

# *Why discuss Spatial Justice in urbanism studies?*

**It is very difficult to discuss the issue of spatial justice within the context of a country that enjoys so much of it. The Netherlands is probably one of the places in the world where the overarching objectives of spatial planning and design have been most fully attained: healthy, fairly sustainable and mostly prosperous cities with few signs of spatial segregation are trademarks of the polder model (see Helman, 2013). Citizens in the Netherlands can enjoy an enormous range of public goods, such as excellent mobility and access to jobs and services, healthy green spaces and safety.**

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However, these conditions are also widely taken for granted. As a result, architects and urbanists in academia seem to dodge issues of democracy, justice, and redistribution; instead they focus on the technical or aesthetic aspects of their professional activity. This is not acceptable. 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. Cities and regions that are socially, economically and environmentally sustainable and fair are not a “given”, they are an achievement.

The activities involved in spatial planning and design are at the very core of this achievement. Dodging the subject will make urbanists irrelevant in the long run.

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. In short, urbanism happens in political arenas (Harvey, 2012).

As I have written in another article (Rocco, 2013), “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”.

This is also 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, planning and design decisions happen in specific socio-economic contexts, which are invariably very different from each other. Nevertheless, the most recent financial crisis has highlighted at least one convergence: cities all over the world are becoming more unequal, socially and spatially fragmented, even in the developed world (UN-Habitat, 2013). This is very bad news, as it is widely accepted that economic growth alone is not enough to promote well being: equity is also important. There is plenty of data showing correlation between lack of social mobility and inequality. There is even more evidence showing that inequality is socially and economically unsustainable in the long run (e.g. 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, seemingly because of deep inequalities that make some parts of many American cities very disadvantaged places to be born (see 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 the discussion, we need to explore some key issues of spatial inequality and its antidote: spatial justice. Here, I explore the concept of spatial justice and its implications for urban planners and designers. I explore crucial aspects connected to spatial justice and summarize them at the end with a proposal.

Spatial justice refers to 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.

Spatial justice is crucial to support more equitable and fair societies and to promote the full realisation of human potential. In order to achieve spatial justice, we must work towards sustainable governance, fair redistribution of resources, and equitable distribution of and access to spatial benefits and opportunities. These conditions will be more easily achieved through democracy and participation (UN-Human Rights, 2014, Wigmans, 2001, Papadopoulos, 2007, Avritzer, 2010).

Spatial planners and designers have a highly 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



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sustainable structures and processes (Rocco, 2013).

Spatial justice implies the Right to the City, that is, the right to interfere in the affairs of the city and the right to shape the city to one's own desires. Henri Lefebvre is one of the initiators of the concept (Lefebvre, 1968), but more recently David Harvey has written extensively about this, particularly in Harvey (2008) and Harvey (2012). 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 least, the alienation of citizens is one of the greatest challenges facing our democracies today.

In the developing world, on the other hand, the formal structures of citizenship are not accessible to all and people often need to fight for access to basic rights (precisely those things that people seem to take for granted in the developed world) and to be included in the formal structures of citizenship (Holston, 2009).

For the first time, radical democracy seems to be possible in practice (see Dahlgren, 2009). New technologies and practices have made wide participation possible and sometimes unavoidable, as more and more people get access to the Internet through phones and cheap tablets (Mims, 2014). Perceived spatial injustices such as the redevelopment of Gezi Park in Istanbul or the lack of affordable and efficient mobility in great

