Abstract: Drawing on a new book Planning and Diversity in the City: Redistribution, Recognition and Encounter which I have written with Kurt Iveson, this talk proposes that a just diversity for cities can be conceptualised and then planned for with reference to three social logics or norms: redistribution, recognition and encounter. Examples of planning and urban policy strategies which encapsulate each of these social logics are presented, and suggestions of tensions that characterise attempts to implement them or use them for guidance are noted.

In this talk I comment on some new ways of thinking about social planning strategies, that have emerged (in their current form) in theory, and in planning and the practice of urban policy, in the last decade. Finding these developments is possible if one looks at cities and at their planning with the frame of diversity in mind. My comments come largely from the book that Kurt Iveson and I have just completed, entitled Planning and Diversity in the City: Redistribution, Recognition and Encounter, which will be published by Palgrave Macmillan in London and which is a critical urban geographers’ contribution to discussions about the social side of urban planning. The thinking also builds on a paper I gave the last time Steve Hamnett organised a big national conference for urbanists in Adelaide (see Fincher 2003)! You will see that I take a broad rather than ‘black letter’ definition of urban planning, understanding it as those policy actions associated with forming and amending urban built environments and people’s access to facilities within these environments, and seeing it as a practice in cities led by the state.

Diversity of course is a broad term. Loretta Lees has reminded us that ‘the diversity of different “diversities” is often under-theorised’ (2003a, p. 613). To make some headway with theorising diversity for planning, Kurt and I have identified the three social logics of redistribution, recognition and encounter as our theoretical starting points for designing and evaluating social planning interventions in cities. In addition, proceeding by articulating normative social logics focuses on the importance of norms for planning (after all, a normative activity) as well as attention being paid to the details of implementation processes which has been a strong recent focus of the planning theory literature: in this we support the point recently made by Michael Dear (2000, p. 135) in his commentary on US planning history, that it is timely to restore what he calls the reform tradition to planning and its practice.

In the three sections of my talk I will do the following. First, I will make the claim of the book that redistribution, recognition and encounter are suitable norms or social logics for planning that has an eye to diversity, though we know that in any context these aims may be entwined. Second, I will provide some small examples of ways of working with these ideas, in recent planning contexts, that I find compelling. And third I will note some tensions that are juggled in current planning practice based on these theoretical aims, that are evident in the examples I supply.

1 The three social logics

The three social logics of redistribution, recognition and encounter provide a framework for both conceptualising and evaluating urban policy and planning actions. (You will note, I have no doubt, the importance in the redistribution and recognition parts of this three-strand conceptualisation, of the writings back and forth between the feminist philosophers Nancy Fraser and the late Iris Marion Young – indeed we rely on their thinking). To us, these concepts direct us to the matters of a social kind that we should be making reference to, checking back on, as interventions in the urban built environment are made. Of course the terms are always contentious and without straightforward definitions to apply in any context. Their interpretation and precise normative nature is intensely political. These are general
concepts, and in specific situations decision rules are defined to give them practical meaning for application.

Redistribution has long been one aim of urban policy and planning, though not one commonly and boldly mentioned in Australian settings today. Think of it as using planning to reduce the discrepancy between rich and poor in cities, often by strategies aiming to reduce locational disadvantage through the placement of public facilities and social and physical infrastructure. Of course this could be seen to be reducing diversity in the city – but planning when it has explicitly sought to be redistributive has been about social justice and the creation of a just diversity rather than a diversity that depends on creating an ever greater divide between the wealthy and the disadvantaged. Gleeson and Low’s Australian Urban Planning (2000) provides a good discussion of the association of redistributive planning with the welfare state from the end of the Second World War and indeed before that with large works in infrastructure placement, at the national and State scale in a number of countries including Australia. You might ask yourself whether in urban policy-making and planning this motivation to reduce inequality through modification of the built environment still exists, and if so in what forms and at what scales.

