Planning Theory & Practice

Planning with Resurgent religion: informality and gray spacing of the urban landscape

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Published online: 22 Apr 2015.

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COMMENT

Planning with Resurgent religion: informality and gray spacing of the urban landscape

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Introduction

It is well over 20 years after Talal Asad's bracing account and critique on religion as an anthropological category was published (1993). Asad brilliantly denounces religion as a definite or universal category and makes way for an understanding of the concept as the outcome of varying histories of discursive narratives (1993). Following his analysis, Ivakhiv (2006) recently challenged geographers to take seriously the study of the phenomena of sacrality and religion as ways to distribute significance over space. In order to avoid an essentialist approach to religion and fall back on the problematic definitions of religion previously criticized by Asad, I use this term rather loosely here as the sum total of understandings and spatial activities which are understood and labeled by those who perform them as emanating from religion. Thus, I hope I can bypass the difficulties of understanding the term and discuss its spatial manifestation and avoid the essentializing of it. Let us then try and take the ways people are assigning significance to places through the religious sphere seriously. In what follows I want to make the case that planners need to address and to take into consideration the plethora of religious manifestations which are currently influencing cities worldwide mostly through informal processes and gray spacing the city's landscape. A good place to start is with the observation of Yiftachel (2009a) that current planning theories rarely address processes of ethno-spatial policies and their framing of material realities. He further argues that the "communicative turn" among planning theorists, while insightful and rich, has also worked to "disengage" the field's center of gravity from its core task of understanding and critiquing the impact of urban policies, as a platform for transformative intervention. Thus, he concludes, this theoretical development has resulted in several disciplinary blind spots, among them the role of ethnicity (Yiftachel, 2006). Yiftachel's critique rests also on the overly European and North American centrality of the field and the fact that while most influential journals and scholars are focusing on the Global North and West – the world, apparently, entails other spatialities. Hence, Yiftachel suggests, it is high time to conceptualize from the "South–East" (the wide range of non-Western, non-Northern societies), and create meso-level theories which would genuinely engage with the framing realities of various South–Eastern regions. Indeed, one such issue is the differentiated resurgence of religion around the globe and its growing influences in some urban areas more than others. One of those blind spots, I argue, is our lack of acknowledgment of the re-emergence of religion and its ample spatial manifestations, mostly of marginalized groups, which are becoming more apparent in the urban landscape and therefore need to be on planners' agenda and awareness as a force to be acknowledged and dealt with. One of the

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questions that will probably remain open is whether it would be at all possible to plan for such a contingent urban development.

In her tour de force which critically revisits planning as praxis, Sandercock ([1998](#)) proposes to replace the pillars of "modernist" planning principles with a postmodern approach based on negotiation, multiple ways of knowing, and acceptance of multi-culturalism. Amongst other concerns she promotes the need of marginalized people to make their own plans (and space) outside the boundaries of official planning. She posits an opposition between modernist planning and those planning approaches that recognize and engage with "difference" and with people who voice their own marginality and transform it into a creative space for theorizing, This is indeed a challenge, as Sandercock herself admits, that might never be realized: "can such cities ever be constructed" ([1998](#), p. 183). While on the role of memory in contemporary planning, Sandercock goes as far as tagging contemporary urban planners as "thieves of memories who neglect and ignore time and again the city's past for the sake of catering and obliging to hegemonic prevailing discourses of progress" ([1998](#), p. 208). As part of her reimagining the field she relates to the need of contemporary cities to accommodate for everybody's memory as part of being in the city:

> Memory, both individual and collective, is deeply important to us. It locates us as part of something bigger than our individual existences, perhaps makes us seem less insignificant, sometimes gives us at least partial answers to questions such as Who am I? And why am I like I am? Memory locates us, as part of a family history, as part of a tribe or community, as a part of city-building and nation-making. Loss of memory is, basically loss of identity (Sandercock, [1998](#), p. 206).

Recently, and in this very journal, Fenster and Misgav (Healey, [2005](#)) remind us of Healey's engaging definition of planning as the: "interconnection of people and places, activities and territories". In their analysis of memory and place in participatory planning, Fenster and Misgav forcefully advance our understanding of the role of memory in exploring multiple meanings of place, and its active empowering role in participatory planning processes (Fenster & Misgav, [2014](#)). Trailing this nuanced approach to memory as a way of being in the city, in what follows I will revisit these ideas as I narrate and explore the recent reconstruction of a small mosque in Acre, a mixed city in Northern Israel. Following my interlocutors in Acre I wish to present the struggle over the mosque as indeed the struggle to "be in one's city", to be less insignificant and locate oneself in one's urban landscape through mnemonic manifestations. Albeit, the struggle over the mosque will serve mostly as a way to demonstrate one of the growing challenges of contemporary planning; informality and gray spacing. My overarching argument throughout this *Comment* article is that religion (in much the same way as memory and indeed as part of collective memory) is becoming a dominant factor in different part of the world in these highly important urban phenomena.

