



UNEASY AND CONTRADICTING COHABITATION OF NEOLIBERALISM AND PLANNING: WHAT IS NEXT?

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Abstract

Neoliberalism may be a widely used term in both scientific and popular writings, but there remains much confusion over what its exact contents are – Brenner et al. (2010a) have called it a ‘rascal’ concept but confirm elsewhere (Brenner et al. 2010b) that it remains a “keyword for the understanding of regulatory reforms of our time”. Infact, neoliberalisation manifests itself as a “prevailing pattern of market-oriented, market-disciplinary regulatory restructuring” (Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2009a, p. 51). The neoliberalisation of social, economic and political processes pervades urban development, planning and governance discourses and practices, and pushes them in a market-oriented direction; however the terms ‘neoliberalisation’ and ‘planning’ are seldom heard together in the same phrase. The concept of neoliberal planning may actually seem to be a contradiction to some planners; while to others it may be a signal to ‘give up’. Planning, if anything, may be seen as being in direct contrast to neoliberalism, as something that should be rolled back or even annihilated through neoliberal practice. To combine ‘neoliberal’ and ‘planning’ in one phrase then seems awkward at best, and an outright oxymoron at worst. To admit to the very existence or epistemological possibility of ‘neoliberal planning’ may appear to be a total surrender of state planning to market superiority, or in other words, the simple acceptance that the management of buildings, transport infrastructure, parks, conservation areas etc. beyond the profit principle has reached its limits in the 21st century. Planning in this case would be reduced to a mere facilitator of ‘market forces’ in the city, be it gentle or authoritarian. Yet in spite of these contradictions and outright impossibilities, planners operate within, contribute to, resist or temper an increasingly neoliberal mode of producing spaces and places, or the revival of profit-driven changes in land use. This paper aims to tackle this uneasy cohabitation of neoliberal planning and show the contradictions created by it while underlining the need for new planning approaches to ‘deal with’ neoliberalization of urban development.

1. Introduction

Neoliberalisation and market-friendly policies have been affecting the way cities develop and function for more than three decades. While cities have been going through a massive transformation process due to the deindustrialisation during the 20th century, there has also been a transformation from traditionally interventionist land-use planning dynamics towards neoliberal planning dynamics. Slowly but surely, planning institutions began to agree more and more with the changing priorities of local governments who are slowly left on their own

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by the neoliberalising states to provide necessary services and infrastructure. This required new mechanisms to allow flexible interventions to accommodate multiple actors to the process of urban development and planning. This also meant deregulations to allow involvement of new actors and also to allow the accumulation of capital in cities.

The aim of this paper is not to understand the processes of neoliberal urbanism but to underline the challenges to planning in neoliberalising cities, which need to respond to contradictory processes. Neoliberal planning can best be understood as the embodiment of a set of contradictory urbanities that typify contemporary urban neoliberalism across the Western world (Baeten 2011). This paper will put these contradictions within a framework and will highlight the growing need for new approaches in planning.

The most interesting of these contradictions is in the neoliberal urban development system, which is based on market-oriented dynamics and can only function if land-use decisions are regulated by planning institutions. In other words planning is a prerequisite for neoliberal urban development. In the absence of control, property owners and landlords are at liberty to act as they please in the way they develop their property, and this will have a direct influence on the value of other land and properties. Thus, land-use planning specifically, and planning institutions in general, are needed to regulate the land and property market. Why then, has there been a transformation from traditionally interventionist land-use planning dynamics towards neoliberal planning dynamics that require more flexible intervention mechanisms?