Now, of course if we examine the way redistributive planning was implemented decades ago, we can make theoretical as well as (often) practical and political criticisms of it. Its view of the citizens to whom it would deliver benefits was that these people were uniform in their interests, forming a unitary public and public interest that policy-makers could define and respond to. We know well the late twentieth century history of resistance to that idea, of the struggles this produced for community participation in planning and within the state, of the important role of feminist activism broadly in achieving the level of consultation and transparency with respect to governmental actions in cities we may feel we now (sometimes) have. Leonie Sandercock (2003, ch 2) underscores the continuing importance of this in her writing about the need for us to obtain more than just the ‘official’ planning histories of events - to obtain as well the histories of a range of other groups about those events, and to hear their voices reporting these events. Recognition, then, has joined redistribution as an important social logic of urban policy and planning. It is the activity of acknowledging the existence of ‘multiple publics’ in any context, and in most public policy practice this recognition has been implemented by identifying and labelling ‘groups’ with an interest in a conflict or situation, often via an equal opportunity policy approach requiring the relevant groups to be consulted and their interests acknowledged. We term this a group checklist approach, and as will be clear a bit later, it is being subjected to considerable criticism by urbanists at present because it reifies and fixes individual and group identities, when we know identities in groups and indeed in individuals are unstable and cannot be fixed (though they may be claimed).

Fraser (2004) has proposed, in response to this and other criticisms, that we should devise forms of recognition without this need to foster group identity, and rather in terms that define individuals as of equal social status, as ‘peers in social life’ (2004, p.129). This, of course, is easier said than done in practice. Nevertheless, the understanding that there is no overarching ‘public interest’ that policy-makers can define, and that rather there must be acknowledgement of multiple and shifting interests and identities in the citizens of cities for whom public policy works, provides a major social logic for urban policy and planning, that of recognition. This social logic, or norm, sits alongside of redistribution as one of the core motivations in urban planning and policy. As indeed Nancy Fraser and Iris Marion Young have long articulated in their (generally aspatial) debates about the meaning of justice.

To these aspatial norms we add that of encounter, the notion of harmonious (if in democratic practice frequently agonistic, as Amin (2002) makes clear) sociality in lived spaces. This norm is underscored by a view of the city not just as an administrative and physical container of people’s lives that policy-makers are trying to make more efficient. It sees urban environments as places that people experience differently through their mobilities and interactions with others. And of course cities are frameworks for access, to life-long change and the facilities and services that make that change possible for people. We see the social logic of encounter really as expressing an everyday ‘right to the city’, that policy-makers and planning would seek to facilitate.
Now of course this is no new idea to urban studies. In the second half of the twentieth century numerous critical texts (think of the writing of Jane Jacobs and Richard Sennett) have extolled the need to focus on small-scale interactions between strangers in the city (however the notion of the stranger might be defined). More recently, such thinking has been re-introduced by Amin and Thrift in their call for the need to foster in cities ‘spatial openness and hybrid spaces’, ‘eroticism of the new and unfamiliar via …“disorderly” streets and bazaars’, ‘publicisation of difference and strangers via open public events such as festivals and games’ and ‘access to public institutions and well-being in place’ (Amin and Thrift, 2002, p. 139, quoting Iris Marion Young). To those who might think that the provision of large urban public spaces where anyone can mill about and bump into anyone else, satisfies this yearning for encounter, Amin (2002) has rejected the seductive notion that the freedom of association and encounter in large public spaces always develops a cosmopolitan urban civic culture. Such public spaces function either as spaces of through-movement or are taken over by particular groups, he finds, whose presence precludes others from comfortably lingering there. We have to work harder at facilitating encounter than just engineering huge public sites for casual co-presence.

These three social logics or norms – redistribution, recognition and encounter – are what Kurt and I have concluded are major conceptual and practical reference points for those of us interested in the shaping of cities so that they are more inclusive and progressive – in short, so that we work towards a just diversity.

2 Examples of these logics at work in planning practice

Once we try to examine instances of contemporary planning and urban policy practice with a view to finding the workings of these three social logics there, we realise very quickly that of course such general norms are implemented in different ways in different situations – they are unpacked in practice according to practical ‘decision rules’ or rules of thumb that allow us to act. Some of the interesting examples in the urban studies literature indicate the sorts of situated complexities that confront the implementation of any one of these three logics.

