

Insurgency, Planning and the Prospect of a Humane Urbanism

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I wish to thank the organizing committee of the WPSC for inviting me to open this important conversation among colleagues from around the world. [...] It is a true honor and privilege to be addressing such a distinguished international group of scholars, some of whom I continue to learn from. As always knowledge is a collective production and therefore what I share with you today are my insights gained through dialogue with activists and scholars in many parts of the world.

I don't need to tell this audience that we live in a time of crisis, a global crisis that is not only a crisis of capitalism but also of planning as a profession and as an idea. Therefore the urgency of our conversations at this world congress to discuss how we can rethink planning when it is part and parcel of contemporary crises, and imagine decolonizing practices that make a humane urbanism possible. The contemporary crisis is insidious and infecting all dimensions of life in all corners of the globe. But it does not mean we are all in it equally, these crises affect people differently in different places in ways that are unjust and unequal. Powerful economies that produce inhumanity of global crises, however, have seldom accepted responsibility for their creation.

Today, upwards of 60 million people, that is one in every 122 people worldwide, are displaced from their homes by war and other dangers, a toll of suffering worse than at any other point in human history. But while the world has had its eyes on the almost 1 million fleeing people who have braved the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe, only close to 300,000 received so called “European hospitality.” The vast majority of refugees remain closer to home, without much global limelight in places like Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran and Egypt and in refugee camps like Zaatari in Jordan, which now are a permanent feature of cities and a form of urbanization.

This is indeed the age of global displacements be it because of war and oil or because of real estate capital's greed causing urban dispossession and displacement.

As the World Congress of Planning Schools the conversations that we embark in the next few days concerns how we as planning academics, training the next generations of planning professionals respond to and engage with such crises and injustice.

I argue that planning is facing its own crisis of identity and legitimacy, a crisis that emerges from its professional schizophrenia whereby its image of itself and idea of the profession does not match its record. And hence the need for a new kind of planning, new meaning and new imagination. Progressive planning needs to break with the hegemonic assumptions that has brought it to such existential crisis. It needs an ontological shift in theorization of planning practices. Some call this insurgent planning, others including our colleague here at Rio call it confrontational planning.

In this presentation I focus on how such an ontological break in theorizing planning practices requires firstly, to recognize the range of practices beyond those sanctioned by the state and the corporate powers —namely insurgent practices; and secondly, to decolonize imagination and possibilities for future. For that we need to turn to subordinate people's practices, well-seasoned in long-lasting anti-colonial and anti-capitalist movements. There we will find the inspiration, the values, and the guiding principles to practices that can foster a more humane future and urbanism.

Let me develop this argument one step at the time. I do this in three acts: Act I understanding planning schizophrenia; Act II insurgent practices as a different kind of planning; Act III

imagination and the urgency in decolonizing the future. I will then end with a brief reflection on what this all means for planning education.

ACT I Understanding Planning Schizophrenia

Planning as a profession prides itself for serving the public good but professional planners often find themselves in the service of private good.

This schizophrenia of planning is laid bare when:

Mixed-income housing development in Chicago means displacement of the impoverished and racialized from public housing. In Chicago, as real estate prices soared and public housing sites became financially attractive, public housing was dismantled in the name of developing mixed income communities. The result of planning for integrated housing has been displacement by gentrification— for example, the rent of new apartments in the area is over \$3,000 for two bedrooms.

This schizophrenia of planning is laid bare when:

Efficient transportation in Mumbai means dispossession and displacement. The coastal road project in Mumbai promises a 33.20km combination of "bridges over the sea, elevated roads, reclaimed land and undersea tunnels" to span across the bay and reduce Mumbai's traffic congestion and pollution levels. The planners also promise significant greening and beautification that will raise the quality of life.

But the Independent People's Tribunal working with Mumbai's Collective for Spatial Alternatives³ shows that "the road will cater to only a little over 1% of Mumbai's population— those who drive cars and commute on the city's more developed western coast. Even worse, the project will destroy coastal ecology, and the livelihood of coastal fishing communities whose lives depend on the coastal line. Although transportation planning justifies and promotes a mega project in the name of public good, we see it ultimately serving developers and real estate capital.

