

Chapter 11

Neoliberal Planning: Does It Really Exist?

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Neoliberalism may be a widely used term in both scientific and popular writings, but there remains much confusion over what its exact contents are – Brenner, Peck, and Theodore (2010a) have called it a ‘rascal’ concept but confirm elsewhere (Brenner, Peck, & Theodore, 2010b) that it remains a ‘*keyword for the understanding of regulatory reforms of our time*’. Smith (2008) has declared neoliberalism ‘dead but dominant’, and some call for a shift in focus from analysis and critique to the exploration of possible postneoliberalisms (see for example Brand and Sekler (2009) in the theme issue on postneoliberalism in *Development Dialogue*). We hope to have demonstrated in this book that neoliberalism in cities across the globe is still expanding, enlarging, unfolding in varied ways under different local circumstances. The 2008 financial crisis, with its particularly urban manifestation in a US context, has not (yet) brought neoliberal diffusion to a grinding halt. It is therefore strongly needed to continue to analyse an ever-expanding phenomenon that has such a vast impact upon the shape of our cities, natures, and everyday lives in more and more parts of the worlds.

We argued in the beginning of this book that the concepts of ‘neoliberalism’ and ‘neoliberalisation,’ while in common use across the whole range of social sciences, have thus far been generally overlooked in planning theory and the analysis of planning practice. Offering insights from papers presented during a conference session at the Association of American Geographers meeting in Boston in 2008 and a number of commissioned chapters, this book has attempted to fill this significant hiatus in the study of planning. What the case studies from Africa, Asia, North-America and Europe included in this volume have in common is that they all reveal the uneasy cohabitation of ‘planning’ – some kind of state intervention for the betterment of our built and natural environment – and ‘neoliberalism’ – a belief in the superiority of market mechanisms to organise land use and the inferiority of its opposite, state intervention. Planning, if anything, may be seen as being in direct contrast to neoliberalism, as something that should be rolled back or even

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annihilated through neoliberal practice. To combine ‘neoliberal’ and ‘planning’ in one phrase then seems awkward at best, and an outright oxymoron at worst. To admit to the very existence or epistemological possibility of ‘neoliberal planning’ may appear to be a total surrender of state planning to market superiority, or in other words, the simple acceptance that the management of buildings, transport infrastructure, parks, conservation areas etc. *beyond* the profit principle has reached its limits in the 21st century. Planning in this case would be reduced to a mere facilitator of ‘market forces’ in the city, be it gentle or authoritarian. Yet in spite of these contradictions and outright impossibilities, planners operate within, contribute to, resist or temper an increasingly neoliberal mode of producing spaces and places, or the revival of profit-driven changes in land use. It is this contradiction between the serving of private profit-seeking interests while actually seeking the public betterment of cities that this volume has sought to describe, explore, analyze and make sense of through a set of case studies covering a wide range of planning issues in various countries. This book attempted to lay bare just how spatial planning functions in an age of market triumphalism, how planners respond to the overruling profit principle in land allocation and what is left of non-profit driven developments.

The expansion of neoliberalising forms of planning – the reworking of actors, policies, institutions and regulatory frameworks in order to facilitate market-driven land use changes – does not just happen, of course. Inspired by Klein (2007), it can be observed in many places how real moments of crisis, along with their peculiar discursive framings, have come to act as strategic entry points for neoliberal planning transformations. Crises, whether economic, social, environmental, or political, then, act as a ‘shock’ and require a new doctrine, a shock doctrine, that make market-friendly changes to planning ideas and habits seem necessary, unavoidable, natural even. The social-economic fallout of dramatic processes of de-industrialisation in places like Montreal or Malmö are reframed as a problem of shrinking tax incomes, the absence of a sizeable creative class, the absence of private investment, increasing social benefit dependency, frightening outbursts of street violence, and problematic concentrations of the undeserving (non-white, minority) poor. This very specific prioritisation of problems, then, becomes the ‘natural’ agenda of contemporary spatial planning through the seemingly necessary production of market-friendly places (detached from the city’s social problems), together with a curing cocktail of repressive socio-spatial policies (Wacquant, 2009), the militarisation of public space (Davis, 1990) and privatisation of public spaces (Mitchell, 2003). Very similarly, as Loopmans demonstrates in this volume (Chapter 6), the political crisis following the sustained electoral success of the extreme right in the Belgian city of Antwerp has been invoked to clean up and clear out certain inner-city neighbourhoods through strategic planning projects and systematic repression of the unwanted groups living there or making a living there. The South-African case (Oranje, Chapter 10, this volume) clearly shows how not only cities but entire countries, newly emerging or moving out of a crisis, are ‘easy targets’ for groups detached from the collective sphere and pursuing their own interest.

