

# Chapter 8

## Urban In/Justice

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### 8.1 Introduction

What makes a given urban element, in a given location, unjust, as opposed to merely unfortunate? What would injustice be like, in a literal sense?

While there is wide interest in the theoretical aspects of urban justice, I argue in this chapter that not enough time has been devoted to grounding these theoretical explorations in terms of *literal* interpretation, or how urban injustice is manifested in everyday urban experience. I contend that it is not only possible but necessary to make the injustices of everyday urban life explicit and meaningful – beyond the



Suburban wasteland. Photo courtesy of the author

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abstract and beyond the theoretical. For example, why would the above photo of the built environment be considered “unjust”?

Consider the wide range of built environments that could be interpreted through the lens of “justice”: (i) a trailer home in a remote location, (ii) a sidewalk that ends abruptly, (iii) a wide arterial road separating a shopping center and a neighborhood, (iv) vacant land in the heart of the city, (v) cul-de-sac streets, (vi) big box stores, (vii) apartment housing complexes adjacent to industrial land, and (viii) parking garages and parking lots.

Why should any of these elements be interpreted as being unjust, as opposed to being merely objectionable to some people (or even beloved, perhaps, by others)? What is the justification for elevating them to the level of injustice? This chapter lays out a theoretical and practical argument for a literal, physical interpretation of in/justice. I use the term “in/justice” to highlight the fact that injustice and justice in the built environment are often simultaneously exposed. I argue that the failure to translate in/justice – that is, both justice and injustice – more literally is rooted in an overcautiousness concerning past experience (an experience that could be rectified) and, as well, an under-theorizing about what a good city is, or should be.

Often injustice is easier to see and is in many ways in greater need of explanation. Justice, on the other hand, can be translated proactively, as a basis for positive intervention. For example, the built environment can be used to increase socialization, reduce crime, enhance civic pride, promote health, allay the fears that arise from uncomfortable proximities, resolve contestations over space, or balance the problems that ensue when residents have an increased need for privacy and security. In turn, any of those goals could be justified on the basis of connecting them to in/justice.

## 8.2 Theories of Urban In/Justice

Theoretical work on justice in the city is an essential basis for exploring literal interpretation. Urban geographers like David Harvey and Edward Soja have written prolifically about spatial justice in an urban setting, using critical theories of space and revealing how “unjust geographies” are created. Harvey’s seminal *Social Justice and the City* (1973) explored the relationship between social justice and space and called into question the existing “structural limitations” of spatial definition. Harvey called for a move away from technical solutions toward something more subjective and revolutionary.

Susan Fainstein’s book *The Just City* (2011) offers an evaluation of the justice of urban policies from an urban planning perspective. The tensions between planning and markets or between efficiency and equity are analyzed. Like many books in this genre, Fainstein faults neoliberal planning policies for promoting economic growth at the expense of social justice. She offers policies and programs to ensure greater justice in both process and outcome. The institutions and social movements that need to be tapped to arrive at a greater level of urban justice are divulged: government programs, redevelopment policies, and an inclusionary, substantive discourse.

There is a large literature that evaluates the meaning of the built environment in sociological, theological, and cultural terms, and much of this work incorporates some interpretations of justice. This includes explorations of what land, public spaces, and buildings mean in terms of theology (Gorringe 2002), sociology (Michelson 1970), architecture (Girouard 1985), and culture (Davis 1999). There are detailed accounts of struggles to control public space, like Mitchell's *The Right to the City* (2003) which advance social justice arguments. A significant literature explores the implications of sprawl and "bad" urban form from economic, social, and environmental points of view. A recent work by Williamson (2010) evaluates sprawl's effect on civic engagement, inequality, and environmental impact.

Most of these writers also consider how a more socially just city might be achieved. Through changes in policy, program, and process, they often target the needs of specific populations. Thus the Lefebvre-inspired group "Right to the City" (a nonprofit organization) is focused on the needs of low-income communities of color, illuminating injustices in the provision of housing, healthcare, and other services. Methods for increasing their participation in decision-making are explored. Environmental justice and spatial justice are translated to practice by involving marginalized groups more directly in participation processes and trying to give them a more powerful voice in urban politics.

