

**a critique of  
FORMALIST  
URBAN PLANNING**  
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**For all emissaries of joy. Special thanks to my advisor, Joyce P. Jacobsen.**

## INTRODUCTION

**Space matters when thinking about social interaction. Moreover, the study of society becomes more enlivened as we study the behavior of individuals across space and the influence of physical environments on social patterns. But what can social studies have to do with the forms of urban space?**

While urban forms can reveal patterns of social behavior, planning theorists have largely prevented a reciprocal relationship between social studies and the practice of urban planning. These theorists have perennially re-affirmed the common notion of urban planning as a strategy for satisfying social objectives and interests. Though the social role of the urban planner has occasionally morphed because of political action, such as after the Civil Rights Movement, planning theorists have always held that urban planning is merely a function of social forces.<sup>1</sup>

As such, the ability of urban planners to transgress their institutional boundaries has been subordinated to the planning practice's narrowly defined social objectives. Furthermore, the internal necessity for broadening the field's perspective has been non-existent.<sup>2</sup> For example, the field of urban planning itself has only dealt with the inequalities of social systems as a political matter; planners have seldom taken criticism as an indication that widespread change in the basis of planning should occur (Fainstein 2001, 16 fn. 65). Accordingly, after the social protests of the 1960s, it was not long before economic development once again reigned supreme as the key objective in the planner's mode of action.

However, through the remainder of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century a cleavage between planning theory and practice developed. The intellectual trends associated with the politics of the Civil Rights Movement

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1 Susan Fainstein has surveyed planning theory for "stories" of the urban redevelopment process and developed her own synthesis of liberal, structuralist, and regime theory. But she too has been content with analyzing the "economic factors driving interest formation" in the redevelopment process. She also qualifies her position by stating: "I do not assume...that economic factors produce only one possible interpretation of interest or that economic situation (as opposed to community, race, and gender) is the only 'objective social interest' to be maximized" (Fainstein 2001, 15). Nonetheless, Fainstein has still been primarily concerned with interest formation from a "structured position derived from the interaction between economic, communal, and ideological forces at a particular historic moment" (Ibid).

2 Alexander Garvin is representative of a number of scholars and planners who have refrained from transgressing the social boundaries of the planning practice. In the following passage, he argues that Robert Moses was a "complex" public figure. However, Garvin justifies this statement by noting how Moses conformed to social objectives. "Moses was far more complex than his critics admit. His renewal projects were neither simplistic slum clearance nor merely a spur to the filtering out of slum tenements...He conceived of [Le Corbusier's urbanism] to counter the middle-class exodus to the suburbs, and to help institutions in the area expand" (Garvin 1980, 77). Thus, even the most exceptional of city planners have been reactionary agents according to liberal planning theory.

continued to hold swagger in planning theory despite their loss of importance within the planning field. Several planning theorists analyzed the correlation between the outcomes of planning objectives and the perpetuation of social inequalities. Among them, Susan Fainstein questioned whether local officials could ever “produce growth with equity” (Ibid). Additionally, numerous other approaches were employed by theorists to answer this question. Sanders and Stone attempted to stress the principle that political success is worth more than economic success, and that planners should stress equity before economic growth. Yet, Fainstein and a veritable compendium of other urban scholars left the question of planning and inequality unanswered. They simply resolved the process of urban redevelopment with respect to only the “character of the urban regime” and the “unfolding of the process” (19). As such, they enacted both a nebulous and politically uncharged approach to planning.

To further explore urban planning’s production of social inequalities, we must further temper Fainstein’s scope and venture beyond the subsets of liberal, structuralist, and regime planning theory. Though these theories are helpful in linking social forces to the inequities of some planning outcomes, the disciplines of urban economics and architecture and urbanism are necessary when challenging urban planning’s disproportionate social benefits. They help connect the inequities of development to the urban forms of development.