This schizophrenia of planning is laid bare when:

Entrepreneurial planning in Cape Town means transferring the cost of economic revitalization on to the shoulders of poor townships. While this urban revitalization has brought "I love my laundry cafe" to Erica's downtown neighbourhood in Cape Town's Improvement District where she can enjoy her wine, coffee and internet as her laundry is getting done; Nomvisiswano never got her promised constitutional right to her basic services. Washing at one of the few communal taps on the outskirts of the Marikana settlement in Philippi, is a daily struggle. When they agreed to the creation of CIDs over a decade ago, planning professionals promised that the betterment of improvement districts will rise everyone's boats. But it did not do so for Nomvisiswano and millions of others.

The problem indeed is much worse than that. Lack of water and sanitation is in scary ways also connected with gender violence. Take the case of the two teenage sisters from the state of Bihar in India, who one evening in May of 2012 left their shack to defecate outside, away from everyone where they won't be seen and will have privacy. But they never came back. Their dead and raped bodies were later found hanging from a mango tree. If women had safe access to toilets, reports the Bihar police chief, in Bihar alone nearly 400 rapes could have been avoided in that very year. Of course, this issue affects people far beyond the borders of Bihar.

But how has planning profession served the public good in such a grave case of spatial injustice? Are girls and women not enough of a "public"? and is their safety and lives not enough of a

“good”?

The bottom line is that the capitalist state, and the experts that seek to maintain the status quo through liberal democratic inclusion are facing the limitations of their promise.

Planning as we know it is faced with a crisis of legitimacy.

Its contradictions, and false promises manifest in growing inequalities. And the spatial injustices it facilitates are glaring evidence of “an emperor with no clothes.”

-We need a different kind of planning^[1]

-Indeed not only we need it, but a different kind of planning is possible.

-Where do we see this?

Citizens all over the world have taken their cities in their own hands—from Gezi Park in Istanbul, to South side Chicago, to *piqueteros* in Buenos Aires, say *basta!* We have had enough! *Que Se Vayan todos!* (get rid of them all)

We need to take these practices seriously and recognize them as instances of city making, as instances of people planning their own futures, a future that embodies a humane urbanism—something that the planning profession as we know it has failed to do.

To discuss these as novel planning practices we need a new imagination, a new lexicon, new repertoire of practices and a distinct understanding of justice.

Insurgent planning can be that framework, which paves the path toward a humane urbanism.

- But what does this insurgent planning look like?
- How do I recognize it when I see it?
- What are its guiding principles, values, ideals and imaginations, and how does it make a fundamental break with planning as we know it?

These are the questions I turn to in Act Two.

Act II Insurgent Practices as a Different Kind of Planning

Insurgent planning is an alternate planning as it happens among subordinate communities, be it informal settlements and townships in the ex-colonies or the disadvantaged communities in the belly of the beast— North America and Western Europe.

At this particular historical juncture of neoliberalism where inclusion is an alibi for exclusion and normalization of neocolonial domination, the bankruptcy of liberal inclusive planning urges us to rethink the epistemological and ontological parameters of planning theorization and practice. We are urged to re-center politics of justice in theorization of planning and make a break with the political philosophies that have guided it through much of the twentieth century. Insurgent planning, I argue, pursues such an ontological and epistemological break in our contemporary neoliberal conjuncture.

Insurgent Planning builds on an earlier radical tradition in planning theory, initially formulated by Friedmann in late 1980s, and further developed by others including Sandercock and Beard and others who called for recognizing citizens’ practices as forms of planning.

Insurgent Planning advances this tradition by further opening up the theorization of planning to other forms of action. Opening it to include not only select forms of action by citizens and their organizations sanctioned by the dominant groups, what I call invited spaces of action; but also the insurrections and insurgencies that state and corporation systematically seek to ostracize and

criminalize— what I call invented spaces of action.

This I argue is not only epistemological (inclusion of local communities and local knowledge and voice) but also ontological.

Insurgent activists put to practice a different understanding of justice. To reach a just outcome, they shift the base of their call for justice from Rawl's justice as fairness to Young's notion of justice based on recognition of difference and its politics. They claim it is not enough to address individualized rights and fair treatment as liberal political philosophy of justice advocates. Rather, they call for urgent recognition of self-determined and group-based forms of oppression.