## Figure

1. SPATIAL JUSTICE: WALKABILITY and MOBILITY are difficult to achieve but essential to provide opportunities for all. The elderly, the disabled, children and other vulnerable groups must be able to access the city. (Street in Amsterdam ©R. Rocco).
2. SPATIAL JUSTICE: AFFORDABLE MOBILITY is a basic public good that enables access to the city. Providing bicycle paths and the necessary infrastructure to support bike mobility enables people to lead healthier lifestyles and to save on public transport. (Bicycle racks at Delft train Station. © R. Rocco)
3. SPATIAL INJUSTICE: INFORMAL URBANISATION: Despite the fascination of designers and planners by the assumed authenticity and dynamism of slums, their inhabitants do not have access to the same services and facilities to be found in the surrounding formal city, despite being full citizens. They are effectively segregated from the rule of law. (Favela Paraisópolis and the surrounding neighborhood of Morumbi, São Paulo,, © R. Rocco)



Brazilian cities have led to gigantic popular movements. These movements were not understood by authorities and were toughly repressed, leading to further unrest (Rocco, 2013). Radical democracy implies that public 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.

Nevertheless, democracy should not only be about the will of the majority. Differences of opinion and divergent interests must be managed in the democratic arena, and those who have little or no voice (the so-called minorities) must be also heard and their needs tended in the name of justice. Democracy is about the fair management of differences and the search for workable consensus (Crick, 2002).

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). Radical democracy seems to indicate that spatial injustices are eminently unsustainable. They will crumble sooner or later, or if contested and not tackled, they will lead to social unrest and violence.

Here, I would like to argue that spatial planners and designers must look for new ways through which they can deepen their role as articulators of spatial visions and plans in complex networks of interaction and decision-making, as explained by Forester (1999) and illustrated by Sehested (2009). They must understand new processes through which space is being produced and act to help construct new ways of participation and co-design. They must help authorities cater for radical democracy in an effective way. It is our task, while cooperatively visioning, planning and designing spatial interventions, to come up with innovative ways to articulate differences and divergences and to give a voice to those who have difficulties being heard in spatial development. And as I indicated before, we must also come up with ways to animate and include those who feel alienated or indifferent.

My proposal here is that spatial justice should not only be actively and critically discussed in Urbanism courses. We should incorporate spatial justice as a criterion to evaluate plans

and designs as well. If technical and aesthetic criteria are discussed, spatial justice should be discussed as well.

I am not saying that the criteria leading to a correct evaluation of spatial justice are simple. In fact, they are the subject of heated debate. Even though we all have a pretty instinctive understanding of justice, the way to achieve it in spatial development is not always well defined. Thus, I would like to invite you to take part in the debate and add to it.

We must agree on one basic premise: discussing justice is as important, and as pertinent to Urbanism studies, as discussing technique and aesthetics. And yes, justice is as much part of the Urbanism discipline as aesthetics and technique.

In order to initiate the debate (which I foresee will be long and arduous), I propose a set of very simple questions to be asked of any spatial proposal, any plan or design. These questions are designed to elucidate the main issues of spatial justice I have described very briefly above. They must lead to the elaboration of quantitative criteria and measurements in the future, as I suspect many of these questions can be answered not only with arguments but with numbers as well:

- Does it [the project, design or plan] promote the equitable redistribution of public money? How? What are the instruments?
- Does it create public goods? How? Are they really public goods or just goods that can be enjoyed by those who can afford them (and hence not truly public)?
- Does it promote inclusiveness and discourage discrimination and separation? How? What are the spatial features? Who are the excluded? How are they being catered for? Are women, children, ethnic minorities, religious minorities and sexual minorities part of its considerations?
- Does it avoid or reduce negative externalities? Are there losers in the process? How can they also benefit, and if they cannot, how can they be compensated?
- Does it promote democracy and participation? How? What are the instruments? Are the ideas contained in this project a product of your imagination alone, or do they involve some form of participation and shared knowledge-building?

I am sure I am not the first to advocate the inclusion of spatial justice in Urbanism

curricula, and perhaps these questions are not exactly original. In any case, most of them are already part of any sound assessment of plans and designs. They are already part of the discourse on sustainability, as I have tried to indicate.

But I hope we can incorporate spatial justice more explicitly in our discussions and in our curricula and debate these issues openly. ■

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