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The necessity of a difference-oriented urban planning practice

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Cities are characterised by pluralism. This fact is becoming increasingly relevant in the practice of urban governance and planning. The handling of differences is usually based on an understanding that favours only one individual feature (such as income) and addresses only specific groups. This is a restrictive understanding of differences, an understanding that imposes exclusive features on individuals or groups and thereby simplifies complex identities. In fact, in our understanding it is needed to include in the concept of differences numerous other existing features such as age, gender, language, disability and religion, aiming to understand these characteristics in their intersectional combination and dissolve representations of supposedly homogeneous groups. *Difference-oriented urban planning* is an approach that we suggest to conceptualise differences in planning theory and practice.

Individualisation, anarchic community building, mobility and globalisation are all changing cities and challenging the traditional *modus* of governing collective spaces (Sassen 2002). The trend is toward differentiation and increasing complexity (von Beyme 1992) – toward singular complex identities rather than larger, homogeneous group identities¹ – and a focus on the heterogeneity of people living in the same territories, in particular urban ones (Pattaroni 2006; Vertovec 2007; Tasan-Kok et al. 2013). There are various *loci* from which to examine how such complexity can be managed. One such *locus* is the organisation of urban spaces and urban mobility. There are also different ways to study how cities deal with contemporary challenges. One of these is to take into consideration how differences embodied in contemporary societies are shaped by and framed in contemporary urban contexts. The increasing differentiation in modern societies is most pronounced in cities, especially in urban areas with a highly mobile population (Viry and Kaufmann 2015). Cities attract people from all over the world with diverse origins, religious practices, socioeconomic statuses and everyday practices (Cattacin 2009), and modern cities and their governance are forced to respond to this heterogeneity and demographic change. Although policies regarding, for instance, social security or health needs are usually made at the national level, cities offer an interesting context for the investigation of territorialised practices, because they are confronted with highly diverse lifestyles and are therefore especially affected by the question of the inclusion of differences. It is also in urban areas that we find a concentrated mobilisation of special resources and innovative, specialised infrastructure implemented at the local level and supported through the participation of all sorts of stakeholders in order to better respond to the needs of a highly differentiated population (Cattacin 2011). If we want to introduce a practice of difference-oriented urban planning, we shall, in particular, pay attention to seven interrelated aspects of urban governance:

1. The concrete city of differences, of hybrid belongings and complex mobilities; surveys on the neighbourhood level in which projects are located, permit to quantify “superdiversity” (Meissner and Vertovec 2015). Such surveys have to focalise on differences in lifestyles, trajectories of mobility, preferences in housing, mobility and work-life balance, expectations about urban and mobility planning.
2. The genealogy of concepts such as *diversity* and *differences* as urban planning categories; through a critical analysis of urban planning history of a concrete city, it is possible to identify when, why and how the idea of a complex urban space characterised by differences and diversity emerged and how its operationalisation has been transformed over time. In our understanding, *differences in urban society have been drivers of transformation since the beginning of city planning, and that the next generation of urban planning will radicalise the idea of differences by considering it a form of biodiversity and introdu-*

1 Scholars point to this complexity through the concept of *intersectionality* (see, for instance, Cho et al. 2013).

cing it to all fields of urban policies (Mantziaras 2017).

