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### A crucial dimension of sustainability

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# Teaching, Learning & Researching **Spatial Planning**

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Caroline Newton & Marcin Dąbrowski



# Teaching, Learning & Researching Spatial Planning

TOOLS, CONCEPTS AND IDEAS TAUGHT AT THE SECTION OF SPATIAL PLANNING AND STRATEGY OF THE  
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# Spatial Justice

## A crucial dimension of sustainability\*

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*This chapter seeks to describe the concept of spatial justice and to unpack its implications for spatial planning and the role of planners. It addresses spatial justice as a crucial dimension of sustainability, especially of social sustainability. It argues that justice buttresses public reasoning and public justification and therefore reinforces the social and political structures and institutions that allow for sustainability to exist. It argues that spatial planning is one of those socio-political institutions buttressing sustainability. It argues, furthermore, that Justice is a good “internal and necessary for the successful realisation” of spatial planning, without which it is meaningless. It goes on to examine the role of planning as a public reasoning tool and identifies participatory planning as a viable tool to achieve spatial justice.*

**SPATIAL JUSTICE, CITIES, CITIZEN PARTICIPATION, COMMUNICATIVE TURN, THE RIGHT TO THE CITY**

\*An earlier version of this text appeared in Rocco, R., Newton, C., D’Alencon, L. M. V., Watt, A. v. d., Babu, G., Tellez, N., . . . Pessoa, I. T. (2021). A Manifesto for the Just City. Delft: TU Delft Open. Excerpts from Patsy Healey's and Do-reen Massey's writings have been widely used by me in other texts, websites and communications.

## 1. Introduction

Social justice is undoubtedly one of the greatest challenges of our times, as rampant inequality erodes the fabric of our societies everywhere, undermining trust in governments and institutions, leading to violence and extremism, and eating at the very core of democracy.

Growing inequality, socio-spatial fragmentation, and lack of access to public goods are threats to the sustainability of our cities, especially when sustainability is understood in its three fundamental dimensions (social, economic, and environmental) (Dillard et al., 2009; Larsen, 2012). Social sustainability can be conceptualised as the social and political structures that hold overall sustainability up. Justice is at the core of social sustainability, as it sustains public justification and the democratic process itself. Social sustainability is underexplored in sustainability studies and the absence of this dimension means there is an enormous gap to be filled in how we understand the role of those social and political structures in planning for the just transition to sustainability.

Moral and political philosopher Alastair McIntyre argues that a practice is defined by the goods internal and necessary for the successful realisation of that practice (McIntyre, 2007). In the case of the planning practice, justice is a definitive 'internal good' that allows planning to achieve its standards of excellence, without which it is meaningless. In other words, I argue that justice is an essential component of planning, without which planning cannot be publicly justified or sustained.

Among other things, this means spatial planning must engage with 'two converging, yet distinct

social movements: sustainability and social justice' (Campbell, 2013: 75) to continue to be relevant. The European Union has made big steps in this direction in its European Green Deal (European Commission, 2019) taking up the notion of 'just transition to sustainability' as a core tenet in policymaking.

Justice underscores social sustainability because it helps boost the legitimacy of institutions. In also helps increase support for, compliance with, and suitability of policy. Moral and political thinker John Rawls explains this connection by reminding us that truth concerns validation, while justice determines acceptability: what is acceptable or not acceptable as outcomes of reached agreements (Rawls, 2005).

Justice is in fact inscribed in the very notion of sustainability: 'Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). The same report advances the idea that 'even a narrow notion of physical sustainability implies a concern between generations, a concern that must be logically extended to equity within each generation' (43). This speaks to the concept of intergenerational justice having a logical extension to the idea of intragenerational justice, that is, justice in this generation, here and now. And, indeed, it seems implausible to imagine a world in which we are worried about the welfare of future generations, while disregarding the needs of the current generation, by which I mean of course a broad concern for the welfare of all human beings, independently of their nationality, gender, race, sexual orientation, or creed.

## 2. Freedom, justice and sustainability

This concern might, in the view of many, be extended to the well-being of all living beings and of Planet Earth itself, especially when the latter is conceived as a system in which all 'existing biological systems behave as a huge single entity [with] closely controlled self-regulatory negative feedback loops that keep the conditions on the planet within boundaries that are favourable to life' (Boston, 2008: 86). This is known as the Gaia Hypothesis.