While past trends may have implied that urban planning has responded to movements in architecture and matters of economic efficiency, the responsive strategies have been superficially pursued. Urban forms can have meaning for the social studies, but planners have excessively adhered to the formal prescriptions of architecture and urbanism without regard to the social significance of form, even though the architectural discipline has analyzed urban forms as agents of social change and symbolic materials in the construction of cultural and social identity. Moreover, as we search for theoretical groundwork with which to advocate the importance of urban forms within the planning practice, urban economics presents itself as a usable framework for assigning and measuring the value of form. The synthesis of urbanism and urban economics also provides a new goal for urban planning’s mode of action: obtaining the optimal formal development of cities with respect to the special character of local forms. Thus, interdisciplinary approaches in the social studies can frame the analysis of urban forms as a means to ameliorate the inefficacies of the urban planning practice.

## **A Brief History of Formalist Urban Planning**

Urban planning gained acceptance in the United States as private property became increasingly subject to the public's interest. In the mid-1800s, landscape architects and city planners demolished villages and shantytowns and built neighborhoods around large parks and expansive boulevards. In Brooklyn, for instance, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux's plans for Fort Greene and Prospect Parks acted as catalysts in the development and design of the surrounding neighborhoods.

In 1906, in *Strickley v. Highland Boy Gold Mining Co.*, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld takings for economic development and validated the promotion of economic development as a function of government and liberal planning (*Kelo v. New London* 2005, 14). However, despite the well-advertised success of Central Park as a stimulant to local property values, it seemed that planners idealized their importance to society in broader terms than simply associates to economic development. Their vision encompassed the design and the efficient development of the entire physical city. Affiliated with their vision was the method of large-scale, comprehensive planning harkened by the work of Olmsted and Vaux and the emerging practice of zoning. In 1926, the Supreme Court validated the right of municipalities to zone with *Euclid v. Ambler*, and the planner's idealistic objectives gained national credence. Thus, in its youthful stages, the American city planning practice was in touch with the social value of urban form and promisingly assigned fairly equal weight to issues of urban design, economic efficiency, and economic development.

Changes to the mode of urban planning could be blamed on political and economic forces. During the Great Depression, city planning became a function of the New Deal's fiscal and political legacy, which primarily used the institution of planning to achieve liberal objectives. Urban redevelopment was championed as a more politically and economically viable function for urban planning, even more so than the regulation of the use of land and the form of urban development.

Under these pressures, planners looked to past examples of liberal planning achievements, such as Central Park, and relied on enhancements of the public sphere in addition to large-scale redevelopment to increase labor demand and stimulate investment. Their plans were formulated with approximations of household preferences for local public goods, including the desire for open space.

However, while these plans worked to an extent (for instance, by helping clear slum areas and

reduce suburbanization), the urban forms of large-scale redevelopment produced enormous social costs associated with the effects of displacement and the widespread physical damage to local urban forms. These costs accumulated as political groups mounted campaigns against the federal government's Title 1 slum clearance program and its disproportionate benefits to the middle and upper classes.

When political-economic transformations in the early to late 1970s brought forth an era of fiscal restraints, new directions in liberal planning continued to take place. Decreased social expenditures combined with the political rebuking of large-scale redevelopment limited the use of the modern superblock as a planning device. However, urban planners were persistent in their pursuit of urban economic development and utilized modernist-inspired urban architectural forms to accommodate open space within congested central cities. Liberal urban design policy adopted "privately-owned public space" as large-scale development's concession to the public realm of the streets.

In New York, this policy brought sub-optimal outcomes from the use of urban land as it was often implemented without acknowledgement of the actual level of local demand for open public space. Furthermore, the policy's inefficiencies were generally indicative of modernism's universalizing of site and context. As such, the urban forms of new developments with "privately-owned public space" (i.e. the building, the block, the setbacks, and the various demarcations between private and public space) were built irrespectively of local forms, such as the public right-of-way comprised of pre-existent streets and sidewalks. Nevertheless, variations on this policy were upheld as the inefficiencies of "privately-owned public space" were seconded to liberal planning objectives of economic development, the prevention of suburban flight, and the image making initiatives to create newer, more modernized downtowns.