The neoliberalisation of planning implies a partial retreat by planning as an institution from its very core, namely the improvement of the built and natural environment through some sort of concerted effort in the public sphere. This 'retreat' should not be read as a mere withdrawal but a complex reworking of relations between state and market in which the state not simply 'looses power' but gains a more proactive role in the introduction of market principles in planning through local, national and international regulatory reforms (see Eraydin, [Chapter 4](#) and Taşan-Kok and Korthals Altes, [Chapter 5](#), both in this volume). Still, if private interests not just prevail but become overarching directives, planning's very field of operation, public decision-making and its crystallisation in land uses, finds itself in troubled waters. In the process of public retreat, as for example the Auckland case of land contamination ([Chapter 8](#), this volume) has shown, 'individual responsibility and 'individual freedom' become a pivotal yardstick in the organisation of cities and natures. Following Rose (1999), this implies a very peculiar understanding of (urban) freedom and individuality. 'Freedom' under this new neoliberal subjectivity means freedom from bureaucracy and state patronage, rather than freedom from want or from the need for transport, shelter or safety. In this neoliberal understanding, urban subjects in the first instance carry self-responsibility for education, retraining, well-being, and risk management through prudence (Larner, 2000), rather than having a set of rights they can claim from 'the city' or 'the government'. Urban subjects, then, become self-governing atomised entrepreneurs who have the obligation to pursue their own betterment and fulfillment, and the obligation to be 'free' (Bondi, 2005) in the city of endless choice and resource. It is up to the utilitarian citizen to maximise personal gain from this generous urban offering. No longer can urban dwellers, as neoliberal subjects, lay claims on the city government to guarantee their well-being. The city as right, as entitlement, is slowly being replaced with the city as possibility and opportunity. Based on UK evidence, Raco ([Chapter 3](#)) in this volume clearly demonstrates how the recent turn to a discourse of 'aspirational citizenship' puts the responsibility for urban well-being in the hands of the individual. Urban policy is more and more concerned with cultural interventions that deal with possible aspirational deficiencies, or gaps in aspiration amongst 'free' citizens. It closes opportunities for alternative aspirations and representations of diversity in the city. Those who do not show the right type and proper level of 'self-realisation' tend to be defined as a 'problem' rather than 'potential'. Needless to say, the very promise of potential fulfillment does create an excitement about and desire for the city among many individuals, and makes it difficult to organise any contestation around the individualisation of urban citizenship. Within this impeccable logic of urban neoliberal subjectivity, it is perfectly normal that cities in the first place dress up to seduce wandering neoliberal minds seeking that flawless urban landscape where they can capitalise best on their talents.

In the process, an idea of urban justice that would go beyond the harsh but fair 'justice' imposed by market forces on the city, and the 'up-to-you' subjectivity that accompanies it, is disappearing in the background. Commenting on how sustainability has become part of an urban ideology of the neoliberal era, Gunder (2006) aptly summarises why this should be a concern to planners: *'For many, the urban*

crisis appears to be that our cities simply are not sustainable. What has happened to planning's traditional concerns about fairness, equity, and social justice? Under this hegemonic crisis of unsustainability, issues such as homelessness, racism, or inequality appear no longer to be burning urban issues. Yet, they have not gone away. Exploitation still occurs; it is just not considered an urban problem of major institutional concern, especially in relation to the importance of reducing our ecological footprint! Is this obscuring of injustice by some who claim to act in the name of sustainability not ideology at its most insidious?"

The contradiction of neoliberal planning lies in the epistemological impossibility to tackle these obvious urban injustices in the absence of a convincing theoretical and conceptual framework, even if the need for planning intervention that goes beyond paving the institutional way for more market-friendly planning is obvious, acute even. Of late, leading authors in geography and planning have started to tackle this obvious conceptual hiatus that has been steadily growing during decades of neoliberal urbanism. Susan Fainstain (2010) has launched the concept of 'the just city', centered around diversity, democracy and equity, as an alternative for the 'ideological triumph of neoliberalism' which has caused 'the allocation of spatial, political, economic, and financial resources to favor economic growth at the expense of wider social benefits'. In *Seeking Spatial Justice*, Soja (2010) insists on the assertive recognition of the social-spatial dialectic (the spatial will be a constitutive part of any form of urban justice). Harvey (2008) and Mitchell (2003), inspired by Lefebvre (1968), have tried to revive the notion of 'right to the city', while both Friedmann (2000) and Amin (2006) have tried to answer the question what constitutes the 'good city'.

