

## Commentary: Where Do Theories Come From?

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Qadeer and Agrawal's article is a welcome addition to the research on multicultural cities and planning practices. Their empirical survey of Planning Departments in North America, using Qadeer's policy index, is a useful starting point for measuring the degree of engagement with cultural diversity (although this really needs a cautionary note that relying on survey replies is not the same as actually studying what's really going on, on the ground). And their insistence that a strategy of 'reasonable accommodation' is the key to multicultural planning is an important reminder that there are other overarching goals such as sustainability, affordable housing, and job creation, that also need to be accommodated in a never-ending process of negotiation in specific contexts.

Where I want to take issue with this article is in its treatment of planning theorists and of the relation between theory and practice. The authors argue that there is a disconnect between theory and practice, that practice is outpacing theory, 'which is largely occupied with advocating greater sensitivity to cultural differences and emphasizing measures to involve ethnic minorities', that 'planning theory presents a static view of planning institutions as well as of the cultures of urban communities', and that planning theorists 'have not moved beyond the narratives of the 1970s and are not taking into account rapidly changing reality'. As one of a number of planning theorists quoted in this piece, I not only want to counter every one of these charges, but also to argue that it is Qadeer and Agrawal who are behind the times when it comes to being aware of the shifts in the theorizing over the past decade. The most significant of these shifts is the move from multiculturalism to interculturalism as a description of the new reality.

Before I move to that argument though, I want to explain where my own theories come from. In contrast to the authors' assertion that planning theory is (merely) 'a series of opinions and propositions', my own theorizing in *Cosmopolis 2: Mongrel Cities of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (2003) was based on empirical work in three culturally diverse municipalities in Melbourne, Australia in the late 1990s (Sandercock and Klinger 1998a, 1998b). Reflecting on that study when I arrived in

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Canada in 2001, I came to the conclusion that the fact of cultural difference was a challenge to planning systems in four profound ways, which I then elaborated (Sandercock 2003, Chapter 6). That book was written in 2002. After that, I immersed myself in the realities of my new home, Vancouver, doing in-depth ethnographic work in its most culturally diverse neighbourhood, Collingwood. Over the next six years my colleague Giovanni Attili and I produced a 50 minute documentary, 'Where strangers become neighbours' (Attili and Sandercock, 2007) and a book of the same title (Sandercock and Attili, 2009). Each of these works is essentially a song of praise about Vancouver's adaptation to its multicultural urban realities, noting that this is the result not only of the planning system but more importantly of a national framework of legislation and policy in support of multiculturalism and anti-discrimination and of persistent grass-roots campaigns by and for the rights of minorities. The fact that Qadeer and Agrawal completely ignore this recent work suggests that they are not keeping up with the evolution of the field. It is not a fair argumentative strategy to characterize and condemn another author on the basis of one piece of work done at one point in time. And here their article really is flawed in their repeated generalizations about planning theory and theorists (each from a different country and context), without bothering to keep up with the outputs of the various theorists whom they reference.

Returning to my original point about where my theorizing comes from, this new work develops an argument about interculturalism as the only workable theoretical foundation for the diverse and ever-evolving realities of multicultural cities, *based on* my observations of the extraordinary transformation of the Collingwood neighborhood over a period of twenty years, from a predominantly Anglo-European demographic of the 1980s to the opposite today (only 27% of the population speak English as their first language).

What I posited in 2003 was a potential theoretical shift from multiculturalism to interculturalism, that is, a shift from the celebration of ethno-cultural differences to the building of bridges between cultures, establishing political community rather than ethno-cultural identity as the basis for a sense of belonging in multicultural societies. This was then reinforced through my study of the role of the Collingwood Neighborhood House (CNH) as a catalyst for building an inclusive community, using a community development approach to bridge vast ethno-cultural differences. CNH's vocabulary of accommodation to difference is a vocabulary of rights of presence and engagement, of bridging difference and getting along through relationship building, through creating the spaces for intercultural dialogue to happen through the delivery of programs and services, dialogue that occurs in the micro-public spaces of everyday encounter and prosaic negotiation of difference.

Such initiatives don't automatically become sites of social inclusion. They need organizational and discursive strategies that are designed to build voice, to foster

a sense of common benefit, to develop confidence among disempowered groups, and to arbitrate when disputes arise: all of which requires outreach to marginalized groups, systematic anti-racism and diversity training strategies, and the conscious choice NOT to provide any programs or services on an ethno-culturally specific basis!

But these neighborhood-based organizational and discursive strategies cannot thrive in the absence of a broader intercultural political culture: that is, one with effective anti-racism policies, with strong legal, institutional and informal sanctions against racial and cultural hatred. Canada as a nation, and Vancouver as a city have striven, albeit imperfectly, to create such a political culture in the past three decades. At federal government level there has been an effort to create a sense of national identity and national belonging that is grounded in ideals of active citizenship, democracy, and political community, rather than in notions of 'Canadianness' grounded in race or ethnicity, and this is a very important distinction between Canada and European countries, including the UK.

I have made two arguments in this brief commentary, one methodological, the other substantive. The first is that planning theorists' work usually evolves over time and that it is unfair to characterize any one theorist's work as 'static' or 'stuck in the 70s' on the basis of the reading of just one article or book. The second is that there has been an important evolution in the theory and practice of multiculturalism in Canada over the past decade, which has significant implications for the practice of planning and for planning institutions. I hope that Qadeer and Agrawal might give greater attention to these issues in their ongoing work on cultural accommodation in planning practice.

### References

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