

Chapter 9

Place as Trading Zone: A Controversial Path of Innovation for Planning Theory and Practice

Laura Lieto

Abstract In this chapter I will argue that place-making can be regarded as a “trading practice” involving different actors who compete, negotiate and eventually agree upon specific socio-spatial arrangements we can call “places”. Places should not be regarded as naturalistically given nor as imbued with some long-lasting “identity”; rather, they should be seen as arrangements of power relations in space, elective contexts for subjectivities to emerge, clash and develop, and thus as inherently political.

As a practice of social production of space, place-making is not necessarily based on a dialogue aimed at resolving disputes and finding agreements on values and beliefs; rather, it appears to be mostly based on an ability to cooperate “while still disagreeing”, as focused observation of place-making practices will bear out. In this perspective, the trading zone theory developed by Galison – based on the idea that effective cooperation between different groups and subcultures is not necessarily a matter of value sharing, of agreeing about the full signification of what is exchanged – may work as a useful conceptual frame for a theory of place-making as a trading practice in space and, as the case study presented here seeks to do, offer an interesting perspective to learn from, to rethink social innovation in the urban space and how planning acknowledges it.

Keywords Pidgin • Creole • Subculture • Thick description • Boundary object • Transaction

L. Lieto (✉)

Department of Architecture, “Federico II” University, via Forno Vecchio 36, Naples, Italy
e-mail: lieto@unina.it

9.1 On Place-Making and Planning

As many agree, the term “place” generally refers to specific socio-spatial arrangements where physical forms entwine with social patterns at different time-space scales (Hillier 2007), institutional rules with daily practices and uses (Amin and Thrift 2002) and technical representations with narratives and social imaginaries (Decandia 2008).

The complex spatiality of places spurs cognitive and psychic performances of individuals and groups, which are essential to the development of subjectivities. These performances have to do with processes of “political subjectification of liberal subjects” (Huxley 2007, p. 189) occurring in urban space over time. Therefore, places are not to be considered – as is the case when they are assumed as stereotypes – as pre-political entities with a given identity. They are inherently dynamic.

In this perspective, the issue of power matters as well. Certain socio-spatial entities are forged both by repressive institutional forces and agonistic social relations and thus function as contingent arrangements of power. Therefore, they are contested and fluid, being often rearranged to reflect different political frames of reference, social implications and interests (Amin and Thrift 2002).

Place-making – as a practice of social subjectification in the spatial context – often occurs when people are confronted with some form of scarcity, for example, the lack of certain collective facilities or public services. Cases may vary a lot depending on factors such as social and ethnic composition, levels of income, the local job market, environmental quality and the grade of preservation of the urban fabric. But we may reasonably argue that place-making is a matter of creatively producing solutions to everyday life problems that are perceived as such by different social groups and sometimes left unsolved or simply ignored by institutions. In this perspective, place-making can be regarded as an expression of “negative capability”, a particular form of deviation from routinized behaviours, or an application of institutional routines in unusual situations (Mangabeira Unger 1987; Young 1996; Lanzara 1993). Acting outside habitual sense-making or institutionalized contexts may give people the opportunity to develop new conceptualizations of perceived problems. That is why negative capability usually arises as a creative resource in critical situations, characterized by uncertainty and emergency, and where institutional competencies do not work effectively.

This kind of capability, quite common in everyday urban practices, can produce innovations – as an unintentional outcome – in the form of collective services or facilities which institutions, for various reasons, are not able to provide. This is typical of certain sectors of urban societies: starting from their specific point of view and interests, groups of citizens, associations or other social organizations can come up – under certain conditions – with original ways to combine their capabilities and available resources in order to improve the quality of life in local contexts. It thus happens that society contributes to the production of commons, but the commons it produces differ from those produced by institutions, being based on a different, contextual and contingent kind of rationality.

Place-making can also be regarded as a linguistic matter. To understand what urban places are and how they work, Michel de Certeau, in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1990), introduces the metaphor of “textual poaching” to characterize a tactic (as distinguished from a formal strategy) ordinary people creatively deploy to resist, counteract and make active sense of mass consumption and domination strategies in contemporary societies. But why “textual”?