As a result of globalisation and the increasing mobility of capital, large-scale capital investments were mobilised into the cities, especially in the form of large-scale property-development projects. Such investment opportunities became a target for capital investors, who replaced small-scale individual property owners. Looking from the land-use planning point of view, controlling and regulating the intervention of large capital investments in the city is a lot easier than controlling small-scale investments across the city. The city is now divided among major capital holders who are willing to pay the high cost of land development (and redevelopment) and small-scale property investors who invest in the rest of the land market. This division in the urban land and property market allows both small- and large-scale capital investors to exist in the city without interfering in each other's activities. Obviously, when compared to a rigid and regulatory land-use planning process, a more flexible and negotiable strategic planning process will do more to encourage such land and property market dynamics, and it is this trend to which the neoliberalisation of planning refers.

Instruments of neoliberalism have been adopted within different policy contexts in different periods, and naturally they have different meanings and outcomes in different institutional contexts. What these neoliberal agendas, strategies and policies have in common is that they all create contradictions between the principles and practices of planning for urban development. While planning literature is replete with critiques of neoliberal urban development, it ignores the consequences for the planning profession itself. In spite of these contradictions and problems, planners operate within, contribute to, resist or temper an increasingly neoliberal mode of producing spaces and places, or the revival of profit-driven changes in land use. We all agree that new planning perspectives are needed to understand the increasing weakness of cities with respect to economic, social and ecological pressures and



threats; to pay attention to the growing concerns on risks in the globalised economic system; and to bear in mind the processes that misguided development under the hegemony of capitalism (Eraydin, forthcoming). Yet, new planning approaches and concrete studies on credible alternatives are missing.

There is enough literature that points out the evils of neoliberal urban development and planning processes. Already two decades ago Albrechts (1991, p. 126) invited planners to take a new approach, calling for a paradigm shift ‘from planning for capital’ to ‘planning for society’. He advised the planner not to become an entrepreneur and avoid attempts to steer economic forces, but so far that shift has not taken place. The blame lies not with the planners, but with the system in which they necessarily serve as agents of neoliberal urbanism. While planners keep rejecting the idea that neoliberalisation is occurring in urban spatial development and policy processes, neoliberalisation is slowly finding its way into every subfield of planning. Moreover, this ‘prevailing pattern,’ including its embodied contradictions, is settling into everyday practice. Marketisation initiatives have caused uneven economic stagnation, thereby intensifying inequality, inter-local competition, coordination problems, and social insecurity (Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2009b, p. 51). While participation and bottom-up approaches are encouraged and regulated in contemporary urban societies, their effectiveness is limited by public decision-makers whose principles may be a result of pressure from market forces.

Private sector intervention has always been an issue for public policy makers but the growing problem is that planning operates more than ever within the one-size-fits-all market solutions, without powerful alternative visions of urban justice trickling down to the planning office. New planning approaches that began to mushroom everywhere, although fragmented and small scale, are not put together below umbrella conceptual frameworks. In a recent publication (Tasan-Kok and Baeten, 2011) we pointed out what is wrong in this planning approach and what contradictions are created by the system for cities and their residents with some case studies from Africa, Asia, North-America and Europe. These studies revealed the uneasy cohabitation of ‘planning’ – some kind of state intervention for the betterment of our built and natural environment – and ‘neoliberalism’ – a belief in the superiority of market mechanisms to organise land use and the inferiority of its opposite, state intervention. These contradictions included dynamics that are not alien to the scholarly literature: Displacements due to property-led gentrification processes, global processes intervening local networks of governance, marginalisation, proactive role of the state in the introduction of market principles, self-responsibilization, privatisation of infrastructure provision, opportunism, entrepreneurialism, etc. In this paper we plan to provide an overview of the outcomes of this study, putting the contradictions into a structured framework.

The paper will first give an overview on the historical development of neoliberalization of the planning institution, followed by a section that systematically defines the contradictions that neoliberal planning creates. Finally we will end the paper with a discussion on our ideas for future approaches.

