

Multiculturalism in Planning

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Introduction

Multiculturalism embraces racial and cultural differences within a society. On February 15, 2000, academics, planners and others gathered at York for a one-day conference called "Planning in a Multicultural Region." The choice of the word "region" was deliberate: although newcomers are attracted to Canada's major cities, the impact and benefits of such immigration are felt across entire urban regions.

Two interesting observations emerged from the event. First, ethnicity and culture affect planning practice in a variety of ways. Second, despite planners' recognition that they work within a multicultural region, they continue to struggle to find the appropriate roles for ethnicity and culture in the planning process. A multicultural society (and state) is a community of communities. Its many cultures may be more evident among immigrants and ethnic groups, particularly those from different racial and religious groups, but that multiplicity is not limited to these communities.

Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is more than the tolerance of people with different beliefs, behaviours, and lifestyles. It is a vision of nation-state and society in which different cultural groups and communities co-exist as equals, entitled to their ways of life in their private realms but bound to common institutions in the public sphere. Cultural diversity within the private sphere also implies a reconstructed public sphere based on common institutions that incorporate the values and ideals of all citizens - in other words, a new social contract.

Canada's Multiculturalism Act acknowledges "the freedom of all members of Canadian society to preserve, enhance and shape their cultural heritage." In urban planning, multiculturalism means creating urban forms, functions, and services that promote a plurality of lifestyles and sustain diverse ways of satisfying common needs. Fleras and Elliot (2002) define it "as a process of engaging in diversity as different yet equal" (p. 26). Furthermore, Fleras and Elliot (2002) explain a "partial list of multiculturalism [would include]:

- "A 'descriptive' definition: the existence of ethnically diverse groups who are culturally different and who wish to remain so at least in principle (if not always in practice)
- A 'prescriptive' definition: a set of ideals that promote diversity as normal, necessary, and acceptable

- A ‘political’ definition: a framework for justifying government initiatives in diversity issues
- A ‘practical’ definition: something to be used by minority groups to advance their interests, [and] compete for scarce resources” (p. 15).

Multiculturalism and Urban Development

In the growth and development of cities, citizens' needs are met through market processes, backed and regulated by institutionalized urban planning and other public policies and programs. Culturally determined differences in people's needs come into play in two ways:

- In the provision of health, education, employment, and recreational services; and
- In the delivery of sites and community services through the urban planning system.

The market may have delivered these multiple forms of development, but the planning systems certainly facilitated and approved them. Multicultural planning is not a distinct genre of urban planning. It is a strategy of making reasonable accommodations for the culturally defined needs of ethno-racial minorities on the one hand, and reconstructing the common ground that underlies policies and programs on the other. A set of policies is recommended for making urban planning more inclusive.

Understanding Multicultural Planning

Different cultural groups have different preferences that “often require a divergent set of community services, housing facilities and neighborhood arrangements” (Qadeer, 1997, p. 481). Cultural differences transform the built environment through “ethnic enclaves, ethnic bazaars and malls affecting the residential and commercial organization of a city” (Qadeer, 2009, p. 12). Furthermore, cultural preferences place new demands on the city and thus planning practice. Multicultural planning needs to account for these cultural differences (Burayidi, 2003; Hardwood, 2005; Qadeer, 1997, 2007; Sandercock, 2003).

Evolution of Planning as a Profession and Cultural Diversity

Scholars have suggested that the culture of urban planning is embedded with values of the Enlightenment, which embraced rationality, scientism, and universalism, and these principles are associated with modernist views (Allemendinger, 2009; Burayidi, 2000, 2003; Sandercock, 2003; Taylor, 1998). The field of planning developed with these principles in mind, reflected in “blueprint plans” and utopian plans, which began in the 1920s and 1930s and lasted until the 1960s. These types of plans did not include specific cultural or social elements, as they reflected a belief in physical determinism – for example, the physical environment would directly impact the quality of life and social interactions (Allemendinger, 2009; Jacobs, 1961; Taylor, 1998). Many scholars argue that much of modern planning practice is the product of modernity (Allemendinger, 2009). Supporting this idea, Sandercock (1997) states

that planning is influenced by five pillars: “rationality, comprehensiveness, scientific method, faith in state directed future, and faith in planners’ ability to know what is good for people” (Burayidi, 2003, p. 260). However, because societies are fragmented and pluralistic, it is impossible to attribute normative values to all cultures (Allmendinger, 2009; Burayidi, 2000; Sandercock, 1998).