Textual poaching corresponds to a practice of active reading, based on the idea that, when we read a text, we are not just passive recipients of a written message, but we actively collaborate with it to reformulate it and make our own sense out of it. In this metaphorical perspective, the reader is the city dweller and the book is the urban space, with its symbolic and syntactical structures, which the reader needs to be able to interpret correctly and promptly in order to effectively cope with the multiple and unforeseen occasions that the city offers (Lieto 2006).

Everyday life can be depicted as a constant and creative – and sometimes subconscious – dialectics struggle, between normalizing and insurgent powers. It is the arena where people contend with institutions striving to regulate their preferences, behaviours, movements and lifestyles and assimilate them into prefixed, normative schemes. In de Certeau’s perspective, this struggle is, in substance, a clash between different linguistic codes.

Conceptualizing places as creative and symbolic settings, open to social innovation and having their own “linguistic” structures, draws our attention to power relations in space as mediated by language. These relations obtain between different subjects (not just the public or organized groups, as in formal governance settings, but all potential competitors and place-producers) who negotiate, contend and make temporary agreements about material and symbolic arrangements of their lifeworld. These agreements are not necessarily based on shared moral and cultural values; in fact, they are often reached despite irreconcilable differences between the parties involved.

In these terms, place-making can be regarded as a matter of “space politics” (Dear and Flusty 2002; Soja 1999). In this context, “politics” is to be intended in the broadest sense of the word: it is not necessarily driven by the law, morality or civic responsibility nor is it the expression of a political party, but “when it occurs, it is always original, always a rupture with tradition” (Zanardi 2011, p.104, *my translation*).

This perspective strongly challenges “professionally certified” planning (Davoudi and Strange 2009), insofar as it stretches the latter’s underlying ideology to its limits by deploying socio-spatial practices producing innovations. Although there is a wide agreement about the need for collaborative forms of planning (Healey 1997) addressing diversity, multiplicity, contingency and the conflicting practices and demands arising from socio-spatial contexts, we should be nevertheless aware that irreconcilable differences (in values, identities, cultures) between actors stand in the way of a full agreement about change and future based on mutual recognition, inclusion and respect. And these differences may undermine the principles of justice, equity and conformity that form the ideological background of spatial planning.

9.2 The Applicability of the Trading Zone Theory to Place-Making Practices

So how are we to deal with irreconcilable differences and bring about change in a collaborative perspective within the socio-spatial arrangements we identify as “places”? What kind of theoretical frame is best suited to address this issue in planning terms?

We cannot presuppose the nature, values and objectives of actors involved in place-making. Their identities, as in the case of places, are not naturalistically given. Neither are they fixed, as they change over time in relation to several, variable factors. Furthermore, we cannot presuppose that when actors agree on spatial arrangements fitting certain needs or requirements, they also share values and beliefs.

If we look at this issue from an informal perspective (i.e. a “non-planned” one), this becomes even clearer: in many cases of place-making practices, such as the one I present below, collective solutions to perceived problems are produced on a thin basis of agreement which does not necessarily presuppose value sharing to work. In other words, people involved in place-making can achieve innovative results by “cooperating and still disagreeing” (Fuller 2008).

In such a perspective, the trading zone theory – which in recent years has been taking hold in different fields of knowledge (Kellogg et al. 2006; Gorman 2007), since the seminal work of science historian Peter Galison – offers a useful conceptual frame to understand in practical terms how urban places can function as contingent and contested arrangements of power relations in space. This frame is also useful as a means to bring into focus the problematic relation between place-making and planning, which – as we will see in the case study presented below – may strongly undermine ideological principles of social equity and justice deeply embedded in “professionally certified forms of planning practice” (Davoudi and Strange 2009).