Such an understanding of justice shifts the debate on inclusion from representation to self-determination—a shift in perspective that validates citizens' collective direct action and shifts from representative democracy to participatory democracy. In representative democracy, citizens delegate their rights to others—political representatives, bureaucrats, or technical experts—to act in their best interests. In contrast, in participatory democracy citizens recognize the inadequacy of formal rights and do not hand over the advocacy of their interests to others but, rather, directly take part in and shape decisions that affect their lives. Participatory democracy consequently promotes a form of citizenship that is multi-centered and has multiple agencies, including citizens and their direct social actions.

This has important implications for planning. Because it ontologically breaks with liberal notion of inclusion which has guided professional planning for most of the 20th century. Insurgent practices make an ontological break because it does not aim for a bigger share of the pie but for a different kind of pie—a pie that is ontologically distinct. Insurgent practices and insurgent planning does not seek inclusion through a better representation (be it by experts or politicians); it seeks self-determined inclusion wherein people's rights are real and practiced.

As insurgent planning de-centers the role of representation and pays attention to direct action as means of inclusion, it also shifts the subject of its theorization from planner to planning. In the conceptual architecture of insurgent planning, professional planners are but one actor among a range of actors that shape the contested field of action known as planning. The core concern is therefore with practices not with their actors.

As concepts of Invited and invented spaces of citizens' action are critical to my approach in theorizing insurgent planning, I will take a few moments to clarify the concept.

The two sorts of spaces I discuss stand in a mutually constituted, interacting and dialectical relationship, not a binary one. On-the-ground evidence shows that grassroots practices that seek to reach more than individualized needs, which is the goal of liberal inclusion, often have to move across and between those spaces as called for by specifics of the struggle. But institutions of power, such as the mainstream media, the state, and international donor organizations, configure these invited and invented spaces in a binary relation, and tend to criminalize the latter by designating only the former as the “proper” space for citizens' voices and participation.

We should note that a binary construction of invited and invented spaces risks an embedded misconception of stability in each space. It disregards the flexibility and innovative nature of capitalism and how it folds in whatever lies at its margin and seeks to incorporate whatever might be a threat to it. What is today an alternative might become mainstreamed and de-politicized by containment and entrapment tomorrow, with its transformative force hollowed out—leaving activists holding “a toy telephone with no lines that reach anywhere,” a metaphor that my colleague Ken Salo uses for these stolen movements.

Radical movements thus need to constantly reinvent their spaces of action through “practices of rupture and creation”. Because, quoting Marcelo Svirsky, activism that “treads established paths of

dissent is always in danger of being besieged and contained by the organism of the State” and from conformity to complicity is but a short step, as Buchanan advises. Activism that seeks only to guarantee the workings of representative democracy, is essentially what Svirsky calls “slave activism”.

This kind of slave activism is what the de-politicized planning theorization has celebrated and popularized as inclusive planning through citizen participation and grassroots community development and grassroots involvement. Insurgent planning breaks away from this mode of thinking in radical ways. It defies confinement and conformance of citizens’ actions to liberal democratic state and market apparatus norms, but also recognizes how citizens may use those norms to induce a rupture and create something new.

Skeptics, however, raise important questions:

-How do we recognize insurgent practices that contribute to building a participative democracy and create the foundation on which to develop humane urbanism?

-Is every acts of resurrection or disruption a progressive contribution to a humane urbanism? or could it be anti-democratic, reactionary, or even fascist?

For example take the right wing Clive Bundy’s case in the US which involved nearly six-week occupation and armed standoff with authorities in Nevada over cattle grazing rights in a wildlife preserve. The insurgents Clive Bundy and his sons with the support of other cowboys resisted the imposition of federal taxation.

Or take the frequent Xenophobic uprising in South Africa, including the 2015 one in Western cape where I had the misfortune to witness the heart wrenching testimonials of their victims among poor African migrants and refugees.

I understand in terms of three principles insurgent planning practices with a transformative potential for a humane urbanism:

- Transgression in time, place, and action. They transgress false dichotomies between invited and invented spaces of activism; they transgress national boundaries by building transnational solidarities and move beyond time bounds through a historicized consciousness.
- Counter and anti-hegemony: Insurgent planning practices are anti- and counter-hegemonic. They destabilize normalized relations of dominance and in specific are anti-capitalist.
- Imagination: Insurgent planning practices are imaginative. They recover idealism for a just society.