2. A bit of history: Changing approaches of planning



Since the late 1970s the twin processes of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation of capital are played out at various scales: in the neighbourhood, city and metropolitan region. Public-sector responsibilities are decentralised or privatised, economic sectors are deregulated and welfare services are replaced by workfarist social policies that favour innovative and competitive economic development (Leitner et al. 2007; Jessop 1993). While the state is being hollowed out, ‘a dramatic intensification of coercive and disciplinary forms of state interventions’ (Peck et al. 2009b) is occurring to cope with the effects of these marketisation initiatives and their consequences. In response, the wealthiest nations had to bail out their financial institutions as they teetered on the brink of bankruptcy during the credit crunch of 2008–2009, yet individuals and homeowners were able to take no benefit from state intervention.

Over the past two decades or so, urban development has become a common activity of a diverse group of stakeholders: public agencies, semi-independent public organisations, private companies and public-private partnerships, who have shared the responsibilities and risks of pursuing decentralised goals through individualism and entrepreneurialism. The stakeholders of neoliberal urban and regional governance (policy-makers, planners, mayors, decision-makers, municipal commission members, NGOs, civil society organisations, neighbourhood committees, urban residents, etc.) all take part in planning, either directly or indirectly, but are increasingly dependent on the neoliberal debt-oriented economy as individuals or organisations that are being held responsible for their own actions. This complex system has accelerated the trends of entrepreneurialism, consumerism and property-led development, and thereby, actors in the urban land and property market have been elevated to the position of key players in urban development. As the expanding role of governance engenders more participatory practices and a further democratisation of urban society, some public responsibilities are decentralised to semi-dependent public bodies, while others are transferred to private organisations or public-private enterprises.

During the 1950s, comprehensive land-use planning became the most prominent approach to planning. Few of the adopted plans had much legal effect, however, policy-makers tended to ignore them (Altshuler 1966). In the 1960s, many planners believed in a future in which social problems could be controlled and humanity liberated from the constraints of scarcity and hunger; while critics of this vision argued that planners were more concerned with formal planning procedures than with their outcome (Albrechts, 1991). From the late 1970s onwards, greater flexibility and the loosening of rigid rules became a common thread in planning discourse (Healey and Williams 1993). In the 1980s the Anglo-American experience suggested that plans should be continually revised to take into account new information and events. As a consequence, flexible, short- or middle-range planning gradually came to replace long-range, end-state planning (Taşan-Kok 2008), and the focus of planning practices shifted to projects (Albrechts 2004; Healey and Williams 1993; Motte 1994) and land-use regulations. Since the beginning of the 1990s planning scholars have increasingly supported strategic spatial planning as a solution to the growing complexity and increasing concern about rapid, random and fragmented development in many West European countries (Albrechts 2004; Healey 2004), where this method was considered more realistic and effective. Traditional planning practices and processes had become ineffective and were too passive to deal with property-led urban development (Fainstein 1994). Entering the 2000s, the planning profession lacked clear boundaries and a recognisable identity (Myers and Banerjee

2005). In the practitioners' eyes, the field was porous and vaguely defined, and the increased flexibility in planning was related to this openness (Taşan-Kok 2008). Besides being more flexible, the role and scope of the planner became more ambiguous during this predominantly neoliberal era, when a blurring of the boundaries became evident not only in the field, but also in planning literature. This change was precipitated by a few developments (Tasan-Kok, 2011):

- *Varieties of capitalism*, fragmented spread of neoliberal economic policies, and diverse reactions of planning institutions due to 'contextual embeddedness and path-dependency of neoliberal restructuring projects' (Peck et al. 2009b);
- *Ambivalent position of planning institution* due to the blurred boundaries between public sector and private markets (Alexander 2008);
- Increasing *opportunity-led approach* of planning institutions.