For Indian economist and philosopher Amartya Sen (Sen, 2009), there is a special case to be made for the preservation of the environment beyond the satisfaction of our needs and the preservation of our living standards. Sen appeals to the responsibility we have towards other species due to our incommensurable power in relation to the planet and all living beings. This is our 'duty of care' towards the planet, like the duty of care that befalls any adult in relation to a small child. In Sen's example, the adult is so much more powerful and stronger than the small child that a duty of care automatically ensues, as an adult may not allow a child to come to harm through action or inaction, even if they are not biologically related. Likewise, humankind, as a powerful presence on Planet Earth, has a duty of care towards the planet and its natural systems.

This speaks to the case for the 'rights of nature', by which we can also imagine jurisprudence that describes inherent rights of ecosystems and living beings, similar to the concept of fundamental human rights. In this theory, human rights emanate from humanity's own existence, that is, every human being has fundamental rights just because

they exist, independently of their country of origin, race, gender, age, and other characteristics. In this perspective, babies do not have fewer human rights than adults just because they cannot communicate with words or write petitions. Babies are born with the full set of human rights by the mere fact that they exist as living sentient beings. In this sense, all living beings should have fundamental rights because they exist, are alive, may experience pain, and are an integral part of the complex systems of life on our planet.

Talking about the 'rights of nature' is difficult because justice is a human invention. Justice allows us to keep interacting with each other, it does not exist in nature. Nonetheless, it is clear that we must extend the notions of rights and justice to the natural world if we wish to keep interacting with it, lest a purely predatory interaction will lead to our mutual destruction. Epstein and Schoukens (2021) recognise a 'jurisprudence trend' towards recognising the rights of nature and argue that 'explicit or not, nature as protected by European Union (EU) law already has certain legal rights in the Hohfeldian sense because other entities have legal obligations towards it' (2021: 205).

For Sen, by extending rights to nature, we are in fact extending our own freedoms, including the freedom to meet our own needs now and in the future. He calls this idea 'sustainable freedom': the preservation and expansion (where possible) of the substantive freedoms and capabilities of people today, without compromising the freedoms and capabilities of people in the future (Sen, 2009: 252-253).

But the emphasis on our own human needs, which is ubiquitous in sustainability science, can also be challenged. For Sen, people have needs, but they also have values, conscience, rationality, freedom, ethics, moral feelings, and codes which determine how soci-

eties are organised. Most importantly, there is power, often expressed in economic or political power, which makes our relationships with each other and with nature unbalanced.

### 3. Cities: The spaces of shared life

Cities are a spatial expression of this organisation. Cities are the predominant mode of human inhabitation in the twenty-first century (Gross, 2016), and they seem to exert an enormous pull towards those seeking for a better life, as testified by the dramatic urbanisation of the world after World War II. According to the World Economic Forum, the world's urban population has risen almost six-fold between 1950 and 2018, from 751 million to 4.2 billion people (Ghosh, 2019), or more than 52% of the world's total population. Such a dramatic urbanisation process was triggered by two intertwined reasons: overall population increase and upwards trends in people migrating to cities from rural areas (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2018). However, cities do not offer the same opportunities to all who come seeking for opportunities to improve their lives. There is an (urban) geography of the distribution of the burdens and benefits of human activity, where those burdens and benefits (in the form of services, public goods, and environmental quality) are unevenly distributed. In short, where an individual or household lives in the city will have a determining impact on their access to opportunities, services and (public) goods (Marcuse, 1997; Van Kempen, 1994).

This distribution follows diverse patterns and path dependencies, according to each place's his-

tory, geography, economic and social development, presence and quality of democratic institutions, and a myriad of other factors that influence the distribution of those burdens and benefits in space and among different social groups.

Somewhat counter intuitively, cities have enormous advantages over rural areas: density is maybe their most significant feature (Glaeser, 2000). Spatial density means density of interactions and opportunities as well, and density is also the breeding ground of innovation and exchange (Jacobs, 1969). Cities are spaces where we simultaneously cooperate and compete for resources, and where we must decide together how these resources are distributed and shared.