In the newest era of urban action known as entrepreneurialism, "global cities" and political-economic transformations have increased the availability of capital for urban real-estate development. Urban forms have been reified as a type of cultural capital— "symbolic capital," which affluent groups have attempted to integrate into their spatial and material practices.

Post-modern trends in urbanism have facilitated this mode in the social production of urban forms. Whereas modernism valued urban form as an agent for social change, post-modernism has held that iconographic urban forms have social value in their communicable power to edify selected

elements of social and cultural identity. Thus, urban form becomes a source of symbolic capital for both affluent groups and city planners who wish to physically and materially iterate conceptions of cultural status and institutional identity.

The planner's intended message for urban forms has always been more responsive to changing institutional and political goals than to theory and design. When Jane Jacobs's urbanism was incorporated into liberal planning objectives, the urban forms of the traditional city were recalled by citizens, preservation boards, and city officials and were suddenly worth preserving. However, though planners recognized the political demise of modernist urbanism and embraced its formal alternatives, the cleavage between urban design and local urban fabrics persisted. Essentially, planners created new urban realities but nonetheless maintained a number of formal references to the past.

Through the twenty-first century, the planner's sponsorship of urban form has depended on refined liberal and entrepreneurial agendas for increasing the city's inter-regional and international competitiveness. "Distinctive architectural elements" have become the media for image making and selling points for cities and developers alike. Frank Gehry's deconstructivist architecture has been adopted as a form of symbolic capital. His trademark curvilinear and multi-planar forms have bespoken the liberal planner's objective to motivate urban development through the material assertion of a culturally sophisticated civic identity.

However, as representations of liberal planning goals, abstracted urban forms will rarely ever meet local preferences for local public goods. As such, they become not only symbols of cultural and social identity but also symbols of the upper class's command over the urbanization process. Typically, these forms come in contact with local preferences in gentrifying neighborhoods, wherein the spatial practices of the upper classes deconstruct vulnerable local forms and subject them to the erection of new physical realities. This reality is an abstraction of the inequalities of urban development, liberal planning objectives, and architectural and urbanism principles.

## **A Road Map**

Interdisciplinary approaches in the social studies can frame the analysis of urban forms as a means to ameliorate the inefficacies of the urban planning practice. The structure of this thesis is dependent upon the premise that an interdisciplinary approach to urban forms can increase

the urban planning field's responsibility to all social groups. This approach has been the result of three scholastic accomplishments. Architectural thinkers have explicated the social meaning of urban forms; critical Marxist theorists have identified the class conflict embedded in the forms of the physical urban environment; and urban economists have lent a framework for analyzing the optimality of new forms of urban development.

The approach of this thesis will be exemplified over three chapters.

Chapter 1 describes the mode of liberal urban planning which has historically perpetuated social inequalities. To this end, the chapter shows how urban planning could be seen as a function of social forces, which have brought political-economic transformations and changes in the methods of liberal urban planning.

Chapter 2 develops the interdisciplinary approach to urban forms and provides historical examples in which the three disciplines have coalesced to create effective and socially efficient planning policy. Additionally, the chapter also provides a critique of liberal urban planning's formalist policy-making.

Because Chapter 2 incorporates just three different architectural theories on urban forms, it only briefly exposes the social impact and meaning of urban form from within the discipline of architecture and urbanism. Yet these three theories (from Le Corbusier, Jane Jacobs, and Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter) are quite representative of the key points in the ideological shifts between modernism, anti-modernism, and post-modernism. Moreover, they also establish the possibility for activating the study of urban form as a source for change within urban planning.