Urban informality and gray spacing: introducing the religious factor

Modern urban planning, characterized by a rational, centralistic and superimposed approach to urban design, is becoming increasingly vulnerable to gray spaces and informal activities (Roy & AlSayyad, [2004](#); Roy, [2005](#); [2009](#); Yiftachel, [2009a](#)). Rapid urban growth is gradually transforming many cities around the world. In this socio-spatial process, various minority groups whose voices were formerly weak or silent in modern urban politics are challenging the landscapes, and through them are speaking and emerging as more powerful local players. These groups are voicing their claims against the power of neoliberal logic that is paramount in contemporary urban planning based primarily on maximizing growth, cost efficiency and accumulation (Harvey, [1989](#)). In this context, religion is becoming a platform that serves to mobilize such groups within the urban sphere (AlSayyad & Massoumi, [2010](#); Beaumont & Barker, [2011](#); Kiong & Kong, [2000](#); Garbin, [2012](#)). Religion provides a useful framework for competing narratives and spatial logic as well as for the construction of new political geographies in the city. Thus, various distinct groups weave

new patterns into the urban landscape as ways of claiming the city through religiously based identity politics (Hervieu-Léger, 2002; Orsi, 1985).

Religious buildings and discourse provide a focal point for the social integration of minority groups with other groups, and for the recognition of minority groups by the state. For example, in Colombo, Sri Lanka, evangelical Christian groups convert private houses into churches as a way of resisting and overcoming both formal and informal forms of repression by the state (Woods, 2012, 2013). The recently constructed Essalam Mosque as a "mega-mosque" in southern Rotterdam clearly demonstrates how marginalized groups engage in a process of feeling 'at home' in their city through constructing religious buildings that are then often contested by majority groups (Tamimi Arab, 2013a, 2013b). Against the might of contemporary neoliberal logic of city marginalized/ dispossessed communities must find different narratives to "claim their city." One such compelling narrative and indeed growing force in mobilizing groups within cities is religion (Yiftachel and Roded, 2010). To understand the religious factor and its growing influence on the urban landscape, I follow the phenomena conceptualized recently as "urban informality" mostly in Roy's epistemology of planning (Roy, 2005, 2009) and amended and developed further in Yiftachel's "gray spacing" (Yiftachel, 2009a, 2009b). These phenomena are noted to have emerged in recent decades in response to worldwide economic liberalization. As concepts, they help explain the current dynamics of the city, because we can regard the religious claims of minorities as claims to the city and as expressions of citizenship insurgency manifested through identity politics of alterity. Urban informality was suggested to indicate an organizing logic, a system of norms that governs the process of urban transformation itself (Roy & AlSayyad, 2004). Against the standard dichotomy of the allegedly separated sectors within the city, formal and informal, Roy and AlSayyad propose that informality is not a separate sector but rather a series of transactions that connect different economies and spaces to one another. Therefore, urban informality is a paradigm that refers to the organizing logic and system of norms that govern urban transformations (Roy & AlSayyad, 2004). Informality denotes a state of exception from the formal order of urbanization and Roy (2005) urges planners to use and even embrace this state of exception to mitigate some of the vulnerabilities of the urban poor. Further, she claims that dealing with informality requires recognizing the "right to the city" of those so far deprived and do not fit neatly into the prevailing and hegemonic ownership model of property. Part and parcel of her project is to showcase that such issues are of relevance not only in Third World (or the Global South) contexts but also to American planners concerned with distributive justice (Roy, 2009). She argues urban informality is not a system of norms but rather that which is placed outside the norms, be it that of state's legislations or through economic regulations. Albeit, this contextualization does not address fully nor acknowledge the growing influence of new types of colonial relations which are becoming more and more common in contemporary urban regimes, thus facilitating a process of "creeping apartheid" (Yiftachel, 2009a). Consequently, the urban is gradually succumbing to an Agambenian "state of exception" that creates a particular logic of governmentality which allows for a double-layered constitutional system (Agamben, 2006). The legal production of the state of exception enables the construction or emergence of a space between fundamental rights and the rule of law, wherein states can remain lawful while transgressing individual rights. Further, the state's "power of inclusive exclusion" (Ophir, Givoni, & Hanafi, 2009) exposes particular populations to premeditated marginalization and other forms of violence in a multi scalar setting from the personal through the urban to the national. At the same time these spaces where such forms of governmentality exist may also serve as the place of the ungovernable where power can be shipwrecked and challenged.