British social scientist and geographer Doreen Massey claimed urban space as the dimension of multiplicity: 'If time is the dimension of sequence, then [urban] space is the dimension of contemporaneous existence. In that sense, it is the dimension of the social and therefore it is the dimension that poses the political question of how we are going to live together' (Massey, 2011). Massey calls this idea 'radical simultaneity', in which stories, ongoing trajectories, and multiple voices happen simultaneously, but not symmetrically. Space is permeated by asymmetrical power relationships, practices, and interactions. In a world of growing inequality, scarce resources, and climate emergency, this conception feeds increasing uncertainty about how the burdens and benefits of our coexistence can be fairly distributed among us and whether there is a spatial dimension to social justice. Simultaneously, this triggers a deeper reflection on how to foster spaces of true democracy and participation in deciding how those burdens and benefits are distributed.

Therefore, Spatial Justice seems to be especially

relevant today, as it allows us to focus on the spatial dimension of the distribution of the burdens and benefits of our association in cities and on the manner this distribution is governed.

Spatial justice focuses on two dimensions of justice: distributive and procedural. On one hand, distributive justice seeks the creation, fair allocation of, and access to public goods, resources, and services throughout the city. This is connected to the geography of distribution we mentioned earlier. On the other hand, justice or injustice can also be found in how resources and public goods are negotiated, planned, designed, and managed. Justice or injustice can be found in the procedures of negotiation, planning, and decision-making. For example, planning processes that are transparent and allow some form of citizen participation are bound to be more just than those that do not. This is because the incorporation of multiple voices in decision-making processes increases the chances that the wishes, needs, and desires of those voices are integrated in decision-making.

But as Massey's conceptualisation reminds us, the city is also the space of power differences, friction, and disagreement, where vulnerable groups are generally silenced or unable to have their needs, interests, and aspirations considered. Despite its obvious advantages, citizen participation and engagement are by no means a panacea to solve this impasse.

## 4. Citizen participation and spatial justice

Citizen participation as an activity supporting procedural justice in planning encompasses a large variety of engagement and participation methods, in practice mostly related to the lower steps of Sherry Arnstein's famous 'ladder of participation' (Arnstein, 1969).

The vast majority of democratic theory, and deliberative democratic theory in particular, either implicitly or explicitly assumes the need for widespread citizen participation. It requires that all citizens possess the opportunity to participate and also that they take up this opportunity. But empirical evidence gathered over the past half-century strongly suggests that many citizens do not have a meaningful opportunity to participate in the ways that many democratic theorists require, and do not participate in anything like the numbers that advocates of participation theorists believe is necessary (Parvin, 2018: 31).

Reasons for low levels of citizen engagement in policymaking abound (Parvin, 2018) and are as much related to governance styles and other political, cultural, and economic factors as they are to public officials' unwillingness or lack of capacity to engage citizens.

Following Sen (2009), in order to advance the idea that communicative rationality and public reasoning can deliver urban policy that is both 1) better informed about the pleas, needs, and wishes of citizens and 2) more just, because it includes the voices of the vulnerable and silent, we must find innovative ways to encourage citizens to participate and enable policymakers to guide more meaningful



and fruitful forms of engagement.

Despite the serious critiques to participatory processes put forward, it is difficult to imagine the Just City without some form of participation and co-creation. These can be found in the ideas of French Marxist philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre in his concept the Right to the City (1968), which we will discuss in a moment.

One of the first proponents of the idea of Spatial Justice was American political geographer Edward Soja. For Soja

Thinking about space has changed significantly in recent years, from emphasizing flat cartographic notions of space as container or stage of human activity or merely the physical dimensions of fixed form, to an active force shaping human life. A new emphasis on specifically urban spatial causality has emerged to explore the generative effects of urban agglomerations not just on everyday behaviour but on such processes as technological innovation, artistic creativity, economic development, social change as well as environmental degradation, social polarization, widening income gaps, international politics, and, more specifically, the production of justice and injustice (Soja, 2009, n.p.).

Soja states that spatial justice ‘seeks to promote more progressive and participatory forms of democratic politics and social activism, and to provide new ideas about how to mobilise and maintain cohesive collations and regional confederations of grassroots social activists [...] Spatial justice as such is not a substitute or alternative to social, economic, or other forms of justice but rather a way of looking at justice from a critical spatial perspective’ (Soja,

2010: 60). In this perspective, ‘the spatiality of (in) justice [...] affects society and social life just as much as social processes shape the spatiality or specific geography of (in)justice’ (Soja, 2010: 5).