Chapter 2 then moves on to discuss urban form in the context of urban economics and the concepts of Pareto optimality and local public goods. The argument pursued is that the socially optimal form of economic development can be theoretically approximated by examining local preferences for the urban forms that embody the supply of local public goods, such as open space. David Harvey's Marxist critical urban theory is then used to identify the spatial practices that perpetuate urbanization's inequities and to provide subject matter for a new interdisciplinary approach to planning.

Chapters 1 and 2 both lead up to Chapter 3's case study of the Atlantic Yards project in Brooklyn, New York. The first section of the chapter documents the creation of the neighborhoods that surround the Atlantic Yards site. The second section connects the Atlantic Yards to social

objective interests, shifts in the modes of planning, and political-economic transformations. The stories of the Dodger's move to Los Angeles and the plans for the Atlantic Terminal Urban Renewal Area reinforce the information provided in Chapter 1. They also further exemplify the inefficiencies of formalist liberal planning objectives, even when they are predicated on other veins of urban planning theory, like regime theory and structuralism. The third section ties in the interdisciplinary approach with an analysis of the plan and design guidelines of the Atlantic Yards development. The inter-urban conflict of spatial practices and the notion of neighborhood abstraction will be further explored at this point.

The concluding chapter will explore opportunities for implementing changes in the planning practice with an interdisciplinary approach to urban form.

## **CHAPTER 1: URBAN PLANNING AND FORMALISM**

**Liberal theory states that it is simply the actions of individuals pursuing their fundamental interests in self-preservation that gives rise to the division of labor, the market, and the subsequent rise of market cities. Urban development is “market driven” insofar as cities and the market itself are the products of rationally motivated individuals acting in terms of their own material self-interests.**

Liberal theory, though, confines itself to analyzing the expression of these material interests within only the political and economic realms of life. Thus, the process of urban development can be studied in terms of the changes in the political and economic behavior of individuals due to the advent of new inventions and ideologies. Once people come together in cities and form civil societies, it follows that policies emanating from technological and ideological progress can be used to manipulate our political-economic behavior. In this manner, the administrators of civil society can govern the process of urban development by aligning the interests of individuals in hopes that development will then produce more desirable outcomes for the collectivized interests of society.

Unlike structuralists, liberal theorists do not analyze the urban implications of any of the more abstract historical theories of political economy, such as the Marxist material dialectic. Rather, liberals give ultimate primacy to how the economic behavior of individuals pursuing their material interests leads to the development of cities. Accordingly, the typical market city develops because three conditions are satisfied. First, agricultural surpluses can supply food to both the farmers and urban dwellers. Second, the variances in productivity that imply comparative advantage are great enough that transportation costs are offset and trade can occur. Third, scale economies in transportation mean that trade intermediaries are more efficient at transporting and marketing goods than either the farmer or the urban worker; these intermediaries cluster around central marketplaces. Firms form to further reduce the transaction costs involved with trade, and the clustering of firms and industry produces external economies of scale, or agglomerative economies, which allow one firm to benefit from the decisions made by other firms, such as when the production costs of one firm decrease as the output of another firm increases. This clustering also generates increases in labor productivity and allows employers to increase wages to attract more workers to the city. In summation, firms and people come together in cities and civil societies to further and protect their interests.

Within liberal theory, there are multiple visions for the role of the city planner. This thesis will explore three of those visions emanating from the disciplines of architecture and urban economists and from what Susan Fainstein has termed liberal planning theory (Fainstein 2001, 10).<sup>3</sup> As a theoretical guide for planners, liberal planning theory stresses the planner's role in furthering any society's objective interest in economic development.

In pursuance of this goal, liberal planning theory has developed policies to help governments spur economic growth by manipulating urban labor markets. Planners and municipal governments have found that increases in the demand for labor and the attraction of more firms to their cities can occur by improving the educational system, public services, business and residential infrastructures, and by cutting taxes. Crucial to liberal planning policy are urban redevelopment and the subsidy programs offered to lure export firms to the city. These programs may include tax abatement, industrial bonds, government loans, and land improvement programs.