Born in the field of science epistemology, the trading zone theory aims essentially at understanding why it happens that irreducibly different fields of knowledge, or subcultures within the same field of knowledge, manage to cooperate and achieve, in forms of “incomplete coordination”, concrete scientific results and in some cases true innovations. This happens, according to Galison, because subjects belonging to different subcultures sometimes create interlanguages, that is, linguistic systems that – like pidgin or creole languages in anthropology – work as a “trading zone” where all actors involved *agree to exchange*.

Galison (2010) argues that “at root the relevant aspect of exchange is this: what an object means to me when I give it to you may very well not be what you, as the recipient, understand that object to connote” (p. 9). This “relative superficiality” makes exchange easier when the terms of exchange do not share the same values, languages and cultures. Galison (2010) defines the discourse genre to which a trading zone’s interlanguage belongs as “thin description”. “Thin” means here that “we do not need to refer to some universal currency of rationality or value. And [...] we can bypass the presupposition that there is any agreement among the people exchanging things about the full signification (thick description) of the object exchanged” (p. 10).

In Galison's theory there is an underlying assumption about theory and practice and their mutual relations, which – despite being mostly driven by his research experience in physics labs and similar work settings – can find application in the planning field as well.

Experimental practice, according to Galison (2010), has its own weight “as a distinct form of reasoning – not reducible to inspiring theory or checking it after the fact” (p.1). If we look at the gap between theory and practice in Kuhnian terms, it appears as a paradigmatic split, a cleavage between cultures, which in some cases (such as that of “scientific revolution”) may lead to a synchronic incommensurability; however, looking at it this way obscures the fact that – in many cases – there is a crosstalk between subcultures that allows exchange among different parties who may reach an agreement to achieve mutually advantageous results. Which amounts to saying, following Galison's (2010) reasoning, that Kuhnian theory may turn out to be inadequate in “hybrid arenas of practice as forms of language” (p. 3). A narrow definition of compromise describes cooperation more effectively when it is not moved by shared principles, but by thin descriptions of the problems at hand.

What is exchanged in a trading zone are “boundary objects” (Star and Griesemer 1989; Star 2010). These are “plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites” (Star and Griesemer 1989, p. 17). They “are material (rather than conceptual) entities through which two or more groups coordinate their activities. Boundary objects do not translate ideas between subcultures. They provide structures that suggest ways forward while limiting the array of options” (Fuller 2008, p.4). Experimental instruments – as in Galison's field research work – are typical boundary objects.

There is quite an evidence, in collaborative planning and dispute resolution literature, of material entities working as boundary objects: maps, documents, reports and models are all material devices that give structure to and organize information and options and therefore deliberation (Fuller 2008). The concept is indeed quite plastic and can be applied to a variety of objects. What is of interest here is its explicative potential as applied to some of the main features of urban spatiality in the perspective of place-making.

9.3 Place-Making in the Spanish Quarters, Naples: An Example of a Trading Zone

The following is a case of place-making presented first in the form of a short ethnographic report and subsequently discussed more in depth, employing the concept of trading zone as an interpretive frame. The place in question is the Spanish Quarters, a neighbourhood in Naples' historical centre considered, not just by residents, as a “place”, a *topos*, for various reasons:

- It is densely populated and lies in a central location in the historical centre, right across a major tourist and shopping area (Via Toledo).
- Its historical urban structure, a dense gridiron founded during the Spanish domination (fifteenth century), has been kept unaltered over the centuries.
- It is a multiethnic neighbourhood, where autochthonous people coexist quite tolerantly with migrants of various ethnicities and religions.
- It has a quite differentiated social mix of residents and users, from professionals to workers and from students to low-income families and criminal organizations.
- It is the site of two historical food markets of the inner city, always crowded for the quality of their fresh food and their low prices.
- It boasts two off-theatres, very active on the local and national scene. Nightlife is vibrant in the areas around the theatres and some restaurants (both local and ethnic), attracting people from other neighbourhoods in the city and the metropolitan area.
- Street life is a key cultural feature of this neighbourhood: the locals, both autochthonous and immigrant, habitually get together in the streets – especially in front of the typical ground-floor dwellings opening directly onto the street – to socialize and perform various activities. Children play soccer in the streets, oblivious of the motor scooters and cars, young people meet in the streets at night and so forth.
- Some non-profit organizations supporting low-income people and borderline youngsters are long established in the neighbourhood and are a reference point for many families, social workers and welfare operators.