First, consider the situation in Amsterdam described by Uitermark et al. (2005) in which the ‘group checklist’ approach to planning in recognition of the dynamic presence of ethnic minority groups of immigrants has been challenged. Here is an attempt to improve recognition in urban policy-making – to put into practice a way of resourcing the provision of urban services and facilities that recognises the reality of multiple publics, but does not do this by fixing people into identity boxes. As the authors say, this is a move from a ‘minority’ policy to a ‘diversity policy. Central to the policy shift here has been a move from resourcing the longstanding organisations of particular ethnic communities (in this urban case, Moroccan- and Turkish- identified organisations, aligned with major immigrant groups in Amsterdam) towards resourcing projects put forward by cross-group coalitions that cannot be labelled with one fixed identity. Has this worked? It certainly has the approval of those theorists who have called for recognition of hybrid rather than fixed identities. But in practice, though cross-group projects for service provision have certainly resulted, this has been at the expense of some organisations choosing to remain aligned with an immigrant group, and who may be less professional in their presentation as well as wanting to include in their activities socialisation of their members into cultural norms as well as service provision.

Though we have done no survey of Australian local government practice in providing facilities specifically to ethnically-identified immigrant groups in their singularity, it does seem from limited anecdotal commentary that identifying birthplace/cultural groups is not now a common practice as it once was under fully-fledged multiculturalism. A colleague working with recently-arrived Sudanese people in one part of Melbourne has noted this, and has found that the Sudanese people in questions wish to have a defined community place – perhaps a meeting room and perhaps specific services or funding – to underscore their arrival and legitimise their place in the city. But this is no longer the policy, to their regret. In the meantime, of course, some local governments are place-marketing the ethnic identities of certain of their retail areas avidly – in Chinatowns and the like. It’s an interesting juxtaposition that commercial evidence of ethnic identity is supported and even marketed, but recognition of multicultures in social planning is perhaps less directly supported now. The intellectual and
political critique of multiculturalism and its fixed identity-production seems of less concern for the place-marketers.

Second, shift gears and think about urban renewal and redistribution. Urban renewal or urban regeneration, has long been understood (by some) as a redistributive urban policy – an attempt to provide better housing and therefore better prospects for low income people. Now of course there have been mightily contested interpretations of what ‘improvement’ means through urban renewal. Lauren Costello (2005) has written of how the Victorian Housing Commission used this idea to justify slum clearance and the erection of high-rise public housing in the inner city. Whether or not one likes the public housing (and many didn’t then and still don’t) that housing provides a great deal of low-income housing in the most locationally-advantaged parts of Melbourne. So I suppose one could argue that its presence, over decades, has been redistributive in providing housing to low-income people that would otherwise have been gentrified and scooped up by the middle classes. On the other hand, some urban renewal schemes have seemed to be redistributive in a less progressive way than their discursive rationale would originally have suggested. Loretta Lees (2003b) has categorised decades of urban renewal, urban regeneration and urban renaissance in the UK as ‘state-led gentrification’. This tag seems particularly to apply to those forms or urban renewal planning that seek ‘social mix’ in areas of low-income people, by bringing in more cashed-up households to scatter amongst the less affluent. (Mark Peel (1995) analysed this sort of thinking brilliantly in account of the planning of the South Australian town of Elizabeth). In addition, such policy dispenses lower-income people through other parts of the city.

In Australian cities, Kathy Arthurson (2001; 2002) has been conducting and publishing fine research on the rhetoric and practice of revitalising public housing estates in a number of sites in Queensland, South Australia and New South Wales. Her analysis is firmly a critique of the ‘social mix’ thinking as it is being (very vaguely) used as a justification by certain State housing authorities for ‘upgrading’ some estates. In such places, authorities are selling some housing to private developers, who then re-make the houses in accordance with their view of market norms, and sell it to higher-income people than were there before, and to people who are home-owners. One consequence is overall reduction in the number of low-income housing units in the city – because the price obtained for the sale of houses on estates does not buy an equivalent number of units in other locations in the city. Not all the projects Arthurson has examined are of this kind. For those that are, we have to ask if this is urban renewal as redistribution in the interests of low-income, or state-led gentrification as Lees describes for the UK? I see around my university in Melbourne that public housing estates are about to be ‘upgraded’ by removing some buildings of 4-storey walk-ups and replacing them with a mix of ‘social housing’ and privately-owned and more expensive housing.