3. Contradictions of neoliberal planning

The contradictions of neoliberalism and the neoliberal state have been discussed explicitly in previous literature, however their implications for urban planning have been largely ignored. The ambivalent position of planning, as set forth above, has created contingent path-dependencies and specific contradictions in the functioning of planning institutions. In this regard, it may be enlightening to consider the analytical framework advanced by Peck, Theodore, and Brenner (2009b, p. 55), which applies the Schumpeterian notion of the creative destruction of cities. When analysing the destructive and creative moments of institutional restructuring there are two assumptions that should be kept in mind. First, the conceptualisation of destructive and creative moments helps to simplify the highly contradictory trajectories of institutional change; and secondly, these moments are interconnected. In this light, the neoliberalisation of planning may be seen as a process of creative destruction that results in a cluttered and contested institutional environment where newly created and highly unstable spatial dynamics contradict inherited regulatory arrangements (Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2009b, p. 57). In short, the dynamics of property-led urban development prevail in a city where a comprehensive planning system has been well established; but the destructive moment arises when a new large-scale commercial property appears at a crucial spot in the centre of a traditionally social-democratic city where some other service functions were foreseen in the zoning plans. The local government allows a change in the zoning plan, convinced that a large commercial facility in the centre would enhance the city's competitive advantage. The expected outcome of the land transaction includes a new image for the city, besides rent (and tax) revenue for the local government. Thus, despite opposition from surrounding neighbourhoods seeking to avert high-density development and gentrification, the local government revises the zoning plan. Allowing this new type of large-scale mixed-use project requires not only altering the zoning plans, but also reversing the chain of command. Though contested, a new space of neoliberalisation is thereby created on the basis of property-led dynamics. This is just one of many examples to be gleaned from the institutional responses to the demands of neoliberal actors. That said, creative destruction does not happen systematically, nor does it conform to a standard model due to the path-dependencies mentioned earlier. The contradictions created in each planning system are path-dependent and unique due to the contradictory trajectories of institutional change. Figure 1 depicts this relationship schematically.

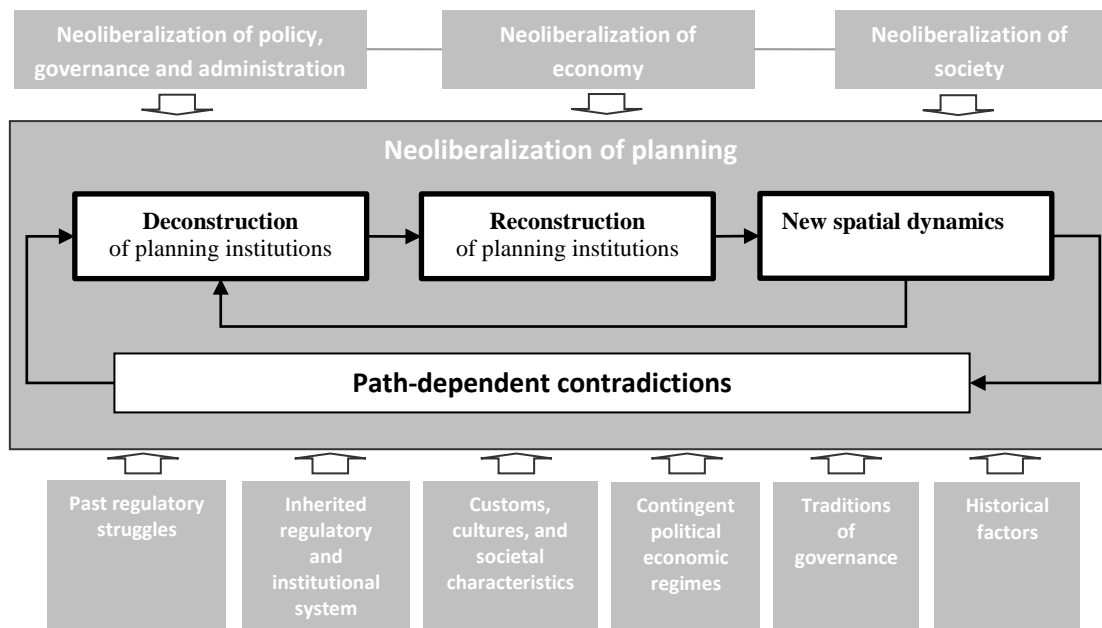


Figure 1. Neoliberalization of planning (Tasan-Kok 2011)