9.3.1 The Practice of Car Parking: A “Thin” Description

In the Spanish Quarters, even simple everyday actions can be very problematic, and car parking is a case in point. The place is not sufficiently equipped with parking facilities, and the very narrow urban fabric offers very little space on the streets. In this context, car parking has become a quite complex space management ritual. There is an unwritten code that people need to know. They need to pick the right spots – if any are available – to park their cars, since a mistake could bring on, in the worst cases, harsh fights or car damage.

The point here is not to underscore the rudeness of the locals’ social behaviour – however deplorable it may be – but illustrate how a certain degree of “place mastery”, that is, some specific knowledge of the spatial patterns and boundaries *written* and *enacted* by social practices, is required to cope with everyday situations. Car parking in the Spanish Quarters is subject to certain “strict” conditions, which an outsider lacking experience of the place and its behavioural codes is at loss to figure out, since no written indications are provided, and people will not tell you how they work.

In a central neighbourhood like this, in one of the most traffic-jammed cities in Italy, parking is a serious issue. Public parking places – even when provided for free to residents by the municipality – are exiguous, as in the whole historical centre of Naples there are only very few spaces complying with normative parameters for car parking. So people have to come up with their own tactics and practical arrangements.

In the Spanish Quarters, people usually occupy small portions of public ground suitable for car parking, which are under no specific jurisdiction. This practice is an expression of a social minority, not representative of the totality of residents. They are mostly low-income people, often living in ground-floor dwellings, in some cases below the poverty line and making a living out of informal and sometimes illegal economic activities.

Before illustrating how ground occupation occurs, let us dwell a bit longer on these small pieces of “no-man’s land”, which become so important – and therefore contested and longed for – when people need to solve a practical problem before it turns into a wicked one. These portions of public ground – recesses in the sidewalks, or small spaces in front of the entrance of abandoned or underutilized ground-floor rooms opening onto the street – make up an urban-scale pattern of tiny spaces that has become a valuable resource for residents.

As far as I can tell from the observations I have made over the years, this network of small spaces works as a “no-man’s land”. In military language, a no-man’s land is a space where ordinary rules are (temporarily) suspended,¹ a form of extraordinary territoriality where a state of exception is in force (Agamben 1995).

The occupation of these pieces of land for car parking is the result of a transaction between people competing with one another over a scarce material resource. This practice can be likened to an expression of negative capability. It is a way of creatively coping with space scarcity, and finding a practical solution to what for many residents is a chronic problem.

The transaction over parking space obeys an urban code people need to have access to in order to “play by the rules” when looking for a parking spot. Drying racks or chairs are the basic elements of this code, working as boundary objects in an interlanguage shared by the residents. People start by placing these objects in “free” spots that are not used for any specific purpose. In doing so, they have a double goal. One is appropriating space for functions, such as drying their laundry or sitting outdoors with friends to chat, that are usually ill-accommodated by very small homes, as most are in the neighbourhood, which has a high number of tiny ground-floor dwellings. The other goal is to occupy – both physically and symbolically – a small piece of ground, which when the laundry is dry and the drying rack is folded and stored away in the house, usually at night, becomes a reserved parking space for the owner of the drying rack or one of her relatives.

People living in the neighbourhood and users who have access to this code know that the drying racks or the chairs out on the street are not just there to perform the function they were made for. They know very well that they are physical and symbolic parking reservation devices. The locals negotiate for use of parking spots and sometimes fight over them, but usually, with some adjustments or alternative “creative” solutions (such as parking turns among relatives or friends), they achieve an agreement based on a somewhat steady spatial configuration.