There is also a large literature that explores social justice from a strictly spatial/locational point of view. For example, research has focused on the social justice aspects of locating unwanted public facilities (an exploration of "environmental racism"). Researchers have investigated the relationship between minorities and low-income groups and unwanted environmental hazards. For example, Grineski et al. (2007) looked at the class and ethnic environmental injustices of air pollution, attributing the higher exposure of hazards suffered by marginalized populations to white privilege. Promotion of justice in the built environment, then, is a matter of implementing a more equitable distribution of unwanted uses as well as a fairer distribution of desirable resources. Such a distribution might be based on need, matching resources, and facilities to the populations that most need access to them.

Despite theoretical backing, however, the translation of social justice to principles of physical planning and design is weak. I attribute this, in part, to a lack of specificity – an avoidance of translating theory to design principle in anything but the vaguest of terms (there are reasons for this avoidance, which I discuss below). Most often, the action plans of theoretical works on urban justice conclude with platitudes: statements about the need to reduce the urban ecological footprint, elevate local empowerment, meet basic human needs, and promote new forms of governance – all admirable goals. But such declarations tend to be un-actionable. Further, there is often little understanding of what these goals would mean for everyday urban life, or how they would change the specific outlines of urban structural form. Human geographers might study intently "the importance of spatiality in the processes of social reproduction," but the spaces to be studied, the "discourse-producing sites" like prisons, schools, and hospitals, are studied devoid of context. Critical social theory perspectives on design are particularly skeptical

of the need to make these kinds of literal connections (see Knox 2010 or Cuthbert 2006).

What is missing, I believe, is a more unequivocal, literal, and physical interpretation of in/justice. For that to occur, it is essential to avoid the claim that the built environment can be used to overcome injustices rooted at a deeper, structural level. The built environment *augments* the programmatic and process-oriented requirements for greater social justice. It does not replace them. Yet the possibility and potential of this kind of complimentary linkage is rarely pursued. Instead, the notion that the physical environment can be crucial in determining social well-being and equality is regularly critiqued. This response, in my view, seems unnecessarily limited in its exclusion of the built environment and its reliance on abstract notions of city form.

What are the underlying reasons for this dismissal? To some extent, the disconnect between theories about urban in/justice and their physical interpretation simply mirrors the loss of localized form as a context for production and consumption – the substitution of “flows and channels” for spatial places (Castells 2003). But there is also the fear that physical form in connection with something as fundamental and overarching as social justice will appear too deterministic and controlling, perhaps implicating what Harvey (1989) calls a “localized aesthetic image” that supports the “capitalist hegemony over space.” It may be seen as an attempt to disguise the underlying political and economic processes of injustice, instead motivating “simplistic spatial solutions to complex social, economic, and political problems” (Crump 2002).

Architects, too, are often averse to attaching social agendas to physical urban forms. Attempts to promote social justice through urban design are often limited to innovative approaches to socialized housing. This cautiousness is not unjustified. The application of urban design to social justice has gone badly in the past. The failure of modernist urbanism and its literal-minded articulation of equality in built form resulted in massive demolition of public housing only a few decades after construction. During the urban renewal schemes of the 1950s and 1960s, neighborhood destruction was undertaken in the name of social equality. Given the way in which physical solutions have been cast as cure-alls, critics are right to guard against “bricks and mortar” remedies at the expense of people, institutions, and political process.