Harvey (2005) explored the shadowy areas and conflicts within the general theory of neoliberalism and came up with a number of general contradictions. Peck, Theodore and Brenner (2009b, p. 51) have pointed out some serious disjunctures between the neoliberal ideology and its everyday political operations. Combining these analyses, we can group the divergent incongruities into a few contradictions that are inherent in the neoliberal state. What is in common in diverse institutional structures is that they all reveal the uneasy coexistence of ‘planning’ and ‘neoliberalism,’ and explore the diverse contradictions created as a result of this coexistence.

First of all, *the transfer of responsibilities to the general public or private companies creates contradicting processes*. The general public are expected to become entrepreneurial and responsible, creating their own chances, which on the one hand create opportunities for democratic/bottom-up participation (van Dyck, 2011), but on the other result in exclusive processes (Raco, 2011; Smith and Coombes, 2011). This aspirational political approach sees citizens as entrepreneurs or consumers and this kind of policy framework requires individuals to contribute to the competitiveness of the places, and is aimed at upgrading places, as derelict areas diminish the aspirations of the public (Raco 2011). Raco (2011) argues that neoliberal policy defines a citizen profile on the basis of aspirational citizenship (competitive, entrepreneurial, highly educated, commercialised etc.), where citizens with low aspirations should take people with high aspirations as a model in attempts to become successful and competitive. In this respect, aspirational policies in the UK promoted the idea of social sustainability, while also facilitating increased social polarisation. Moreover, as Smith and Coombes (2011) argue, responsabilisation reframes individuals as agents of their own destinies, although van Dyck (2011) shows that in Canada this type of responsabilisation may also increase chances of participation and social economic progress (even though the practice



of social entrepreneurship is limited). Private companies are expected to take over the tasks that cause fragmentation (or hybridisation), and the meaning of service provision changes a result, becoming more technocratic and delimiting public access to decision-making, thus excluding certain parts of society.

Secondly, the changing role of planners creates contradictions in that *neoliberalisation increasingly frames planners as information providers whose role is merely to recommend the thresholds of safe behaviour to consumer-citizens* (Smith and Coombes 2011). Planners may shift the balance in property rights to promote risk avoidance, but the consequential decision on how to use land is transferred to occupiers, developers or tenants to the benefit of those economic actors with access to scientific and legal expertise. Consequently, responsibility is offloaded from planners, as private matters and their consequences are rightfully contemplated at the level of individual households (Smith and Coombes, 2011). Oranje (2011) also emphasises some contradictions that have been created by neoliberalism for planners and politicians, exploring ways and the extent to which neoliberalism has created a setting of rules and actions that have facilitated the continuation, development and sustenance of the approaches and actions of property developers. Oranje's (2011) case also shows how neoliberalism has increased the appetite for transformation among urban planners in South Africa, turning them into willing agents of neoliberal accumulation.

Thirdly, planning practice has moved away from *democratic and participatory processes* (Beaten, 2011). Despite the frequent 'participative planning' discourse, in planning practice the participation of ordinary citizens goes no further than including some of their reflections in the shaping of the ongoing competitive developments (if the community is participating at all), but not in such fundamental decisions as whether the project should be carried out in the first place. As Taşan-Kok and Korthals Altes suggest (2011), local networks of participation are also affected by the interference of transnational trade agreements (such as European Competition regulations).

Fourthly, the *competitiveness agenda creates contradictions for the social cohesion of cities*. Neoliberal urban policies are confronted with the uneasy task of matching competitiveness goals with the provision of collective goods and ensuring social cohesion, as Loopmans and Dierckx (2011) show in the case of Belgium. They argue that neoliberal urban development projects appear to be too divisive for the local populace to provide a basis for broad-based collective mobilisation. In the same vein, and complementing Baeten's (2011) arguments, Raco (2011) argues that the persistence of deprived or problematic groups are seen by policy makers as a hindrance to national competitiveness and generate additional financial burdens on the welfare state and society. Thus, the distinctions and differences that exist between social groups are beginning to have a negative impact on the overall competitiveness of cities and regions in this policy framework.