An outsider who does not even suspect what the drying racks or the chairs really mean beyond their specific function would say that parking is impossible in such a place, with its very narrow alleys and no public or private parking facilities. He or she would be surprised to learn that several residents have found their own solution to the problem, usually a few steps away from their house door.

When people have reached a somewhat steady agreement over one of these no-man's spots, another code arises, with different meanings. Instead of drying racks or chairs, little iron poles appear, planted into the ground with concrete and secured by padlocks. For insiders, this is the sign that those portions of ground are no longer no-man's land; they have become private parking spots, that is, exclusive services connected to the residential function.

In technical-juridical terms, this is a misappropriation of public space, a breach of the law. It is worth remarking that only in very few cases – I have personally never been a witness to an instance of this – are transgressors actually punished with legal sanctions for these violations of a public norm. This is not just a matter of laxity and weak institutional capability in terms of social control and law enforcement – although such laxity and weakness are undoubtedly part of the traditional cultural background of the south – what we are looking at is also a form of flexibility on the part of the authorities to allow people to find solutions to what would otherwise be a serious problem.

It goes without saying that this code is ultimately enforced by violence. Should somebody complain about the iron poles or dare to remove them to park his or her car instead, or just to free up illegally seized public ground, a harsh reaction may be expected from the “owners” of the locked parking spots. Usually, for the sake of the neighbourhood's peace and also due to the embeddedness of this practice, people do not complain, unless they decide, for some reason, that it is time to start the ground-occupation game all over again and negotiate new parking arrangements.

9.3.2 The Practice of Car Parking in a Trading Zone Perspective

Let us now retrace the case using a trading zone interpretive frame. Very schematically, in a trading zone, two (or more) parties wish to undertake a joint action or make an exchange, but lack a common language. If they stay within their respective languages, however, any attempt at cooperation will be unsuccessful. Thus, they need to develop an interlanguage that will conceal or attenuate their differences. Since both parties benefit from this, it is a win-win game.

To apply this approach to our case study, first of all we need to recognize the elements of the trading zone: who the parties involved are, what their main linguistic differences are and why they are both motivated to create a trading zone.

In the Spanish Quarters, the trading zone is not established just among residents directly involved in car parking; if so, there would be no need for a trading zone, since there would be no significant difference of “language” within what is a quite homogenous social group. (I am using the term “language” here in a broad sense, to designate a specific, situated vision of the world, a system of values and beliefs, a cultural context we could call – to use Galison's terminology – a “subculture”.)

Other subjects are involved in the zone in order for it to function as a field of practice. These subjects are representatives of public institutions, mainly municipal police agents, who are in charge of local control and security, and are hence locally based. These subjects regularly hang around the neighbourhood, and, without their

tacit connivance, the parking game would be impossible or at least much more difficult to carry on.

The two parties – residents and police agents – differ in several ways. Most importantly, they bear different rationalities and have different goals in performing their everyday routines. For residents (those involved in the practice), parking in the neighbourhood is what we could call a “survival tactic” in a socio-spatial context characterized by material scarcity and economic marginality. As such, it is mostly an informal practice of self-organization in an urban space, a typical feature of critical neighbourhoods in cities in southern Italy. For those who are in charge of public order and security, the deployment of this tactic is a violation of public norms, notably of admitted uses of a public good such as a sidewalk or some other element of the public space. For this party, the boundary between private and public property has been crossed, and municipal traffic regulations regarding car parking have been transgressed.

Given these differences, a (imperfect) trading zone is *de facto* established in the neighbourhood: residents and police agents share an interlanguage made of boundary objects (chairs, racks and poles), and both benefit from the trading zone, even though, as we will see, the benefits are not “equally distributed”. Cooperation in this case cannot be regarded as a “win-win game”, given the strong power asymmetry.

To understand how the system works, we need to take a closer look at the way the micropowers involved interact (Foucault 1977). Agents are locally based. They know the place and the people living there, and, most importantly for our purposes, they are familiar with the code of chairs, drying racks and iron poles; they know what these things mean beyond their intrinsic function. Police agents are not “neutral” executors of norms and formal routines – both in this case and in general – insofar as they have to deal with issues of social stability in critical contexts such as the one under discussion.