"Gray space" means the position of various urban phenomena in the vaguely defined gap betwixt the official and legal and the destroyed, evicted and illegal. Yiftachel suggests that there is a rising tide of observable gray spaces in various urban settings worldwide (Yiftachel, 2009a). As a concept, gray space relates to urban relations, people, and structures that are positioned outside the

hegemonic grip and control of the official planning authorities, yet tolerated or at least exist in perpetual and continuous dialogue with them. These spaces are "neither integrated nor eliminated," neither accepted nor actively prohibited by authorities (Yiftachel, 2009b). They form urban enclaves/margins/spaces that operate informally and are being tolerated by authorities either by tacit consent or because the authorities lack the ability to respond. Marginal individuals and minority groups can operate in these spaces to actively influence the city. The city's informalization process may lead to a state in which ownership, use and purpose of land are ambiguous and transitory (Roy, 2005). Yiftachel explores these new, informal spaces and urban geography and tracks the way they conjure a new type of urban citizenship and propel ongoing proliferation of urban gray spaces. He regards this emerging urban political geography, identified as gray space, as the spatial manifestation of the rise of enhanced urban colonial relations (Yiftachel, 2009a).

I wish to add the religious dimension to the current understandings by showing how gray spacing is turning into an important, highly present, and transformative factor within cities. To uncover the way religion is used to claim city spaces I follow Orsi's (1985, 1999, p. 45) "Urban religion", as "a site of converging and conflicting visions and voices, practices and orientations which arise out of the complex desires, needs and fears of many different people." As such I argue that religious spaces, buildings, and discourse are emerging collectively as important phenomena in the growing informality of the city, and that religion predominates in driving socio-political change that in turn engenders the reorganization of urban spaces.

Context – The Lababidi Mosque in Acre

The Lababidi Mosque is located in, today, the ethnically mixed city of Acre in northern Israel. It was built in a newly emerging modern suburb outside the historical city during the British Mandate (1917–1948), by Ahmad Lababidi. In 1930, Lababidi, a son of a local wealthy Muslim family, constructed a new mosque as part of a private/family religious endowment (*waqf dhuri*). The mosque was meant to accommodate the needs of Acre's small population of wealthy Muslims who lived outside the walls (interview with N, 18 April 2012). A modestly proportioned (20 × 8 m) rectangular building was built with fine-cut local stones on an empty lot owned by the Lababidi endowment. The establishment of the Jewish state of Israel in 1948 had a dramatic effect on the development of the city, on its former Arab urban community, and hence on the mosque. As of other former Arab towns, Acre succumbed to new types of political geography and urban governance. The city has changed due to influx of new Jewish immigrants and repopulation plans by the state. Acre, as other towns sharing the same urban history, became part of a series of cities known locally as "mixed." The classification of cities as "mixed" in the Israeli context might be misleading as it essentially means a city dominated by one ethnic group, namely the Jewish one. This ethnocratic logic of governance is a leading factor in the growing informality within the city.

The modern and newly constructed parts of the city, even though initially designated for Jewish citizens, shortly succumbed to simple logic of supply and demand (Torstrick, 2000). As time passed, the new neighborhoods became more and more heterogeneous. During the 1970s and 1908s, Acre's Arab citizens bought apartments from Jewish owners. The cumulative effect of these individual acts was to ultimately transform these newly developed neighborhoods. Against the might of the ethnocratic urban planning, the minority was engaged in a "quiet encroachment of the ordinary," that is, a protracted and pervasive advancement of ordinary people on the propertied and powerful in order to survive and improve their lives (Bayat, 2000, p. 545, 2007). These incremental and isolated pragmatic decisions are changing the city as marginalized people are positioning themselves outside the hegemonic grip and challenging the "official" urban plan as imposed by state and ethnocratic hegemonic logic.