Few examples might be helpful.

I start with a brief example from a current project titled “Insurgent Midwest: Transnational Dialogues for Humane Urbanism” that I am involved in with a collective of academics and activists in Illinois.

One of the groups involved in this project is Mexican Solidary Network (MSN), A community-based organization based in Chicago’s Albany Park, a neighborhood with a large immigrant and Latino population, but networked and in partnership with movements in Mexico. It works closely with the Zapatistas, campesino/indigenous communities, and labor fronts in Chiapas, Ciudad Juarez, Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Mexico City in Mexico. Their most important strategic partnerships in Mexico are with the Frente Popular Francisco Villa Independiente, a community organization with a base of 100,000 members in Mexico City, and the Concejo Nacional Urbano y Campesino, a

community organization with a rural and urban base of 30,000 members in Tlaxcala. MSN adopts transgressive practices not only for their transnational reach and exchanges, but also for moving beyond and across “invited and invented spaces” of activism. In recent years predominantly large real estate Limited Liability Corporations (LLCs) have started to purchase the multi-tenant buildings in Albany Park, evict the buildings’ current tenants, undertake some improvement and put the units back at the higher end of rental market at prices inaccessible to previous tenants—producing what is known as typical gentrification processes. To fight back these processes of gentrification and displacement Centro Autonomo uses the legal means of advocacy available through “invited spaces” to extend tenant residency and protect tenant legal rights. But they do not limit themselves to such practices and mobilize through a range of “invented spaces” of activism. These include direct action such as protest in front of the banks responsible for gentrification of their neighborhood and for the national housing foreclosure crisis that made many hard working families homeless. They also create real time maps of gentrification by marking buildings that LLCs buy and organize the tenants in those buildings through building-specific tenant unions to sabotage the evictions and or remodeling of the buildings from which people were evicted. Their transgressive practices can be likened to the use of “sword and shield” strategy. The shield to extend tenancy and protect the low-income residents, the sword to take public action against landlords, particularly Limited Liability Corporations that are purchasing increasing numbers of units in gentrifying barrios like Albany Park

Another example might be the citizens’ insurgent practices in Istanbul’s Gezi Park, Turkey, during the summer of 2013.

Deniz Ay and I have recently published a piece that documents the success of invented spaces of activism using performative acts of insurgency to stop the Gezi Park and Taksim square demolition and replacement with a shopping mall. Gezi Park and the adjacent Taksim square, for those of you in this audience not familiar with Istanbul, is a key public space for residents of Istanbul. It is the commercial and a public transportation hub and a major public space.

The multi-national developers and real estate capital however as part of aggressive neoliberalization of urban space in Istanbul have had their eye on appropriating this space for the elite and upmarket use. During various stages of planning this re-development project, concerned citizens and civil organizations exhausted the liberal representative channels of citizen participation (the so-called invited spaces) to voice their opposition. However, as expected these were not more than window dressing for the aggressive agenda of the capital to figuratively and literally bulldoze their way through. On the day of demolition, however, citizens arrived and invented new means for their participation and for being heard; some spontaneous others organized and faced a fierce military oppression. Nevertheless, they occupied the square set up their commune, imagined the public space as their own and were able to resist and stop the advances of capitalism.

What is important for me in this example is the performative aspects of their struggle and the spaces of activism they invented—performativity staged by those ‘that do not count’” to quote Swyngedouw. A series of place-based tactics that symbolically and performatively resist the redevelopment in Taksim re-invented the square and gave it a new meaning through its imaginative use of public space.

For example an unorthodox form of protest: standing still. He stood still for eight consecutive hours on Taksim Square facing the Ataturk Cultural Center (AKM), which bore the wall-sized image of Ataturk, the father of the nation and its modern state in Turkey, with the national flags of the country on each side. The act of standing while facing these figures provoked a collective memory of the foundations of modern Turkey that resonated with many among the opposition to the national government.