Trading, in the case at hand, takes place between different but converging practices, each based on a specific order of necessity and convenience and different rationalities. All these practices, as I observed above, are to some extent a violation of public norms. These violations occur on the basis of a habit, a reiteration of specific behaviours that creates an “objective condition” for a habitual norm to be established and for some irregular behaviours to be tolerated.

Seen from the standpoint of social justice, the “parking game” is undoubtedly exclusionary (there is simply not enough space for all residents to park their cars) and, to some extent, based on violence. Once a tiny piece of ground has been occupied by an individual, its public use is interdicted to anybody else or, at least, it is discouraged by nasty or even intimidating behaviour. This trading around these small portions of public ground is thus the province of a quite restricted “community”, whose social composition is essentially characterized by medium- to low-income levels and the affiliation of its members to the neighbourhood, both in terms of long-term permanence and strong cultural identification with the place.² This consideration brings to the forefront some major limits and distortions of this community-based culture: while the participants in the “parking game” are creatively seeking to cope with the scarcity of a public good, people who are not affiliated to

this minority may be negatively affected. Nonetheless, it is also true that this practice allows as many members of this minority as possible to park their cars in front of their houses and – despite periodical discord and conflicts – it is fairly tolerated in the neighbourhood. Why is this so?

To address this question, we need to turn to the role of public authority “in the field”. As I remarked above, according to my own experience and that of other people living in the Spanish Quarters I have been interviewing as part of my field research work,³ the practice is not subjected to any form of control. Policemen basically tolerate these informal arrangements and issue no tickets or any other kinds of sanctions to the people responsible for them.

This happens for various reasons. Two are worth highlighting here, as they clarify the mediatory role of police agents in the trading zone. Firstly, the failure of local government to implement urban planning programmes such as urban renovation and pedestrianization. Despite the fact that the Spanish Quarters have been, over the past two decades at least, one of the main target areas of the urban renewal rhetoric – consistently with the strategy outlined in the local master plan for the whole historical centre of Naples – the goals outlined by this rhetoric have remained unfulfilled, essentially for financial and political reasons. This means there is no particular urge for change on the part of the city government. Secondly, there is a social cohesion issue related to the parking game in the neighbourhood. The minority involved in the trading zone is, as I mentioned above, partly made up of families formally living close or below the poverty line. Welfare policies, in the context of the general crisis of the national welfare system, fail to address the problems of this social group. Finally, informal and illegal activities are historically embedded in these communities, as is typical of marginal economies in critical social contexts (Laino 2001).

Many people simply cannot afford the price of a private parking facility, and the historical urban fabric, so narrow that sidewalks are rarely to be found, does not offer standard parking space that the public could provide for free to residents (as it does in other, more spacious areas of the city).

The problem is even more complicated. So far, the city government has failed to effectively address everyday mobility needs in the Spanish Quarters. Despite its central location, this neighbourhood still suffers from very low accessibility to the public transit system. Only recently have the local governments (City and Region) started to build an underground station connecting the neighbourhood to the subway network, but until now the Spanish Quarters have been, from a public mobility point of view, hemmed in between a lower pedestrian main avenue (Via Toledo) and an upper road (Corso Vittorio Emanuele) provided with bus service, but hard to reach, especially for people with mobility problems, given the steepness of the hill the neighbourhood extends on. The main alternative to walking is still the private car, and people therefore feel entitled to park their cars in the neighbourhood.

Public officials find themselves caught in between, in a way. On one side is the inadequacy of welfare and public transport and on the other, social cohesion and a community-led culture. “If we gave tickets to all who irregularly park their cars in this neighbourhood, two things could happen: either nobody would pay – the more

probable alternative – or, in the worst case, there would be a social mobilization against the representatives of public authority”, said a police agent I interviewed some time ago.