Since 1948, the Lababidi Mosque was closed and banned from use by its former congregation. Legally and officially, the mosque was part of the private Islamic endowment (*waqf dhuri*) of the Lababidi family, but its ownership rights could not be exercised or even restored (Interview with N, 18 April 2012). Thus, the mosque was left alone in a state of legal limbo; banned to its former community and unavailable to the local economic forces that could restore it to active use. Local initiatives to restore the mosque to the hands of the community were sporadic and ineffective (interview with F, 17 January 2013). The Arab minority lacked the relevant skills, political position, and public influence to change the course of hegemonic urban planning. This would be facilitated later on by disempowering planning authorities through increasing the frequency of efforts to frame the rights to the city through religious identity and demands.

In 2009, a new director and board members were appointed to the Al-Jazzar Charitable Trust, the legal body that oversees the mosque. The trust initiated a complete renovation of the mosque with the unconcealed intention to re-open it and allow it to operate again after a dormancy of 65 years. As succinctly explained by its entrepreneurial current director, Salim Najami:

> There was a need for a place where Muslims could pray in the new city, indeed there was a need. It is not that I wanted to provoke someone. The mosque was already there in 1948 and I do understand the circumstances [the ample repercussions of the establishment of Israel as a Jewish state], but what I do not understand is the situation in which the majority of the Muslim community lives outside the Old City, but we are not allowed to build anything. We are third of the city's population. Two thirds of the community lives outside the walls. Yet they do not have as much as one mosque. Why must an old man who lives in the new city walk and pray in the Old City? I acted with no backup from any religious authorities and I did not ask for one. I wanted to act quietly and without any publicity or provocation. (Salim Najami, interview, 26 December 2012)

As soon as the renovation started, the city was abuzz. The reactions ranged from expressions of fear that the city would become dominated by its Arab population (one of the Jewish participants exclaimed: "this is a Trojan horse") to accusations of negligence by the mayor for not doing enough to stop this "shameful act" (http://www.akkonet.co.il/forums/viewtopic.php?t=294). However, Najami remained undeterred and was able to see the controversial project to it successful end. Thus, religion as heritage and religion as memory served as a platform of being in the city and provided for a way to challenge current planning policies and the ethnocratic logic governing the city.

Planning with religion? Gray spacing and the challenge to planners

Najami's conduct fits well with Holston (2009) understanding of the urban insurgent as a political opponent that destabilizes the dominant regime of citizenship. Religious experiences, religious sites, and buildings are all used by the different agents of the city as platforms to defamiliarize the current and prevailing urban logic and planning. The contingency of the project and the role played by Najami clearly illustrate the difficulties of theorizing about or factoring informality into contemporary urban planning. Gray spacing is the challenge that usually remains unmapped, uncharted and unregulated. In the case at hand, the municipality had no real influence on events because it has no jurisdiction over the mosque (5 November 2012, oral communication, Mayor Shimon Lankri). Consequently, the mayor and other city authorities played insignificant roles in the public conflict that was sparked by the project. On 11 March 2012 the mosque was inaugurated and a prayer service conducted – the first since 1948. Against the prevailing urban governing logic the success of the mosque's renovation enables the infiltration of a religious minority into the urban landscape and daily existence, providing a prime example of gray spacing and the political geography of informality in Acre.

The claiming of religious heritage by religious minorities (as it is transformed into the physical form of religious buildings) not only informs their religious identity but is also closely associated with emancipatory and highly politicized processes. These processes render minorities and

marginalized groups more susceptible to scrutiny and suspicion as they intensify their contest with hegemonic discourse and construct visible signs (i.e. religious sites) that rise from religious alterity, different spatial logic, and different understanding of the city. These claims are exerted through sacred places and their renovations. Thus, conflicting voices, visions, and desires emerge from religiously framed identity politics to contend with and prevail against modernistic planning procedure and spatial logic (Orsi, 1999).

By gray spacing the Lababidi back into the city, the struggle successfully linked spatial politics to suggest that the marginalized community could be more fully incorporated in the city's more inclusive citizenry. Thus, religion is becoming a key contributing factor in the growing informality of the city. For minority and marginalized groups, gray spacing the city through religious claims offers greater leverage in urban struggles against contemporary hegemonic planning. The case from Acre, which is surely echoed in numerous cases in the Global North and South, indicates that the state is less enthusiastic and less successful in challenging these claims. In the current resurgence of religion, these phenomena are bound to become much more central in shaping and influencing urban planning, and they thus merit growing engagement by planners. Be that as it may, one need always remember Sandercock's cautionary and skeptical remark which challenges planners and doubts our very possibility to entail such memories, heritage and alterity in our contemporary cities.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

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