Scholars within the field of multicultural planning argue that there is a dis-connection between immigrants and planners because of a lack of understanding of cultural differences relating to communication style (Burayidi, 2003; Sandercock, 2000). Cultural differences in communication style could be verbal or non-verbal (Burayidi, 2000; Sandercock, 2000). An excellent example is offered by Burayidi (2000, p.5): “when a Japanese [individual] responds by saying ‘yes, yes’ to a comment, she is not necessarily agreeing with what is being said but merely acknowledging that she has heard you.” Furthermore, the degree of assertiveness is also a cultural difference in communication style that can be misinterpreted. In western societies, a reasonable amount of assertiveness is often seen as confident or passionate about the subject, while eastern cultures may interpret that as being rude or too aggressive (Burayidi, 2000).

Methods of Responding to Multiculturalism

The rational-comprehensive model of planning, with its reliance on pragmatic, process-oriented approaches focused on the technical aspects of land use and development, is not a valid method to use when planning for multiculturalism.

Traditional planning attempts to identify and plan for the public interest, but this is not possible when there are multiple publics with divergent interests. Additionally, since traditional planning operates on a centralized planning system, it legitimizes the status quo and institutionalizes unequal conditions for those who are not in positions of power, while avoiding discussions that concern values and social justice (Bollens, 2005).

Mohammad Qadeer (1997) argues that multiculturalism necessitates broadening the scope of pluralism in planning because ethnic minorities have different housing, neighborhood, and community needs than the majority population.

One issue regarding multiculturalism in planning is how to balance competing needs. Qadeer asserts that because place-centered approaches do not address the social needs of ethnic populations, a people-centered approach that promotes welfare and equity is required (Qadeer, 1997). Qadeer proposes that planners create guidelines for built forms that are both diverse to accommodate various group needs and harmonious to create a sense of communal cohesion (Qadeer, 1997, p. 484). Planning can also address multiculturalism as part of a larger framework of social justice and planning. Sandercock proposes to expand the framework of social justice to address difference in the city (Sandercock, 1998). Additionally, policy makers and planning practitioners can learn to address the social and ethnic differences and become more skillful at working cross culturally by institutionalizing anti-racism and diversity training.

Benefits and Limitations of Multiculturalism within a City

It has been argued that multiculturalism benefits the community for several reasons. Firstly, social mixing ensures better access to all resources for all social groups. Secondly, mixing different social groups is “the basis of a better, more creative, more tolerant, more peaceful, and stable world.” Diversity of ethnic groups and social economic status raises the standard of living for the lower-income citizens within that community. In addition, multiculturalism includes the goal of increasing equal opportunity through housing, employment, and other opportunities. Furthermore, ethnic neighbourhoods are an economic asset to the municipality (Qadeer et al., 2010), which would therefore assist mid-sized cities and their demographic and economic profile. Ethnic enclaves also allow elderly and homebound women to speak their language and have similar values and interests as a result of their heritage. Children are able to socialize in their culture and learn the language and traditions. Minority groups find strength in numbers, which allows them to form political parties and cultural associations within the community. Another benefit of ethnic stores and services is that they can enhance the economy, and religious institutions located within the ethnic enclave are easily accessible for all members of the community. It is also easy for ethnic groups to organize cultural activities when the majority of them are concentrated in one area (Qadeer & Kumar, 2006). It is important to note that segregation does not only occur as a result of one’s desire to live only by their own ethnic group, but also due to income, the services they value, religious institutions and other factors (Qadeer & Kumar, 2006).

Furthermore, scholars such as Qadeer (2002) and Florida (2002) believe ethnic and cultural diversity is a key feature of most successful municipalities, which attracts people from nearby areas and distant countries. Although much of Florida’s (2002) argues that places that embrace new forms of culture, which include various lifestyles and values, will benefit from cultural diversity during this age of creativity. Florida believes that creative workers want to live in diverse communities, which will therefore bring economic prosperity to the city. Qadeer (1997) believes that socially mixing characteristics often reflect the fashionable districts of a city with the presence of bars, clubs, boutiques and restaurants. Here, the community is offered a variety of services with ethnic goods intermingling, “serving youth, yuppies, and tourists” (p. 486).

One of the key critiques of multicultural planning is that multiculturalism conflicts with the idea of having a unified cultural identity, and that multiculturalism divides, rather than unites Canadians (Frideres, 1997; Knowles, 2007; Qadeer, 2007). Frideres (1997) explains that multiculturalism is like a double edge sword because:

“...it promotes cultural diversity which enhances and legitimized the quality of life for many Canadians, but at the same time it is subject to the criticism that it is the thin edge which will bring about disunity of the nation (p. 87).”