Fifthly, in the neoliberal agenda, *urban development strategies of central and local governments can be inconsistent and in conflict*. Eraydin (2011) shows in the case of Turkey that while the central government transferred certain planning rights to local governments, it sought to retain, or even extend, its privileges in major urban areas, especially in metropolitan regions.



Finally, property-led development creates contradictions, as Jou, Lund and Wu (2011) show in the case of Taiwan. Their findings suggest that strategies of ‘flexible’ accumulation by dispossession centring on land acquisition and property development are key elements in the ‘prevailing pattern’ of contemporary neoliberal planning, and that cities have become important spaces of neoliberalism and entrepreneurial urban politics (Harvey 1989) that are more accommodating towards investors and developers, as implemented in cities throughout the globe. This, as also emphasised by Baeten (2011), has led to the creation of disconnected patches of elite islands, and thus discontinuity and detachment in the city.

4. Discussion: What is next?

The contradiction of neoliberal planning lies in the epistemological impossibility to tackle obvious urban injustices in the absence of a convincing theoretical and conceptual framework, even if the need for planning intervention that goes beyond paving the institutional way for more market-friendly planning is obvious, acute even. Of late, leading authors in geography and planning have started to tackle this obvious conceptual hiatus that has been steadily growing during decades of neoliberal urbanism. Susan Fainstein (2010) has launched the concept of ‘the just city’, centered around diversity, democracy and equity, as an alternative for the ‘ideological triumph of neoliberalism’ which has caused “the allocation of spatial, political, economic, and financial resources to favor economic growth at the expense of wider social benefits”. In *Seeking Spatial Justice*, Soja (2010) insists on the assertive recognition of the social-spatial dialectic (the spatial will be a constitutive part of any form of urban justice). Harvey (2008) and Mitchell (2003), inspired by Lefebvre (1968), have tried to revive the notion of ‘right to the city’, while both Friedmann (2000) and Amin (2006) have tried to answer the question what constitutes the ‘good city’.

Meanwhile, regardless of the increasing momentum in reconceptualising notions of urban justice in academic circles, planning operates more than ever within the one-size-fits-all market solution, without powerful alternative visions of urban justice (so far) trickling down to the planning office. The success of the neoliberal restructuring ethos as an organising principle for urban policy and planning is perhaps less dependent on some form of admirably coherent economic theory than it is on keeping possible alternatives at bay. As Leys (1990, quoted in Peck et al., 2009a) formulates it, “for an ideology to be hegemonic, it is not necessary that it be loved. It is merely necessary that it have no serious rival”, and, without trying to suggest the existence of mystically conspiring neoliberal powers, there seem to be tactics at work in different parts of the world that try to exactly keep alternatives out of the limelight. One is to incorporate critical social movements into the mainstream of planning through neoliberal logics such as ‘social entrepreneurship’ that forces social movements to prioritise the logic of funding and financial survival rather than the attainment of original social goals (van Dijck, 2011). Another tactic is to portray market-led solutions not as an option but as a necessity. In times of ‘geo-Darwinism’, only cities fit to successfully compete with other cities for scarce resources of capital, be they financial or human, will be or become prosperous places to live and locations where the creative classes will thrive. The ‘good city’, then, is the neoliberal city that successfully prioritises market solutions and attracts its ‘fair’ share of people and investment – which can be interpreted as ‘just’ – even if this Darwinian survival logic contradictorily leads to deeply uneven urban development at a larger scale. But cities, within this impeccable market logic, have the right to compete for profitable



investment, and urban dwellers have the right to try their luck in the world of urban opportunities created by market-led development. Further, the portrayal of neoliberal urban development as desirable, necessary, unique, or unavoidable, has a highly divisive effect on urban actors. If neoliberalisation is about the ‘restoration of class power’ as Harvey (2005) would summarise it, then neoliberalisation can be a strongly desirable project for those who are – or think they are – empowered by it, whether house owners selling their property with a sizeable profit in gentrifying areas, or community groups successfully bidding for financing, planners pushing through (large) development projects, politicians leaving their mark through flagship projects, or developers, estate agents and construction companies making profits from the systematic transformation of urban space under neoliberal conditions.