Meanwhile, regardless of the increasing momentum in reconceptualising notions of urban justice in academic circles, planning operates more than ever within the one-size-fits-all market solution, without powerful alternative visions of urban justice (so far) trickling down to the planning office. The success of the neoliberal restructuring ethos as an organising principle for urban policy and planning is perhaps less dependent on some form of admirably coherent economic theory than it is on keeping possible alternatives at bay. As Leys (1990, quoted in Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2009) formulates it, '*for an ideology to be hegemonic, it is not necessary that it be loved. It is merely necessary that it have no serious rival*', and, without trying to suggest the existence of mystically conspiring neoliberal powers, there seem to be tactics at work in different parts of the world that try to exactly keep alternatives out of the limelight. One is to incorporate critical social movements into the mainstream of planning through neoliberal logics such as 'social entrepreneurship' that forces social movements to prioritise the logic of funding and financial survival rather than the attainment of original social goals (see van Dyck, Chapter 7, this volume). Another tactic is to portray market-led solutions not as an option but as a necessity. In times of 'geo-Darwinism', only cities fit to successfully compete with other cities for scarce resources of capital, be they financial or human, will be or become prosperous places to live and locations where the creative classes will thrive. The 'good city', then, is the neoliberal city that successfully prioritises market solutions and attracts its 'fair' share of people and

investment – which can be interpreted as ‘just’ – even if this Darwinian survival logic contradictorily leads to deeply uneven urban development at a larger scale. But cities, within this impeccable market logic, have the right to compete for profitable investment, and urban dwellers have the right to try their luck in the world of urban opportunities created by market-led development. Further, the portrayal of neoliberal urban development as desirable, necessary, unique, or unavoidable, has a highly divisive effect on urban actors. If neoliberalisation is about the ‘restoration of class power’ as Harvey (2005) would summarise it, then neoliberalisation can be a strongly desirable project for those who are – or think they are – empowered by it, whether house owners selling their property with a sizeable profit in gentrifying areas, or community groups successfully bidding for financing, planners pushing through (large) development projects, politicians leaving their mark through flagship projects, or developers, estate agents and construction companies making profits from the systematic transformation of urban space under neoliberal conditions.

Neoliberal planning, however paradoxical, is tempting in many ways for many users of urban space, not necessarily including those who gain most from it, and often after the temporal suspension of genuine social concern amongst planners, politicians or community groups to enable ‘development’ in the first place. The thrill of competing for funding, pushing through plans, seeing spectacular architecture rising from the soil, or contributing to favourable statistics on investment, population, local GDP, etcetera can be far larger than the search for democracy, equity and diversity in the city. Neoliberal planning, then, involves the installation of a new ‘planning subjectivity’ in town halls and grey administrative buildings where planners do their everyday work. The excitement, pride, respect and recognition that follow from successful neoliberal planning implementations, stand perhaps in sharp contrast with the management of the poor and their poor neighbourhoods within very limited and ever shrinking social budgets. Contributing to the overall ‘gain’ for the city, to the ‘good’ for the city, as defined by neoliberal planning principles, acts as an aphrodisiac for planners and other policy makers, since those principles form the parameters of urban success. At the same time, it becomes increasingly difficult to stand up for the ‘other’ city, the city of ‘loss’, the ‘bad’ city. Seen through this lens, ‘punishing the poor’ (Wacquant, 2009) may be an undesirable part of the urban neoliberalisation process, but nonetheless necessary and unavoidable in an age of unforgiving interurban competition in which the ghetto has no place. Moving out of sight those who are obviously guilty of failing to grab the opportunities offered by the neoliberal city, has become a constitutive part of neoliberal urbanism.

This leads us to a final contradiction of neoliberal planning. Reducing the city to an ‘economy’ defines everything and everybody as either economic gain or loss, with nothing outside this dichotomy. Economic reductionism, on the one hand, simplifies the view of what constitutes good planning – planning that triggers economic gain – but, on the other hand, turns planning practice more complex, as all planning issues that fall outside the economic imperative lack an overall vision to effectively deal with (other than ‘removal’, as described by Wacquant, 2009). The separation of the economic sphere and the social sphere under neoliberal conditions, in

other words, turns the planning profession schizophrenic, as it has to pursue goals that only suit part of the urban public. The dichotomy between the social and the economic in the age of neoliberal planning is reflected in the gradual separation of planning frameworks for either 'social' or 'economic' planning. Cities have 'hard' planning-theoretical frameworks for economic policy, with Richard Florida's hypothesis about the mobile 'creative class' (2002) as the undisputed paradigm. It unashamedly suggests to favour the highly qualified, private enterprise and technology, in a chauvinistic attempt to plan for the muscled, 'masculine', assertive city that shows no patience with democratic reflections about how people may want 'their' city to be. Conversely, cities have 'soft' conceptual tools to plan for social purposes, or plan in poorer neighbourhoods. In sharp contrast with Florida's proposals, the communicative turn in planning theory, headed by Patsy Healey (1997), amongst others, offers democratic, considerate, 'feminine', dialogical, inclusive planning frameworks that sensitively take people's preferences and feelings into account. It goes almost without saying that this planning-theoretical dualism, grown out of and reinforcing the separation of the 'social' and the 'economic' in neoliberal times, disempowers planning that engages with the social, and empowers planning that prioritises economic growth. The contradiction lies in the theoretical and practical impossibility to separate social and economic aspects in urban planning – it belongs to the *raison-d'être* of planning to be integrative in order to come to 'good' land use decisions.

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