This quote demonstrates many concerns that planners’ had about dividing the population, which it is this lack of understanding of multiculturalism with hinders the concept of multicultural planning and the public realm. Qadeer (1997) notes that

multiculturalism can increase community tension, if planning is not done properly. For example, public hearings, zoning debates, and school board meetings can become the battlegrounds for racial debate based on ethnic superiority. Neighbourhood conflicts increase and potentially cause deeper resentment towards one another. As a result, “the planning system becomes an arena not only for contesting ethnic interests, but for more personal conflicts as well” (p. 486).

Planners Responsiveness to Multiculturalism

The term multicultural planning is puzzling for planners. They are aware of the ethno-racial diversity of their clients and generally feel that they are sensitive to differences in their clients’ material and aesthetic needs for community facilities, services, land uses and housing, etc. They maintain that they plan and manage by functions and not persons. Their professionalism demands a certain uniformity of treatment of all citizens. Yet the term multicultural planning suggests to them that it is a distinct genre of planning something like advocacy planning, collaborative planning or sustainable development. And they are apprehensive of the accusation that they are not practicing it, particularly in the Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal metropolitan areas.

Planners’ ambiguity about multicultural planning is in contrast with the academics’ exhortations about the need for responsiveness to the ethnic and cultural diversity of contemporary cities in Canada, the USA or Australia. Implicit in these exhortations is the notion that the planning institutions are covertly discriminatory against ethnic and racial minorities. They are guided by the values and preferences of the dominant majority, embedded in the singularity of public interest and incorporated in planning policies and standards. The academic discourse favors treating different people differently to fulfill the objective of equity in the outcomes of programs and not be tied to the uniformity of measures. It emphasizes ethno-racial differences and reads in them disparities of power.

The divergence between the planners’ perceptions and academic critiques points to a lack of clarity about how planning institutions do, as well as could, respond to the ethno-racial diversity of people. The urban planning institutions, though a critical determinant of the quality of urban life, are not the only force shaping the structure and form of cities. Undoubtedly, the market, community initiatives and political processes significantly influence the quality of urban life. In the discussion of the planners’ responsiveness to the culturally defined needs of various ethnic groups, the domain of planning institutions should be kept in view.

International Case Studies in Multicultural Planning

Though the United States does not have a formal strategy for multicultural planning, similar countries with large immigrant populations, such as Australia and Canada, have worked to embrace their diversity and build a dynamic, heterogeneous identity. In his research, Qadeer addresses how multiculturalism has affected planning policies and strategies in Canada, an “acknowledged multicultural society” that is committed to sustaining the cultural heritage of minorities (Qadeer, 1997, p. 481). The Canadian

Multiculturalism Act of 1988 acknowledges multiculturalism as a public philosophy and grants groups the right to practice and preserve their heritage. It also provides individual and community equality of rights and freedoms. The Canadian multicultural philosophy of maintaining cultural differences promotes diversity rather than the assimilation of cultures. Therefore, planning must equitably accommodate these groups' needs in order to successfully achieve a multicultural society.

In 1997, Leonie Sandercock (2010a, 2010b) conducted research on three municipalities around Melbourne, Australia to explore the difference that cultural diversity makes to the landscape of planning theory and practice. She finds references to cultural diversity in policy documents, but cultural diversity is mainly depicted as being significant only insofar as it contributes to business and development opportunities. Other policy documents place diversity in the context of planning for the needs of the community, but the term "community" is vaguely defined and suggests that community planning operates for the greatest good for the greatest number. In terms of urban design, state government policy recognizes the importance of designing for local cultural identity and enabling people to have an input in shaping their environment, but physical aspects of design are largely predetermined by planning professionals. Though the local government demonstrates its commitment to include different social groups in governance, planning policy ignores the relationship between cultural diversity and land use planning. The concept of cultural diversity is suggested, but specific implantation strategies are not proposed (Sandercock, 2010a).

Conclusion

It is equally important, however, that planners recognize the cultural assumptions embedded in traditional planning practice and the way that immigration interacts with planning. This necessity is most obvious in relation to public participation strategies, but is also important when cultural values conflict with land use practice (for example, in the location of funeral homes or the orientation of a building on a site), or when land is used in "nontraditional" ways, thus creating new challenges for planning definitions of use and the associated requirements.

Despite the reluctance of planners to account for ethnicity or culture, and their insistence that they base their decisions solely on the technical merits of a proposal, the challenges of multiculturalism cannot be dissociated from planning.

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