Standing Man while bewildering police forces on how to handle the supposedly passive protests of masses “just standing” also created the bodily presence of people. This simple presence of bodies in public domain, as Judith Butler and Athanasiou¹⁵ assert, generates a certain performative force through the “We are here” message that should also be re-read as “We are *still* here” despite the dedicated efforts of dispossession and oppression. The Standing Man protest became innovative acts of citizenship practice precisely because of the political, spatial, and historical context in which it took place and gave meaning to it.

Table on Earth is another example of invented spaces and means of activism. A month into the struggle marks the first day of Ramadan, and so many expected that this would inevitably end the Gezi Park protests. Instead, people of Gezi reinvented the space of the most popular street in Istanbul (Istiklal), blending the ideals of the Gezi movement and the rituals of Ramadan. People occupied the light-railroad passing across Istiklal Street and created the Table on Earth, as they named it, to break their fast, hosting hundreds of people sharing their food with one another. This innovative act of using the tramway, in the middle of the most vibrant neighborhood of the city and surrounded by high-end luxury restaurants, was key to asserting their presence, the “we are still here” affect but also evoking an imagination of a more communal urban space and humane urbanism.

While these movements by no means offer a blue print, their practices are fundamental to obstructing the beast of urban greed. These practices may or may not stand valid for another struggle another time and place, but we need to invent new forms of action, share them, create a repertoire, and a planning idiom (to use Ananya Roy’s term) to push limits of imagination and evoke an alternative future that is for spatial justice.

Struggle over imagination and decolonization of future, I argue, is key political terrain of struggle. That is the Act III I now turn to, which has significant implication for planning educators.

ACT III: Imagination and the Urgency in Decolonizing the Future

The writings of African intellectuals teach us that liberation of the colonies could happen only through what Fanon calls “decolonizing the mind” and liberating imagination. Liberation needs a new consciousness, one that is recovered from colonial moral injury, the profound alienation that believed development of the colony could happen only “upon condition of rejecting itself” and wholesale importing of non-African scenarios and solutions (Davidson 1992, 199).

I assert the need for a new consciousness that liberates planning imaginations. This requires decolonizing planning imagination by questioning its hegemonized assumptions.

The core struggle this generation faces is between expanding the realm of imagination and closing it down. Future is inevitable. It is open and it is plural. People need it like they need air, writes Jan Pieterse (2000, xxi).¹⁸ But future is also empty; meaning that what it constitutes depends on how it is imagined, susceptible to be reinvented and be “opened by a horizon of possibilities”. Because of its openness and its plurality, future is an object of intense dispute, Boaventura de Sousa Santos (1995)¹⁹ argues.

But the open-endedness, plurality, and unpredictability of future also makes it a political territory, a site of fierce contestation over the content it can take. If we do not dare to imagine the unimaginable, then the future is less open and more predetermined as persistence and perpetuation of the present.

“Colonization of future” as a concept is of key importance in this discussion. Let me elaborate: In the first colonies land, natural resources, and slave labor were objects of wealth creation. In the 1980s Maria Mies and her colleagues provocatively wrote about *Women, the Last Colony*. That is,

colonization had turned to women and their cheaply obtained labor for more wealth creation.

Today, however, I argue that it is the future that must be invoked as the last colony—future as a political territory, a “territory” to be “occupied” to secure closure through totalitarian imaginations and through erasure of alternatives. The latest subject of “colonial occupation” or “grabbing,” then I argue, is the future, and the struggle for its emancipation and decolonization is urgent.

As opposed to Francis Fukuyama’s argument for the end of history that seeks to bring closure to the future, our citizens’ struggle is to overcome such closure and open up the terrain of imagination to conceive of alternatives. *The end of history as we know it can also be the beginning of history as we want it.*

For this some employ performative actions that evoke imagination of a different world, even if momentarily and temporarily. Others among new social movements turn to science fiction for social justice movements.

In short, politicization of imagination and future as a terrain of struggle for justice is key if we are to plan for a world more just, and an urbanism more humane. The potential of insurgency for humane urbanism lies in the normality that it disrupts and the new common sense that it helps to create.

And now the final Act: what are the Implications of these debates for Planning Education

I focus on three main points that emerge from the specific insights I have shared over the last hour.