Third, think about the light touch in planning that is needed to facilitate encounter in urban spaces. If we understand encounter, as we must, as more than building large public squares, then how can it be planned for? Of course some might argue that social mix in housing estates is facilitating cross-class or cross-cultural group encounter – to which the argument could certainly be made in reply that co-presence has been shown in studies to be inadequate for generating encounter. People don’t engage in activity across their groups just because their housing is mixed together. As Amin (2002) has argued, sites of activity in which ‘prosaic negotiations’ occur in order for the activity to be successful, are what is required. A number of actions by planners and policy-makers towards this end are of interest here. Kate Shaw, in her prize-willing planning paper (2005) has discussed the European planning policies (again featuring Amsterdam prominently) that have set aside cheap working premises for alternative cultures to retain a presence in central cities that are otherwise gentrifying. She has argued very strongly that unless governments take a stand and purchase such premises then artists (that group so central to the creative city) will be priced out forever meaning a loss of opportunity for all sorts of people to interact with them. More temporary planning actions are also evidence of the light touch that can foster encounter on occasion – in the establishment of child-friendly cities in Italy, one example of the temporary closure of a suburban street, to which children are taken in buses to play for a time, shows how the city can be made available for unusual encounters in unexpected places. In a research project on which I am working with colleagues at present, which seeks to find ways to foster cross-cultural interaction between tertiary students who so dominate the population of central
Melbourne, we are hoping to see how the abandoned CUB site at the northern edge of the city might be appropriated for student arts activities for a time.

Of course in speaking of facilitating encounter in these temporary and local ways, that are often about cross-cultural engagement, we must also query certain other processes in our cities that seem to be directed more at exclusion, at anti-encounter. The various forms of gating currently going on in master planned communities may be subject to questions of this kind, though empirical work about it is not extensive at present. Therese Kenna (2007) has published a nice paper about this in the last issue of Geographical Research, in which she finds about Glenmore in western Sydney that an exclusive estate was intended by developers for certain sorts of families, that they constructed an image of this kind in marketing the estate, and that socio-spatial polarisation would be encouraged if more of such phenomena occurred.

3 Juggling the tensions of putting the 3 logics into practice

As will be evident already, in the interpretation of lofty goals like redistribution, recognition and encounter, and in putting them into practice in real contexts, there are many tensions, difficulties and political calls. Some that stand out to me are these.

First, there is a question of the shifting scales at which the social issues I've referred to are located in policy thinking and decision-making. With redistribution, it seems there is rarely an unqualified success to observe on a significant scale. Urban renewal has been widely criticised from the 1950s to the present in all its guises, for not being redistributive in its outcomes. Small-scale successes appear from time to time, or apparently so – like the recent reporting of how much the Victorian Government’s Neighbourhood Renewal scheme has brought a new pride in their neighbourhood to some local people. These local residents have, in a really deteriorated urban built environment, been able to use the scheme’s resources to coordinate and conduct the upgrading of their own housing, using their own labour, themselves. Alongside this local assistance given by government, which does appear to have had benefits for local people in their own place (without relocating them or introducing middle-class homeowners to their midst), one must of course put the larger-scale question of the lack of affordable housing all over the metropolis and the decline over the past decade in numbers of mainstream, government-owned, rental public housing units, in favour of rental support schemes. So if there are occasional small successes, these are dwarfed by a lack of evident larger-scale progress. The silence in Victoria over the city’s ambitious strategic plan, Melbourne 2030, which did include a number of important redistributive intentions when it first appeared, is one overwhelming example.

Second there is the tension between recognising the different social groups, or differently-identified groups, in the city, without either boxing them into fixed identity positions or rendering them back into the uniform citizens of the ‘general public’ by one’s attempts not to box them. As the example of Amsterdam’s diversity policy showed (Uitermark et al., 2005) grouping people for the resourcing of projects for immigrants on the basis of other than their birthplace or cultural identities can have the effect of marginalising those organisations and groups which do seek such an identity. Grouping of any kind always produces some exclusions. Perhaps whilst we accept the requirement that we must group to recognise diversity, the point is always to acknowledge as well the diversity within the group identified, and the porosity of its boundaries as it connects to other groups that might form around some of its members. So, individuals may belong to different identity groups, for different purposes they might have. As one Canadian analyst wrote recently, in an analysis of whether ethnic community festivals in that country represent their chosen identities ‘authentically’:

For researchers, the effort to determine how closely a given ethnic representation approximates an often essentialized conception of that community’s authentic nature may, one hopes, give way to analyses of the specific tensions within the Canadian sub-communities: between, for example, gay and straight Greeks, White and Black South Africans, rich and poor Belgians, male and female Portuguese, young and old Salvadorans, first- and second-generation Koreans (Bramadat, 2005: 18).
We need to look at the internal diversity and trends within any group that might be recognised in social planning, as well as its points of connection with other groups. This may not always be best served by doing away with ethnically-proclaimed identities altogether. In central Melbourne at present, the State Government’s is calling for expressions of interest about how to recast the ethnically-identified little quarters and streets of the city — Chinatown, and the Greek and Italian areas. Of course there has been much criticism of the designation of such areas, by academics as well as members of the communities in question who feel they have been under- or misrepresented in the current forms of these small places. How the tension plays out between recognition of groups, recognition of diversity within groups, and recognition of the borders between groups and other constituencies, will be an interesting test of how far our intellectual tussles have helped us to progress on this question.

And third, there is the paradox that planning for encounter, with a light touch that allows the encounters to occur and flourish in response to the agency of those interacting, cannot be too-lightly conceived. It has to be thoroughly planned, however ironic that seems. Shaw’s (2005) study of the Amsterdam city council’s efforts to retain premises for alternative cultures to continue to exist amidst gentrification, shows the careful delineation of rules by urban policy-makers before the policy took effect — about who would be eligible for the premises and under what circumstances. Then, once the premises were occupied, the policy-makers stepped back and let the artists get on with their lives and the encounters their presence fostered. How difficult must it have been politically, in the council, to hand over the resources and then step back in this way? Take another example of the need to plan thoroughly to ensure a light touch. In community drop-in centres in cities, including neighbourhood houses in Australian cities, there has long been understanding of the benefit of relatively informal interaction occurring during and alongside the activities timetabled in those centres. But in recent years analysts note with distress attempts by governments to step in to reduce the informality of those interactions — in order to make them more purposeful, to make them classrooms in which achievements are worked towards and measured. Or, in other types of centres, attracting disadvantaged individuals of various kinds, there are attempts to make drop-in centres places for the referral of individuals for medical treatment. In these instances of drop-in centres, encounter is being pushed to be more than it is — it is being devalued for what it is. The Amsterdam example of stepping away is not being followed, as we might argue it should be. The political context is of significance here of course. When there is pressure to target resources and make organisations accountable for them, it is often difficult to show the benefits of informal encounters in the same way that one can demonstrate the number of people who complete a short course, or who are refereed on to a doctor for treatment.

4 Conclusion

In our book, Kurt Iveson and I have argued that three social logics, redistribution, recognition and encounter, are norms against which we can both build and consider the orientation and practice of social planning in cities. These are longstanding norms of urban studies, and indeed of public policy about cities and their built environments which has a social orientation. Examples abound of ways that these norms are present, and often more than one of them, in planning and urban policy actions. As has always been the case in the interaction between aims and outcomes, once norms are translated into decision rules that allow implementation, the final presence of such norms may be compromised in the views of some.

Reflecting on the book, what have we (or at least I) learnt from it? What questions does it raise? I suppose for me the matter that has emerged most strongly is the difficulty with actually finding examples of successful redistributive measures, in contemporary planning — or even of finding serious discussion of redistribution as a matter that is of concern for urban policy and planning, in other than the rarified sites of urban or planning theory. This may be a question of theoretical boxing on my part — for it is surely the case that redistributive successes are observable in policy and planning which set out to recognise diversity in a range of ways in our multiple publics, and that engineer encounter. Often the individuals advantaged or accommodated in these policy efforts are of lower-income, or less powerful class position. On the other hand, it does seem to me that we have, perhaps, taken our eyes off the ball by downgrading the importance of redistribution or the reduction of inequality, as a central aim of urban policy and planning. We certainly effect (at least in theory) ever better
consultative processes, recognising how important procedural justice is. But is that enough? I am not entirely convinced that a focus on recognition and encounter, even via an emphasis on cross-class as well as cross-cultural interaction, and a recognition of the distinctive character of communities including those of low-income and therefore the need to support them in situ, will lead us back to including redistribution more centrally in our policy actions for cities once again.

References