States, politicians, and the courts have utilized liberal planning theory to argue that urban economic growth furthers the collective interests of society. For example, when the use of eminent domain has been tried before the Supreme Court, it has historically ruled that planning for economic development through the takings clause of the Fifth Amendment is intended for the public's use and is a good thing in general (*Kelo v. New London*). The argument follows that planning for economic growth is beneficial to cities because it increases their intercity and international competitiveness and helps retain central city investment amidst suburbanization. Furthermore, the liberal argument for planning holds that governmental intervention in the urban development process is necessary to address the impact of technology on the attractiveness of cities and to protect the diversity of interests within pluralistic societies.

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3 Fainstein's own approach pulls from the incites of structuralist theory, but combines them with those of regime theory, which is formulated on how dominant ideologies, agendas, access networks, and latent power affects city planning and development. Regime theory's origins in the liberal theory is quite apparent; like neo-pluralist theory, it accepts individual choice as the basis for political action, but points to the role of the governing regime in shaping the preferences and interests of the populace. Fainstein states that "Regime theory, in its discussion of the social bases of conflict and cooperation in redevelopment, more easily accommodates racial differentiation and ideological forces than do most structuralist critiques. It detects structural biases within the political economic system of capitalism" that drive the planning process, but "it does not incorporate the forces creating that structure into its argument" (2001, 14).

However, as methods for critiquing the *modus operandi* of liberal planning's social inefficacy, neither regime theory or Fainstein's analyze the physical source of urban development's production of inequality: the form of development itself. As such they will only come again in this thesis covering the history of urban renewal at the Atlantic Yards.

Liberal planning theorists have confined their study of urban planning and development to the political and economic impacts of planning measures. For example, Alexander Garvin is representative of these theorists and the author of *The American City: What Works, What Doesn't*. In his book and in other planning reports, Garvin's method of evaluation has been to analyze planning strategies with liberal goals, such as the ability to generate a desired "private-market reaction" or garner political approval (Garvin 1996, xi; A. Garvin, pers. comm.). Garvin's approach is useful because it adheres to the liberal argument for urban planning and helps to satisfy the liberal goals that planners and politicians bring to governing the urban development process. Garvin and others have accepted that the individuals in charge of the planning process champion economic development and politically favorable outcomes, not economic efficiency or good design, as the benchmarks for good planning.

Michael Sorkin, an urban design critic, has also admitted this phenomenon in the planning process. To him, planning has become a further "triumph for neo-liberal economics." Accordingly, "In New York—where the municipal leadership evaluates all development by the single metric of real estate prices—the Planning Department has largely refashioned itself as the Bureau of Urban Design, executor of policies emanating from the Deputy Mayor for Economic Development, the city's actual director of planning" (Sorkin 2006, 9). There are also clear affinities between Garvin and Sorkin's perspectives on the decision-making process in the top tiers of the planning hierarchy; both emphasize the priority of economic and political concerns.

Throughout the twentieth century, planning in American cities has been a function for realizing goals along these lines. The economic goal to stimulate development has remained an essential element of the liberal basis for planning, even though the methods for achieving this goal have changed because of transformations in economic ideas and institutions. In contrast, political transformations and the rise of pluralistic society have changed both the methods of city planning and the political agendas to which planning has typically conformed. This chapter will document how the practice of urban planning has changed throughout the twentieth century in response to political-economic transformations in what we may call the interests of society.

## **Urban Redevelopment**

Throughout the history of the urban planning practice, urban redevelopment has emerged as

an effective mechanism for generating economic development and expressing political interests. In its early years, redevelopment and planning were small-scale efforts, such as park planning and public works.