For Soja, Spatial Justice is not only about distribution and procedures, but has a potential for insurgent action that disrupts and reimagines the *status quo*. And indeed, our time is a time of successive crises: climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, indecent inequality, and cynical populist leaders that caters to the interests of economic elites by subverting the public realm and eroding democratic norms. These crises seem to have a common root in our economic system: capitalism in its current predatory form is not socially, economically, or environmentally sustainable. But we have naturalised capitalism, as if it were an ineluctable ‘natural system’ appropriate to human nature. This conception completely disregards other forms of economic organisation that have existed before capitalism and continue to exist in traditional societies and at the fringes and interstices of modern ones.

I wish to argue that ours is a crisis of imagination: we cannot imagine a future that is not market-based. Most importantly, many among our fellow citizens and politicians have naturalised the idea of rational choice that underscores the idea of an invisible hand of the market to the point where we cannot imagine a world that is not organised by this ‘market’. It is easier to imagine a planet ravaged by climate change than to imagine a different economic and social form of organisation that is fairer, more humane, and respectful of the rights of people and nature.

Following the ideas of Professor Faranak Miraftab of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, our minds are colonised by ideas of individual free-

dom and entrepreneurship that are meaningless if we cannot agree on how we will live together in our cities and in a planet whose resources are finite. There is no freedom possible outside of a society in which we all collaborate with each other, so we can all be free. And sustainability is meaningless if we do not have sustainable freedom, following Sen's conceptualisation.

## 4. The Right to the City

The concept of the Right to the City was formulated by Henri Lefebvre (Lefebvre, 1968) and is firmly grounded on ideas about active citizenship: the right to take part in the affairs of the city, to make decisions about one's own living environment, and therefore realise one's full potential as a political being, realising one's "sustainable freedom". More recently, British Marxist economic geographer David Harvey, and others, have written extensively about the right to the city. According to Harvey (2003), the Right to the City is the right to actively shape the city to one's needs and desires, thus exercising one's full citizenship. In liberal democratic societies, public involvement in the affairs of the city is institutionalised and democracy is representative through elected officials or through other indirect forms of participation. The ability of common citizens to directly interfere in the affairs of the city is limited by a number of obstacles: lack of time, socio-economic and cultural exclusion, lack of access to relevant knowledge, poverty, and many other issues. These are sometimes insurmountable hurdles to full active citizenship in some societies.

Planning and designing the city must cope with constant change and with the need to 'redistribute' power among stakeholders, leading to the fair redis-

tribution of resources, services, and opportunities. This fair redistribution of power among stakeholders in the conduction of the affairs of the city is one of the fundamental aspects of Spatial Justice.

And indeed, in a world struggling through a climate emergency, where resources are dangerously depleted and social and economic instability are rampant, reaching consensus and acting collectively to avoid or mitigate the worse effects of the crisis seems to be the most rationally self-interested thing to do. In this sense, justice concerns a wide range of subjects that concern us collectively, as humanity, in relation to ourselves, to the planet and to other species. Spatial justice remains crucial to how we address these problems in connection to how we conceive and manage our living spaces.

But there are very special circumstances in which compromises can be reached and just outcomes achieved. Those circumstances are often not present in how our cities are planned, designed, and managed, but it is our task as planners, designers, and managers of the built environment to create those circumstances and to improve the fair distribution of burdens and benefits of urbanisation.

## 5. Communicative rationality and planning: potential for fair and inclusive policymaking

In the 1990s, a new 'style' of planning started to emerge, championed by authors like Edith Innes, Patsy Healey, and John Forester, heavily influenced by German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas' communicative rationality theory. This is concerned with clarifying the norms and procedures by which agreements can be reached and

is therefore a view of reason as a form of public justification (Bohman & Rehg, 2007). This 'public justification' is irrevocably intertwined with notions of democracy, diversity, and justice. Public justification is also a form of shared truth-forming. As we saw with Rawls (2005), truth concerns validation, whereas justice determines acceptability: what is acceptable or not acceptable as outcomes of people's and institutions' actions and agreements. Both contribute to the formation of a democratic public sphere.

This 'communicative turn' (Healey, 1996) is important for planners, designers, and managers of the built environment, because it has far-reaching consequences for how they act and interact with others influencing the allocation of resources in the city (distributive Spatial Justice) as political agents. In this perspective, planners, designers, and managers of the built environment must make efforts to include the voices of a variety of stakeholders to discuss any given issue arising from the distribution of resources in the city (procedural Spatial Justice).