Neoliberal planning, however paradoxical, is tempting in many ways for many users of urban space, not necessarily including those who gain most from it, and often after the temporal suspension of genuine social concern amongst planners, politicians or community groups to enable ‘development’ in the first place. The thrill of competing for funding, pushing through plans, seeing spectacular architecture rising from the soil, or contributing to favourable statistics on investment, population, local GDP, etcetera can be far larger than the search for democracy, equity and diversity in the city. Neoliberal planning, then, involves the installation of a new ‘planning subjectivity’ in town halls and grey administrative buildings where planners do their everyday work. The excitement, pride, respect and recognition that follow from successful neoliberal planning implementations, stand perhaps in sharp contrast with the management of the poor and their poor neighbourhoods within very limited and ever shrinking social budgets. Contributing to the overall ‘gain’ for the city, to the ‘good’ for the city, as defined by neoliberal planning principles, acts as an aphrodisiac for planners and other policy makers, since those principles form the parameters of urban success. At the same time, it becomes increasingly difficult to stand up for the ‘other’ city, the city of ‘loss’, the ‘bad’ city. Seen through this lens, ‘punishing the poor’ (Wacquant 2009) may be an undesirable part of the urban neoliberalisation process, but nonetheless necessary and unavoidable in an age of unforgiving interurban competition in which the ghetto has no place. Moving out of sight those who are obviously guilty of failing to grab the opportunities offered by the neoliberal city, has become a constitutive part of neoliberal urbanism.

This leads us to a final contradiction of neoliberal planning. Reducing the city to an ‘economy’ defines everything and everybody as either economic gain or loss, with nothing outside this dichotomy. Economic reductionism, on the one hand, simplifies the view of what constitutes good planning – planning that triggers economic gain – but, on the other hand, turns planning practice more complex, as all planning issues that fall outside the economic imperative lack an over-all vision to effectively deal with (other than ‘removal’, as described by Wacquant 2009). The separation of the economic sphere and the social sphere under neoliberal conditions, in other words, turns the planning profession schizophrenic, as it has to pursue goals that only suit part of the urban public. The dichotomy between the social and the economic in the age of neoliberal planning is reflected in the gradual separation of planning frameworks for either ‘social’ or ‘economic’ planning. Cities have ‘hard’ planning-theoretical frameworks for economic policy, with Richard Florida’s hypothesis about the mobile ‘creative class’ (2002) as the undisputed paradigm. It unashamedly suggests to favour the highly qualified, private enterprise and technology, in a chauvinistic attempt to plan for the muscled, ‘masculine’, assertive city that shows no patience with democratic reflections about



how people may want ‘their’ city to be. Conversely, cities have ‘soft’ conceptual tools to plan for social purposes, or plan in poorer neighbourhoods. In sharp contrast with Florida’s proposals, the communicative turn in planning theory, headed by Patsy Healy (1997), amongst others, offers democratic, considerate, ‘feminine’, dialogical, inclusive planning frameworks that sensitively take people’s preferences and feelings into account. It goes almost without saying that this planning-theoretical dualism, grown out of and reinforcing the separation of the ‘social’ and the ‘economic’ in neoliberal times, disempowers planning that engages with the social, and empowers planning that prioritises economic growth. The contradiction lies in the theoretical and practical impossibility to separate social and economic aspects in urban planning – it belongs to the *raison-d’être* of planning to be integrative in order to come to ‘good’ land use decisions.

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