Micropowers in a real context – as the trading zone perspective allows us to see – work outside “ought-to-be” schemes based on values such as legality and conformity to the norm that the state is supposed to enforce. There is no clear distinction here between “formal” and “informal”: the two spheres are entangled (Roy 2009).

In theoretical terms, the role of municipal police agents – who understand the “pidgin” of boundary objects people use to negotiate scarce spatial resources in order to satisfy the demand for parking space to the highest possible degree in a limited opportunity game – is crucial. They are a “flesh and blood” power that basically works as an imperfect cohesion device on behalf of a “critical social minority”, allowing the formation of a trading zone where what is really traded is not just space but also rights and norms. And this trading is – to a certain extent – a tolerant response, in terms of a sort of “moral economy”, of a broader “public” made up of residents, users and public officials to everyday problems affecting a disadvantaged minority.

In abstract terms, norms cannot be traded. In a democratic scheme of rights and duties, they can be questioned, discussed, amended and even repealed in formal institutional settings, but for this to be possible, a general sharing of values and principles is required. But they cannot be the object of trading, since their basic principle is their general applicability (Agamben 1995).

In real life, however, there is negotiation over norms and their meaning. In the case of the Spanish Quarters, here all parties in the trading zone agree that, in order to provide as many people as possible with parking facilities, the official norm needs to be dis-enforced, placed in a state of temporary and informal suspension, to give way to the de facto, informal norm.

9.4 Open Questions

The trading practice here described raises clashing considerations.

From a moral perspective, the negotiation of norms can be considered as a form of violation of the law and collusion by all the parties involved, whereby a minority seeks to provide a feasible solution to what it perceives to be a problem at the expense of a more general – as well as undetermined and abstract – “public” (the citizens as a whole).

From a pragmatic perspective, this same negotiation works as an “acceptable compromise”, a means of keeping social cohesion, promoting a moral economy and containing discontent in the face of an essential lack of the public services and welfare policies this minority would be entitled to.

From a sociocultural perspective, the “parking game” played with boundary objects such as chairs and poles can be acknowledged as an innovation in a context of material scarcity and a lack of collective facilities.

The trading zone model actually shows some inadequacies when we try to apply it “as it is” to planning practice. In fact, the case discussed in this chapter is more a counter case than a practical proof of the validity of the trading zone theory, since the trading practice here does not really fit all the lifeworlds involved and the benefits are not equally distributed among the traders – as they should be in “win-win game” – and, furthermore, the process by which these benefits are gained produces some negative repercussions on the context, on the neighbourhood “as a whole”, since some parties are necessarily left out of the picture or negatively affected. The main reason for this is that the space of social interaction is much more variable and undetermined in the field than in the lab.⁴ Once some parties have established a trading zone, there will always be some other party at risk of exclusion.

Applying a trading zone model of interpretation to an urban place-making practice undoubtedly helps us to understand the latter’s manifold structure. However, we must acknowledge the problematic coexistence of different planes as revealed by field investigation if we wish to usefully apply this theoretical frame to urban planning practice.

Among the issues arising from the case presented here, two are worth highlighting, in conclusion, as open, interconnected questions that present themselves when we try to apply a trading zone approach to planning practice. One of these questions has to do with social innovation, the other with planning ideology.

Social innovation still occurs – following Galison’s reasoning – even when all the actors involved in the process do not agree about goals, values and rationalities, as long as they all benefit from creating a limited area of exchange and negotiation: a trading zone. Nevertheless, innovation – as the case just discussed demonstrates – may not necessarily be a fully positive outcome, a win-win game, at least in terms of a “just and democratic city” as a latent ideal of town-planning culture (Fainstein 2006). Place-making practices in cities often display innovative elements which could be worth learning from and – eventually – supporting through inclusive and democratic planning processes. Following Healey (2007), in collaborative perspective planners would strategically select single processes of social innovation in urban space and support their institutionalization to thereafter attempt to change town-government cultures. Selection is in point, here. What should we select and why? Who would be left out of the picture?

