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Editorial Note: Why Spatial Justice?

This volume proceeds from the notion that justice is, and should be, a principal goal of urban planning in all its institutional and grassroots forms. Yet why speak of spatial justice instead of social justice? What do critical spatial thinking and practices contribute to the pursuit of justice?

Over the past three decades, activists seeking a more fair distribution of the benefits and burdens of society have increasingly turned from conceptions of (economic) *equality* to broader coalitions of *justice*. This appeal for a “just” society has been a powerful rallying point for a wide range of social justice movements – economic justice, racial justice, environmental justice, etc. – that collectively frame justice in both material (re-distributive policies) *and* non-material terms (liberty, happiness, opportunity, security, etc.). John Rawls (1971) most clearly articulated this paradigm with his two principles of justice: 1) that everyone should have an equal right to have equal basic liberties within a total system that ensures liberty for all, and 2) that social and economic inequalities, where necessary, should be arranged to benefit the least advantaged among us. Indeed, most post-war western democracies through the early-to-mid 1970s pursued Keynesian economic policies that operated within these principles – shifting resources from “have” to “have not” regions in an attempt to ensure the least advantaged would have an equal opportunity to succeed.

The economic crises of the 1970s, however, began to weaken these principles; global trade practices, the offloading of responsibilities to macro and micro-level institutions (the EU, WTO, World Bank, NAFTA, etc. at one extreme and common interest communities, business improvement districts, neighborhood associations, etc. at the other), and a concentration of investments in the most globally competitive urban agglomerations have collectively ushered in a new paradigm of neoliberal Darwinism. The predictable decline of rust-belt and rural regions is replicated at the micro level between have and have not neighborhoods, and at the macro level between have and have not global regions. The result is an intensification of a distinct pattern of geographic disparity.

It is out of this painful transition to the “new economy” (economic restructuring, globalization, flexible accumulation, etc.) that many of the current global justice movements emerged. Yet, these justice movements have largely retained the Rawlsian conception of a universal justice, illustrating the conflicting nature of Rawlsian justice that has guided much of recent efforts: while its intent seeks to ensure equality and fairness, as a normative ideal, it leaves social and spatial difference out of the equation. It also fails to discuss *where* such shared notions of justice would be established and activated.

By the 1990s, faith in this normative justice began to wane as activists recognized not only the new geographies of injustice but also that the circumstances of different social groups mattered – that a one-size-fits-all justice (as conceived by the well-educated, largely white elite) did not necessarily serve everyone equally (as Young (1990) and Harvey (1996) so vividly conveyed). Indeed, we now understand that the distribution of material wealth, opportunity, health outcomes, educational attainment, job creation, and virtually all of the metrics of quality of life are not distributed equally across space – that one-size-fits-all justice does not account for growing regional disparities (which are also strongly correlated with race and ethnicity).

A few key texts—for example, Harvey (1973), Lefebvre (1974), and Soja (1989)—especially challenged social scientists to question the long-accepted treatment of space (or territory) as fixed, unproblematic and inconsequential. Instead, seeking justice means understanding the dialectical relationship between not only the economic and social conditions of different groups, but also the geography of injustice – that is, how the social production of space, in turn, impacts social groups and their opportunities. The earliest use of the terms “territorial justice,” “spatial justice” or “socio-spatial justice”—for example, Davies (1968), Reynaud (1981), and Pirie (1983)—linked geographic distribution to concepts of fairness, but few scholars interested in social justice have thus far explicitly treated space as socially (re)produced. Among the notable exceptions are Flusty (1994), Soja (2000) and Dikec (2001). Much work remains, particularly in theorizing what spatial justice means and how it can be usefully deployed as a framework for critical practice. Yet, a growing body of literature

is beginning to contribute to the concept; some additional references are included in the further reading section.

As the texts in this volume reflect, the renewed recognition that space matters offers new insights not only to understanding how injustices are produced through space, but also how spatial analyses of injustice can advance the fight for social justice, informing concrete claims and the activist practices that make these claims visible. Understanding that space—like justice—is never simply handed out or given, that both are socially produced, experienced and contested on constantly shifting social, political, economic, and geographical terrains, means that justice—if it is to be concretely achieved, experienced, and reproduced—must be engaged on spatial as well as social terms.