Another factor in the lack of connection between in/justice and built form is the weak position of normative theory – that is, theory about what constitutes a good city, something Kevin Lynch lamented in this classic work, *Good City Form* (1981). In the urban planning field, theories about good city form have been subordinated to theories about urban process. Richard Klosterman (2011) recently completed a survey of planning theory courses in US planning schools and found that planning theory mostly consists of critiques of the rational model, perhaps from a gender, space, or postmodern perspective. There is likely to be a strong dose of critical theory and exploration of Habermas’ perspective on communicative action as well as Schon’s exploration of phenomenology as a way of analyzing planning practice, mediation, and negotiation. Theories related to strategic planning, ethics, and advocacy planning are also likely topics. Planning theory, in short, has remained

focused on the procedural side of planning, while the substantive side – theories of what makes a good city – remains undefined. Beauregard’s earlier critique of planning theory (1995) showed how limited planning theory had become: “[P]ractitioners have little use for it, students (for the most part) find it a diversion from learning how to do planning and a requirement to be endured, and planning academics, on average, tolerate it. Within academia, planning theory is marginalized; within practice it is virtually ignored.”

Lacking a normative theoretical basis, different conceptions of the good city cannot be identified or ranked, and, in general, there can be no ability to decide between different substantive conceptions of what good cities – just cities – are supposed to be. This relativistic approach cannot be countered if planners lack the substantive theoretical content required to argue one perspective over another. In short, theory that is focused on observing and criticizing practice rather than offering a compelling model of good cities stymies the implementation of practical or physical steps toward justice.

In response to the lack of theory rooted in urban form, as well as a planning field insufficiently engaged with physical planning, there have been calls to put the physical realm – what Beauregard succinctly termed “things” – back in planning (Beauregard 2012). More recently, in a related argument, Thomas Campanella (2011) argued for a physically rooted planning field: proactive, visionary, a profession with “disciplinary identity” focused on physical planning, placemaking, and a shared civic realm. Without that reorientation, and lacking theoretical support, the ability to promote justice through physical design will be difficult to advance.

### 8.3 Literal Interpretations: A Few Examples

If normative theory about good city form could find a more prominent place in urban discourse, how might the literal interpretation of in/justice then be advanced? Theoretical backing is necessary as justification for why a given element, design, or aspect of physical urban form should be valued from an in/justice point of view, but what would the explicit translations be?

Quite simply, it is possible to evaluate the urban in/justice of a given element, form, or design on the basis of *what* it is and *where* it is – its three-dimensional form and its two-dimensional context. The attribution of in/justice is thus an outcome of the intrinsic qualities of the element itself in addition to its spatial location and what surrounds it. For example, inaccessibility to what is desirable can be interpreted as an expression of urban injustice. Proximity to what is undesirable is an expression of injustice.

A wide range of examples of city form have the ability to be interpreted in terms of in/justice. Notions like spatial equity, the meaning and interpretation of access, the importance of diversity, the experience and impact of fear, opportunities for control, sense of place, and the role of community – are all notions of in/justice that have literal outcomes. Other examples that include the cost of vehicle ownership, linkages between the built environment and health, the relationship between street design and traffic

accidents, urban heat island effects associated with built forms, housing affordability in relation to built environment, energy use and built form, and crime and street design are all areas in which form and in/justice could be explicitly linked.

These examples are not abstractions. For example, advancing an argument that cul-de-sac street patterns in the suburbs might be interpreted as unjust is supported by empirical work that shows that such patterns are linked to an increase in carbon emissions and lower air quality and increased obesity by reducing walking, or that they contribute to the infeasibility of transit. The injustice of a parking lot might be similarly argued by quantifying associated heat island effects and crime rates.

A range of social effects could be interpreted from an in/justice perspective, in turn advanced or inhibited through urban form. For example, it could be argued that social connectivity is an aspect of urban justice, while social isolation is an aspect of urban injustice. Both are affected by physical design. Increasing connectivity translates to gridded street networks, short blocks, streets that connect rather than dead end, the establishment of central places where multiple activities can coalesce, or the provision of well-located facilities that function as shared spaces. Enhancing connectivity can be as simple as delineating safe places to cross existing streets, calm traffic down on busy avenues, or institute better pedestrian pathways. Less directly, an increase in social connectivity has been found to result from feelings of safety (Newman 1972), from greater utilization of public space (Levine 1986), and from greater use of local facilities for shopping (Riger et al. 1981) – all strongly impacted by city form. “Social seams” in the form of schools, parks, or neighborhood stores have been shown to promote stable, socially diverse neighborhoods (Nyden et al. 1998).