In the mid-nineteenth century, civic groups began to realize the economic potential of converting land into parks. In both Chicago and New York City, these groups either pressured the government into setting aside parkland or formed commissions to develop parklands themselves. In Chicago, civic leaders, real estate developers, and sanitarian reformers urged the Illinois General Assembly to pass bills creating the South, West, and Lincoln Park commissions of 1869. These agencies were overseen by the governor of Illinois and were given the wide discretionary powers to buy and condemn land and to assess and collect taxes in support of park construction. Significantly, the main source of financing for these agencies came from real estate developers noting in 1869 that New York City's Central Park "had hardly been staked out before the hoped-for rise in the value of the surrounding lots began, and to-day that rise has reached a point beyond the wildest expectation" (Holt 1996,179).

The New York City experience with parks and public works also documents how these issues have been presented and manipulated to different ends. The reformers of the highly politicized early 20<sup>th</sup> century battle to solve New York's land and housing problems were founded on the political and real estate opportunities offered by redevelopment. In contrast, the later public servants of New Deal policies were anxious to put people back to work and address the popular demands for public works improvements and redevelopment.

In 1904, New York City created a City Improvement Commission and soon after passed the Small Parks Act. Reflecting on more than a decade of progressive city planning, Nelson P. Lewis, in *The Planning of the Modern City*, commented that three years after the Commission was created it "presented a report, accompanied by a great number of plans involving radical changes...the cost of acquiring land for which, with the damage to existing buildings, but with no allowance for construction, was estimated to be nearly one hundred millions of dollars" (Lewis 1916, 36-37).

The focus of the Improvement Commission and the Small Parks Act was Lower Manhattan. In the early twentieth century, Manhattan's Lower East Side was jam-packed with hundreds of dumbbell tenements. As a vibrant form of open space, the streets and sidewalks played host to the social activity surrounding these immigrant and lower-class residential enclaves. Yet, as

thoroughfares, the streets were not as useful. And, as public spaces, the streets were neither sanitary nor endowed with civic grandeur and order. The Small Parks Act partially relieved the congestion of the streets by creating William H. Seward Park, Hamilton Fish Park, and Columbus Park, by demolishing approximately 190 tenements, and, in turn, displacing 13,300 residents (Schwartz 1993, 13). The extension of 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue through Greenwich Village to connect with Varick Street to the south, along with the rapid transit line constructed at the same time, displaced 5,000 residents whereby the cost of acquiring the property was more than \$8,200,000 (Lewis 1916, 37).

These city planning measures were rooted in the liberalism of land reform and were driven by social interests in the potential of economic development offered by alternative uses of tenement-occupied land. Reformers had been convinced that the public would benefit more from city parks, wider streets, and elegant approaches to East River bridges rather than from another tenement houses for the poor. Members of the City Improvement Commission and the Municipal Art Society saw the benefits that Central Park brought to uptown Manhattan. They also recognized the public revenues to be gained from “excess condemnation,” the municipal sale of surplus land taken for public improvements (Schwartz 1993, 12-13). By mid-century, the liberal basis for planning was well engrained in the debate over urban planning policy. In 1940, New York’s City Planning Commission held that “checking deterioration in the older sections and rehabilitating slum areas is not only socially desirable; it has become imperative if the city is to maintain a solvent fiscal position” (The City of New York 1940, 322).

Moreover, the redevelopment projects of this era were routinely presented under the political guise of improving public health. Yet, the political mission of the Tenement House Reform and the City Improvement Commission was heavily dependent upon economic considerations. In 1896, Jacob Riis, co-founder of the Tenement House Reform movement, and his associates incorporated as the City and Suburban Homes Company with Elgin Gould as their president and with the mission to exemplify “practical housing reform in the United States.” In his essay, “The Housing Problem in Great Cities,” Gould reviewed the recent Tenement House Exhibition. “The feature which aroused... the most contemptuous interest” was the model of a tenement block that would eventually be torn down to make way for a Manhattan Bridge approach. “There is not a bath in the entire block,” he reported, “and only 40 [out of 605] apartments were supplied with hot water.” Yet, the bottom line was that “the rental derived from this block, including the shops, amounts in round numbers to











































































































































