

Diversity and difference: a comment

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The time is absolutely right to turn our minds to how Canadian planners attend to diversity and difference. Everyone wants social peace in our cities; the alternative is unspeakably ugly, as we know so well. Responsibility for the quality of the social fabric belongs to everyone and every institution. What's the job here for the institution of planners? My comments about planners working in ethno-racially diverse contexts build on the two preceding papers, but the emphasis is on immigration-related diversity.

Why act now? Witness two sets of points. First, a profound impact on the national urban system today comes from immigration which David Ley and Daniel Hiebert (2001) argue is Canada's most important population policy after health care. Indeed, it serves as an implicit urban policy in the view of Larry Bourne and Jim Simmons (2003, 32). However, that urban system and the unstated population policy partly driving it are evolving outside of any actual national urban policy because, as Jeanne Wolfe (2003) argues, no such policy exists. Consequently, city and regional planners are in the position of having to respond to these non-policy effects. Consider a second set of points. When Canadians compare themselves to the U.S. they say the country's diversity is the second most distinctive feature after health care, offering it as a positive statement (see Goonewardena et al., 2004, section 3). Further, over three-quarters of the population applaud the influence immigrants have on the way things are going in Canada. This stunning response was 28 percentage points higher than that for any of the other 43 countries surveyed (Pew Research Center 2002, Q35, T-36). Putting the two sets together, one can see a clear role for planners that could be undertaken right now because of already-existing positive energy.

Canadians may be almost as committed to immigrant settlement as to health care and environmental protection. But let's recall that experience with environmental protection in particular has taught us a couple of things. First,

Canadian Journal of Urban Research, Volume 13, Issue 1, Supplement pages 46-49.

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ISSN: 1188-3774

a supportive milieu is only a start; people need well-negotiated and signposted paths plus easy-to-use tools in order to act on their convictions. Second, professionals are certainly needed as one of the groups figuring out the pathways and tools. Also, we know things change. The national urban system is bifurcated, with substantial growth in already-large cities and substantial decline in so many of the smaller. International competition for immigrants is increasing. Racialized practices are being blamed for tears in the social fabric, especially in the larger cities. Where are all those leading? Will today's public goodwill be eroded tomorrow?

Act on what, exactly? In a nutshell, work is needed to revise the notion of spatial justice in planning and how it's usually advanced by applying a particular interpretation of equality to planning practices. The two papers explain that planning was built on a notion of equality that expects practitioners to treat everyone identically. This is sometimes called formal equality. In recent decades, Canada and many other states have adopted human rights legislation. As the founding ideas of human rights legislation are slowly combed through Canadian institutions (family, employment, religions, education, government, etc.) it turns out that formal equality is not the only kind of equality needed to address rights. Substantive equality, or a form of equality of outcome, or equity, must be achieved in cases where various distinctions such as culture, gender, physical ability and sexual orientation are in play. Each institution and profession is figuring out what equity looks like in its own field. Planners are well back in the pack of deciding what equity looks like in their context.

One of many reasons for planning's sluggish movement on this may be thanks to a rather muddled focus. Planning's attention is primarily on resource distribution, although its mandate to serve the public interest gives the impression it operates from a reasonably thick understanding of social well-being. If this characterization sometimes has fit, it rarely seems to now. Society chooses to use distribution and redistribution techniques to reward and support members via access to resources. The results of distributing resources in urban and regional space describe, statistically and otherwise, what individuals, families, and so on have. Planning has built its practices around resource distribution. This is evidenced in the importance planners give to working with aggregated data about what individuals, households, and families have; to working with associations — such as ratepayers, boards of trade and commerce, homebuilders' organization, and developers and their organizations — regarding their shares; and to understanding what the economy is producing that can be distributed in their jurisdiction.

Planning-related literature of the last decade or so illustrates that resource distribution is just one fundamental dimension of justice in the politics of urban life. The other is recognition. Recognition was brought to the fore in the so-called identity struggles led by feminists in the 1970s and has evolved tremendously since. Theorists and practitioners have grappled with the significance of one's self presentation (which relates to being, not having) on one's capacity to have and use resources. Distribution and recognition, having and being, are tightly interwoven in spatial justice contexts. Moreover, being — a woman, a Black person, a paraplegic — isn't optional. Thus, since non-optional self-presentation affects having (which has been empirically demonstrated again and again), and having is acknowledged as part of social justice, then it follows that justice is served by simultaneously attending to both having and being, distribution and recognition, in theory and in practice. This thickens up the concept of equality to include substantive equality in respect of human rights. The writers of the papers lament that most planning educators and practitioners ignore this shift — that is, from distribution teamed with equality, to distribution + recognition teamed with equality + equity. Meanwhile, the country has moved on in some respects such as in law and social conventions. When I teach senior undergraduate planning students about the connection between ethno-racial diversity and planning practices they absorb it like nothing I have ever taught before. They show me they are already “there” in an ethno-racially diverse world; what they want are concepts, language, and tools so they can work “there”.

Who should get down to path-negotiating and tool-designing? This is a task for planning educators, joined up with practitioners, in turn joined up with constituencies working on planning issues to overcome isolation rooted in differences. All need to sit together and work out tools and actions that everyone can run with — not only themselves but also politicians and the public. Professional planning organizations should be falling all over themselves to support such initiatives. Genuine creativity is called for because when it comes to the country's experience with ethno-racial diversity, Canada is in a unique situation whether inventoried by attitudes, numbers, policies, laws, history, or conventions. Those who take this on will get to design from within Canada's own specific, exciting situation. And then share with others.

These papers greatly help focus the debate. Now let's roll up our sleeves.

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