3. The integration into the practices of urban planning of the understanding that people differ from each other; the understanding of the constructed space of cities and the instruments used to develop them makes it possible to understand how institutionalised policy options conceptualising differences are conceived. Difference orientedness is especially important in the area of housing. Housing policies determine whether or not certain groups are able to inhabit a given city, and they are a necessary countermeasure against complete market control of housing, which, as Häussermann (2008) argues, “bring[s] about tougher segregation”. Regarding the practice of urban planning, we think that such practices are doubtlessly shifting toward difference orientedness, but also that this orientation is still conceived within a logic of established identity groups. In other words, if difference orientedness is present in the urban planning process, it will reflect the groups engaged in representing their specificity and not an intersectional and dynamic view of differences.
4. The ways groups representing differences participate in urban planning processes; this practice for successful difference-oriented urban planning consists in the possibility (and need) for those who embody differences to participate in the elaboration of urban planning.² This is simultaneously an old and a very new topic. In fact, the city of differences is a highly mobile place without any easy way to include its users democratically, even if only for a brief moment. At the same time, it is hard to engage people in city planning when they belong to different territories (reinforced by digitally based relations) and communities other than the one in which they currently live. Nonetheless, this principle is one from which the new planning should not (and can no longer)³ derogate, and we know that, if differences are not considered, planning processes will be contested.
5. How difference-oriented urban planning interrelates with urban sustainable development; the implications of fluid and shifting urban identities and lifestyles for urban sustainability planning (Kaufmann 2011) can no longer be put away in the planning process. Cities are a major contributor to the human environmental footprint (UNEP et al. 2017). Consequently, and inspired by the UN goals for sustainable development, many cities have already developed or are developing local agendas for sustainable development. Sustainability policies influence the configuration of urban spaces and consequently act on the context in which differences are shaped. At the same time, unsustainable patterns in urban societies – which are to a large degree captured in everyday practices – are shaped by the organisation of urban spaces. Building on research linking lifestyle studies with environmental attitudes and everyday practices, we think that urban sustainability policies need to be inspired by a difference-oriented planning approach in order to be effective, and they should contribute to the richness of the urban population in an inclusive way.
6. The construction of the link between the history of a concrete city (memory, identity, coherence); the way a city’s history is related to the new city of differences is fundamental to understand if we want, apart from marketing strategies, to bring identity and belonging into the planning of the city of differences than the continuity with the city’s history has to be preserved if the planning process is to be successful. If Berlin, for example, reinvents continuity by referring to the city’s multiple pasts, this is not only a marketing strategy, but also a way to legitimate its position as a national capital (the Reichstag as the new parliament) or as an open-learning city (the city is not defined solely by Nazism and its division during the Cold War). That is why, today, cities’ and neighbourhoods’ histories are an essential part of the planning of the city of differences.
7. The city of differences; and the promotion of differences in the urban space (through city marketing);⁴

2 There is an established tradition of research on participation, but it is generally focused on the idea of representing different socio-economic (rich and poor) and demographic (young and old) groups (see, for instance, the contributions in Roberts 2015), and it is less suitable for other differences claiming recognition (Young 2001).

3 See, for example, the literature on movements as “critical urban planning agents” (for instance De Souza 2006).

4 Cities like Zurich and Frankfurt am Main, for instance, have institutionalised a strong relationship between these aspects of urban policy, which indicates that marketing sells a representation of the city that has to find a reality in the city’s planning practices and in the way its inhabitants are included in determining its range of options (Cattacin 2009).



the existence, in urban policies, of strategies to attract groups of people with predominant characteristics, are today part of what we can call “urban marketing”. Urban marketing is characterised by very similar slogans indicating cities’ openness to differences (like “We are all Berliners”) and references to their territorial morphology (with a lake or a mountain, for example), but it has the effect of weakening their social identity.⁵ The kinds of groups that are solicited to settle down in a given territory clearly show the aims underpinning the environment that will be built (favouring, for instance, gentrification, the museumisation of neighbourhoods and housing for artists). Urban-marketing activities reflect the way the city of differences (and innovation) is conceived and if the marketing is oriented toward attracting differences, city planning and inclusion policies will be affected substantially by that orientation.

Scholarly discussions about the city of differences reveal a pronounced interest in linking urban differences with urban planning and development. At the same time, the state of the art reveals important gaps in research. The most important gap concerns the studies’ focus on single characteristics of groups. It is also rare to find studies that combine the idea that the city is simultaneously a representation, a construction and a lived reality of differences. To develop a difference-oriented practice of urban planning these gaps have to be addressed.

The seven fields of attention for the planning of the city of differences can be linked by the view of the city as a continuously changing and challenging place of living together, intimately linked to economic performance and political choices, to conflict and insurgency, to mixing up and segregating differences and to *perceived, lived and conceptualised urbanity*.⁶ Cities that lose their capacity to embrace and manage lifestyle differences are failing economically and dying (see, for instance, Franz 2004 on the shrinking city in Eastern Germany); and cities without conflicts disappear (Gerometta et al. 2005; the contributions in Gualini 2015).⁷

Our proposition for a new planning practice is designed to complement the scholarly discussion regarding groups and “super-diverse” neighbourhoods, but it also goes beyond this discussion in using an open approach to urban differences, which leaves room for both views of differences – as a problem and as a resource – and attempts to open the scholarly debate to difference orientation as an overarching concept.

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5 Contrasting openness (as a normal phenomenon in any urban setting) with morphology (the geographical uniqueness of a given city) results in no longer tying the city’s identity to the people who live there, but to material elements. This way of dealing with a city’s identity risks limiting the ability of newcomers and established residents to find a common way of identifying with the city. That means that it is important to determine how a common social discourse can be constructed (Löw 2013).

6 On this point, see Henri Lefebvre (1974).

7 Such conflicts are also interpreted by *critical urban theory* according to a postmodern logic that sees insurgency becoming instrumentalised or defeated by dominant economic (“neoliberal”) logics. See, for instance, David Harvey (1989), who employs an economic and power-related critique to interpret space and time densifications and accelerations in the urban context.



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