It also implies that citizens have a duty to participate in civic debate (Rawls' 'duty of civility') and, as pointed out by Brandon Morgan-Olsen, they also have a duty to listen to each other and to the arguments emanating from a variety of sources (Morgan-Olsen, 2013). As we have seen, these issues and more make public participation problematic, if highly desirable.

British planner Patsy Healey offers a step forward to incorporating these ideas into planning theory and practice, and explains the possibilities of a 'communicative turn' in planning from the recognition that we are diverse people living in complex webs of economic and social relations, within which we develop potentially very varied ways of seeing the world, of identifying our interests and values,

of reasoning about them, and of thinking about our relations with others. The potential for overt conflict between us is therefore substantial, as is the chance that unwittingly we may trample on each other's concerns. Faced with such diversity and difference, how then can we come to any agreement over what collectively experienced problems we have and what to do about them? How can we get to share in a process of working out how to coexist in shared spaces? The new wave of ideas focuses on how we get to discuss issues in the public realm (Healey, 1996: 219).

Healey correctly identifies this 'new wave of planning' (albeit not so new by now) as having the potential to reconstruct the public realm and publicness. Healey recognises the influence of Habermas in this enterprise by positing that

He [Habermas] shows us that we are not autonomous subjects competitively pursuing our individual preferences, but that our sense of ourselves and of our interests is constituted through our relations with others, through communicative practices. Our ideas about ourselves, our interests, and our values are socially constructed through our communication with others and the collaborative work this involves. If our consciousness is dialogically constructed, surely, we are deeply skilled in communicative practices for listening, learning, and understanding each other. Could we not harness these capacities explicitly to the task of discussion in the public realm about issues which collectively concern us? (Healey, 1996: 219)

Healey asserts that ideas of communicative rationality focus on ways of 'reconstructing the meaning of a democratic practice', based on more inclusive practices of 'inclusionary argumentation'.

For Healey, this is equivalent to a form of public reasoning which accepts the contributions of all members of a political community and recognises the range of ways they have of know, valuing, and giving meaning. Inclusionary argumentation as a practice thus underpins conceptions of what is being called participatory democracy (Fischer, 1990; Held, 1987).

(...). Through such argumentation, a public realm is generated through which diverse issues and diverse ways of raising issues can be given attention. In such situations, as Habermas argues, the power of the 'better argument' confronts and transforms the power of the state and capital (Healey, 1996: 3).

There are close connections between Rawls' theory of justice and Habermas' communicative rationality. For Healey,

Habermas' ideas have the potential to reconstruct democratic practice towards more inclusive participatory forms of democracy based on inclusionary argumentation. Inclusionary argumentation implies public reason that 'accepts the contributions of all members of a political community and recognizes the range of ways they have of knowing, valuing, and giving meaning' (Healey, 1996: 219).

As a practice, Healey argues, it has the potential to regenerate the public realm in which diverse issues and diverse ways of raising issues can be given attention. In such situations, Healey argues, 'the power of the "better argument" confronts and transforms the power of the state and capital' (Healey, 1996). We posit that communicative rationality has the power to make sense of, and distribute justice.

In this sense, the communicative turn in planning

recognises that communication plays a central role in achieving agreements about how spatial burdens and benefits should be distributed. It goes further to posit the inclusion of 'alternative rationalities', that is, the need to include silent or oppressed groups in the dialogue and communication so as to maximise the chances of just agreements being reached, as the exclusion of certain groups from communication and decision-making leads to unfair/unjust outcomes for those groups. This idea is at the core of procedural spatial justice and includes issues of democracy, participation, accountability, transparency, and more. This is also very close to contemporary thinkers' ideas on the distribution of power by the recognition of alternative rationalities, such as Foucault's Power/Knowledge theory (Foucault, 1975; 1990; Foucault & Gordon, 1980) and Paulo Freire's 'pedagogy of the oppressed' (Freire, 2018 [1968]).

It is perhaps naïve to expect that 'just procedures' will produce 'just outcomes', or that the 'power of the good argument' will subvert power, especially in contested urban environments where economic forces override the possibility of fair public debate, but democracy still is our best chance to deliver social justice, and most specially, the Right to the City for everyone.



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Mind map on Spatial Justice made by students of the Department