What we learn here, through our adoption of a trading zone perspective, is that acknowledging innovation is a tricky task for planners. It means critically dealing with different visions, values and goals. Maybe we cannot positively exchange “and still disagree”. Maybe values need to be included in the picture when we select processes of social innovation to be acted out in a planning process. And here the ideology issue comes to the forefront.

As regards planning ideology, one major issue arising from the case presented here – and generally acknowledged by planning scholars – is the clash between general, underlying ideals or values such as equity, justice and conformity, which planning needs to be inspired by (and the normative apparatus of “certified planning” stemming from the modern tradition speaks on this behalf), and the specific, one-sided behaviours of real people in real contexts, which are much more exclusionary and destabilizing than abstract, universalist values.

One of the inspiring principles of the trading zone theory – we can “cooperate and still disagree on what really matters” (Fuller 2008) – sounds as a reasonable and innovative way to address decision-making in planning as well as other fields. However, at the very moment that we, as planners, put values and principles outside of the big picture, some criticalities arise. To what extent is it acceptable to suspend moral conceptions and institutional guarantees in order to achieve effective results on the base of substantial disagreements? By what criteria should we determine which issues and solutions in the planning process call for the application of a trading zone legitimacy?

Drawing on Star and Griesemer’s theory of boundary objects, Balducci (2011) argues that “instead of trying to create sharing, we [the planners] need to look for those solutions which can fit different life worlds, different strategic visions and different stakeholders, even assuming that these visions are and will be conflicting” (Balducci 2011. p. 43).

The planner, like any other stakeholder, joins decision-making arenas with his/her own goals, values and visions of the world. To act as a non-neutral agent of mediation and cooperation, the planner “requires justification and legitimacy, a set of powerful arguments with which to confront warring factional interests and class antagonism. In striving to affect reconciliation, the planner must perforce resort to the idea of the potentiality for harmonious balance in society. And it is on this fundamental notion of social harmony that the ideology of planning is built” (Harvey 1985, p.187). This commitment to the ideal of social harmony explains “why the planner seems doomed to a life of perpetual frustration” (Harvey 1985, p. 194).

Insofar as recent approaches to planning propose alternative and innovative ways to deal with this problem – especially those inspired by pragmatism (Forester 1989, 1999; Healey 2007) and those adopting an agonistic orientation (Hillier 2007; Mäntysalo et al. 2011) – the shift the trading zone paradigm seems to bring about sounds as a challenge to those “fundamentals of ideology [that still] remain intact” (Harvey 1985, p. 194).

Susan Fainstein (1999) argues that, in the face of the substantial failure of comprehensive visions of the “good city”, “today planning practitioners conceive their mission more modestly”. Nevertheless, the search for feasible and inclusive ways to deal with contemporary urban problems calls for new efforts, which – as the trading zone theory itself seems to suggest to planners – cannot but address, theoretically and practically, concepts such as justice, equity and conformity as “relational to context without being wholly relative” (idem).

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Endnotes

1. A no-man’s land “is not occupied or is under dispute between parties that will not occupy it because of fear or uncertainty. The term was originally used to define a contested territory or a dumping ground for refuse between fiefdoms. It is most commonly associated with the First

World War to describe the area of land between two enemy trenches that neither side wishes to openly move on or take control of due to fear of being attacked by the enemy in the process” (Wiki quote).

2. It is symptomatic, in this regard, that migrants – although they are themselves a medium- to low-income group of residents – are excluded from this place-making practice.
3. Mostly residents, some planners, professionals and artists living in the neighbourhood.
4. The term “practice” deserves the plural, as practices are “what everybody does, intentionally or not, within structured fields where our doing (including not doing anything, idleness, inaction) occurs in a continuous process of transformation that produces sense and *multiple outcomes*” (Pasqui 2008:48, *my translation – emphasis added*). Practice is therefore by nature radically plural. Innovation, as one possible dimension of practices, comes along a whole bunch of other practices, each driven by different intentions and producing different outcomes.

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