification and the new forms of land speculation
 Land speculation is not something new. During the industrial age, capitalists had looked for profit also in spatial ways. But industrial capital flourished with city expansion and low land prices (an example in the book is that of the US railway companies during the expansion westwards). Capital factions lobbied for urban planning that would assure the social reproduction of the working class, through social infrastructures such as housing. Today, Stein argues, the situation is very different: financial capital and real estate have no commitment to so-



cial infrastructure, except for those amenities that would increase land value, and have an insatiable desire for ever-rising property values. The faction of real estate capital rather lobbies for urban planning that increases land and property values, and gentrification has been a widely used strategy to achieve this purpose.

The real estate state

The book, mostly concentrated on neoliberal urban planning, surprisingly jumps back to the 19th century to tell the story of a very peculiar family. Not only has this family unceasingly ridden the speculative opportunities offered by the railway expansion and by the modern urban gentrification policies. One of its members was able to reach the White House: the Trumps. With them, the political faction backed by real estate lobbies has finally achieved the national power in the US, establishing what the author calls the *real estate state*: «a political formation in which real estate capital has inordinate influence over the shape of our cities, the parameters of our politics and the lives we lead» (p. 5). A new order that everybody experiences in any city and with which urban planners have to deal with in their daily work.

The role of planners in the real estate state

Applying widely these three 'structural' concepts of the book, Samuel Stein's main efforts are dedicated in this book to understand the role of planners in such a real estate-driven state. He actually became interested in planning because he was «mad at planners» and felt a personal (after all he became a planner) and collective frustration in the profession: «today's urban planners face an existential crisis: if the city is an investment strategy, are they just wealth managers?» (pp. 6-9). Even if, he realizes, the majority of planner are 'radical', in the sense of radically committed to the common good, their day-to-day work and agendas tend to favour their most powerful supporters, including strains of the real estate sector. The main questions that drive the author's analysis are therefore: «how much planning will capitalism allow in a market-based system?» and «how can we improve our cities without inducing gentrification and displacement?» (p. 9).

The answer to such questions comes after a deep analysis of the (d)evolution of urban planning in New York City and the United States, and is articulated on many levels. Looking at the history of planning, the author explains how it gradually became a technocratic profession: «when planners think about their work, they often describe a box full of tools – particular approaches to space that can be used at the appropriate time and space» (p. 177) such as zoning, tax reduction, subsidies, etc. With such a mindset, and refusing political responsibility, planning became a field in which real estate lobbies could easily infiltrate and dominate. How to counter this? The answer given by the author is simple and clear as a call to arms: to bring back the profession from the safe sphere of technocracy to the conflictual terrain of politics.

Planners of the world, unite (with the people)!

In the final part, the author arrives at a sore spot for planners: planning is a public function uniquely positioned at the nexus of state, capital and popular power. But too often the interests of capital – not rarely convergent with that of the (real estate) state – prevail over the needs of the people. While planners lower their heads to the sound of the capitalist mantra «there is no alternative» (Fisher, 2009). Stein, instead, encourages to reconsider the existing alternative principles to neoliberalism: public stewardship over planning, decommodification, socialization of land and property assets. Reverting the paradigm is the first step. Then, better planning practices could change the direction of the capitalist machine: inclusionary zoning, rent regulation, right of first refusal for new social housing, taxes on land value extraction and community land trusts are some examples.

While Stein is aware that such change is very hard, especially nowadays, he suggests two possible strategies. The first is to *unite planners*: urban planners are very passionate and honestly committed to the public good in principle, but crush with a demoralizing reality; getting together and unite around alternative planning principles must be the first step. But more importantly planners must *unite with people* and with their collective organizations, around land rent as a core political issue. «Planners will follow but they cannot lead» (p. 177): large and

effective tenant movements organizing mass rent strikes could be the lever to break the capitalist chain of land value extraction. And planners must roll up their sleeves.

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