Thus, those vested with the power to produce the physical spaces we inhabit through development, investment, planning (and their antitheses)—as well as through grassroots embodied activism—are likewise vested with the power to perpetuate injustices and/or create just spaces. If, as Lefebvre (1974) suggests, space is not just “out there” but is produced and reproduced by social relations, it is incumbent upon planning practitioners, theorists, community organizers and residents alike to take a critical position about their own roles in perpetuating or mitigating spatial injustice. What a just space looks like is necessarily left open, but must be rooted in the active negotiations of multiple publics, in search of productive ways to build solidarities across difference. This space—both process and product—is by definition public in the broadest sense; the opportunity to participate in inscribing its meaning is accessible to all. As Deutsche

(1996: 269) eloquently states: “how we define public space is intimately connected with ideas about what it means to be human, the nature of society, and the kind of political community we want.” Justice is therefore not abstract, and not solely something “handed down” or doled out by the state; it is rather a shared responsibility of engaged actors in the socio-spatial systems they inhabit and (re)produce.

One idea not directly addressed by the contributors to this volume is how diverse struggles, being inherently connected through the fact that we live, experience, and reproduce justice and injustice *in* space, may be furthered by alliances and solidarities across different scales and scopes. The power of connecting “issue based” social movements (environmental, economic, racial, gender, labor, etc.) within and across geographical scales (from the local to the global) to organize collective action has yet to be fully explored in practice. Perhaps mobilizations at multiple and simultaneous scales can create sustained levels of visibility and greater pressure for change that broaden a base of popular support. Such attempts may yet produce ever more effective political and practical strategies, and inspire the extension of functional networks. A burgeoning national movement around “The Right to the City,” which began in late January with a convening of representatives from “over thirty community-based social movements and resource organizations from eight metropolitan areas” in Los Angeles, provides an excellent example of one such attempt. The objectives for the initial meeting – “to build collective capacity for local urban struggles to become a national movement around the right to the city; to provide a frame and structure...for regional organizing and for connecting intellectuals to the work being done; and to build a national network /

alliance that will allow organizations to learn from one another, that will create a national debate on issues affecting urban communities...and [to] to coordinate a national program” – illustrate the goal of casting a wider net, to incorporate multiple issues as well as intellectual work to further shared struggle. (Right to the City, Notes from the inaugural convening 2007: 1) This is but one of many examples to follow closely in the years to come.

While much theorizing about—and active experimentation with—the role and potential of a spatial justice frame remains undone, we see this volume contributing to the articulation of a very powerful concept. The notion that this and future work can further the active production of just spaces remains at the heart of our interest in it. The specificity it provides may yet be part of what helps us evolve from a society with abstract and faraway aspirations for justice and highly developed modes of reacting to injustices, to a society that arrives at the particular expression of what a just version of our society will be like, and the means to secure it for all. The task is no less than the development of immaterial and concrete conditions that can reproduce justice *exactly where we stand*, in our neighborhoods and our institutions, at the level of the body, the home, the street corner, the city, the region, the network, the supranational trade agreement and every space within, between, and beyond.

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Over the course of the production of this volume, Critical Planning hosted presentations and discussions at UCLA as part of a yearlong speaker series. A list of visiting speakers and the titles of their talks are listed in the back of the volume in the Further Reading section. We will continue to explore the concept of spatial justice—and its role in extending networks that function—with a seminar in the fall of 2007 co-organized with UCLA Urban Planning faculty member Gilda Haas, executive director of Strategic Actions for a Just Economy. (www.saje.net) The seminar, related lectures and workshops will be held at LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions) in conjunction with an exhibition on Spatial Justice co-organized by Ava Bromberg and Nicholas Brown that will run from September 19 – November 18, 2007.

Lead Photograph

Lunch with the United Workers Association after the “Summer of Justice” march.

Source: Marlon Ziello

See *Listening, Collaboration, Solidarity* in this volume for full text, page 111.

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