The in/justice implications of health and its connection to the built environment are another important example. A large literature now supports the connection between health, physical activity like walking, and built form (Ewing and Cervero 2010). In the transportation field, neighborhood design has been connected to transport-related physical activity, which has the dual advantage of promoting public health while at the same time addressing transportation problems like congestion, pollution, and greenhouse gas effects (Badland et al. 2008). These issues are matters of in/justice.

Urban in/justice is more readily interpreted as a matter of equalizing access and ensuring closer proximities between where people of all ages and both genders live and work, as exemplified in Dolores Hayden’s proposal for a “nonsexist city” (1980). Access to resources defines the “geography of opportunity,” where proximity to resources significantly impacts the ability of low-income residents to improve their lives (Briggs 2005). In this sense, the way cities and neighborhoods are designed has a direct bearing on whether access between residents, their places of work, and the services they require is increased or not. Access, in other words, is a form of justice, strongly affected by the built environment. Some forms, such as low-density sprawl, pose a significant barrier when it comes to the provision of neighborhood-level facilities or access to jobs and urban services.

A just city is also a safe city, and physical context plays a strong role. For example, safety may be increased where there is housing integration (i.e., housing that is

integrative, not walled off and abruptly insular), options for surveillance, and public places that are active, often through the promotion of intensive use. Safety through design often calls for clear demarcations between public and private space, whereby urban areas have unambiguous functionality. Jane Jacobs (1961) introduced the notion of “eyes on the street” (so it would be relatively effortless for people to keep an eye on neighborhood activities as part of their everyday routines), while Oscar Newman’s (1972) defensible space principles included restricting access at certain points. Urban form can increase security by activating “dead” space – empty, unclaimed, or underutilized land for which clear ownership is ambiguous and for which there is little security for the passer by. Alice Coleman’s “variable design strategies,” Bill Hillier’s “space syntax theory,” and Christopher Alexander’s “pattern language” all call for urban designs that maximize natural surveillance.

These are very practical matters, and perhaps there is little disagreement that justice via access and safety are strongly affected by physical form. Less direct, but potentially just as powerful, are notions about the visual, aesthetic experience of urban dwellers and the impact those experiences have on urban in/justice. Perhaps the case can be made that some visual coherence, some framework for making sense of the urban realm, is an essential basis for a just city. Kevin Lynch’s (1981) “dimensions” were aimed at a built environment that could respond to people’s needs, including not only access but also vitality and imageability. Could a just city be predicated on vitality, activity, and liveliness, via a physical realm that promotes exchange, social connection, and daily life or presents a positive, culturally meaningful experience?

## 8.4 Conclusions

In this chapter, through the examples of spatial equity, access, social connectivity, health, safety, and aesthetic experience, I have argued that it is possible to translate ideals about urban in/justice in literal terms. I argued that it was not necessary to constrain notions of in/justice by viewing them abstractly, in platitudes or only in theoretical terms. In fact, the physical implications of urban in/justice are often direct, design based, and actionable. Considering again the photograph that opened this chapter, might the scene depicted be labeled unjust given its lack of pedestrian access, its poor connectivity, its likely effect on physical activity and therefore health, its safety concerns, and its dispiriting aesthetic experience?

Of course, the literal translation of justice and injustice will never be completely straightforward. One person’s sense of injustice might be another’s sense of justice. Certain factors, once brought in, may trump injustice in favor of other factors, like efficiency or expediency. In the cul-de-sac example cited earlier, it may be possible that increases in sense of community for one group, attributable to the cul-de-sac, are believed to offset the injustices suffered by a wider group. But rather than revert to clichés, we should find a way to consider the complexities inherent in justice definitions, confronting rather than avoiding the manner in

which notions of justice, in their physical translation, may conflict. The literal application of urban in/justice may compete with a whole range of political or economic considerations, but, at least, the extent and nature of these connections should be thoroughly considered.

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