Firstly, at the core of a progressive planning education must be a relational approach that promotes a transgressive curriculum both in content and in modes of knowing.

Secondly, a forward looking planning education needs to prepare students with languages that connect them to varied actors who in contestation shape the human habitat.

Thirdly, we as planning academics must use every opportunity to stir imagination and decolonize the future. Let me explain:

Firstly we need to adopt a relational approach.^[1] A relational approach in planning education exposes the injustices and inequalities by transgressing time and place and forms of action. To combat a parochial understanding of development a relational approach promotes transnational and historicized understanding across all areas of curriculum. It will see local place as porous, not as a bounded or discrete territory. It moves beyond methodological nationalism of urban studies and the post-nationalism of global studies to expose the global cost of local developments.

A relational curriculum would therefore not teach about revitalization without gentrification; it would not teach about migration without displacement; it would not teach about the present without an acute sense of history; and it would not teach about the local without revealing hierarchy and its mode of connection to the world. A relational planning education politicizes curriculum, is polytemporal and transnational, and equips students with the tropes of exclusion and elitism through inclusion.

Secondly, we need to equip students with varied languages of planning that connect students to varied actors who contest and shape the future of human habitat. My colleague Carlos Vainer at Federal University of Rio de Janeiro suggests planning could be understood as a language, and what he calls confrontational planning offers the discursive and technical language of planning to movements. This implies a planning education that prepares students for engaging not only with the invited but also invented spaces of citizens’ action.

Planning understood as a contested field of action by a range of actors, recognizes the multiple centers of power, means of action and languages. Students we, as planning academics, train might end up in nonprofit civil society organizations, in municipal state-funded institutions, in the private corporate world of consultancy or real estate, or simply as concerned citizens waging their own

struggles for a dignified livelihood and humane life experience. They all face each other negotiating an urbanism that has unfortunately sailed away toward a corporate entrepreneurial urbanism (i.e., exclusive elitist urbanism). Our students need to recognize the significance of other actors equally important in the city building processes. They cannot be deceived by the criminalization of certain practices and spaces of action.

So, one might ask, what do those we train who obtain a job as professional planners need to do? Insurgent planning does not have blueprints; beyond its normative structure it cannot have a blueprint, as that would defeat the essence of imaginative and relational practices it calls for. IP is context specific and responds to the range of actors and relationships it finds in a given contested context. As each context has its own micro- politics and infra-politics (to use Kelly Robins' term 1994), there is no generic assigning of certain actions to a professional planner.

Thirdly, our curriculum needs to evoke imagination to envision an alternative future—a future that embodies a humane urbanism.

For a transformative planning education, Fanon is helpful in that he shows the role of subjectivities in enforcing or undermining the discourse and practice of dominant culture. Fanon writes about colonization of mind, values, and subjectivities through the false promise of full citizenship by speaking “proper French.” In planning education the imaginations of students are often high jacked by mainstream Euro-American planning experiences as “proper planning”. The cost of not using mainstreamed elitist planning ideas and ideals, is that we are not heard.

The elimination of alternative futures are not always through direct violence, for example by criminalization of alternatives. The removal of alternative planning practices can be also done through indirect violence by belittling the alternative— belittling them. For example, labeling alternatives as “unrealistic and hence unworthy of engagement”, or “out of touch with the present reality” has often served as an effective means of suppressing alternatives.

In this age of “realism,” where ideals are looked down on and dreaming is stigmatized, the exercise of collective or individual imagination of a just world is of prime pedagogic value. A case in point is my freshman class, which was offered a simple small group exercise to imagine how a just city would look or feel: the students had difficulty engaging with such an imaginary for even five minutes. For planning educators the frontier of anticolonial and anti-hegemonic struggle is indeed the fight for decolonizing the minds and imagination of students, to envision possibilities of a different world.

In closing, I wish to stress that because we live in times of crises both of capitalism and of our planning profession, these crises compel us towards new opportunities. The most important opportunity and challenge of progressive planning to address spatial injustices is to dare to imagine— to imagine a radically different future which is more just and embodies a humane urbanism. For that we also need a repertoire of practices that can invoke such imagining and pave the path for a humane urbanism. The space of this congress and its transnational sharing of ideas and stories is one such unique opportunity. I look forward to it.