

From the “City of Walls” to the “Pilotis Brasilienses”: challenges on the road from spatial disconnection towards social connection in Brazil

Igor Pessoa

TU Delft - Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment, OTB - Research for the built Environment

- The Netherlands

Research Financed by CAPES

i.pessoa@tudelft.nl

Distinct planning theories have addressed the importance of promoting social connection in the built environment. When Susan Fainstein developed the concept of “Just City” (2010) she used social connection as a fundamental aspect towards the just city defined by diversity, equity and democracy. Fincher and Iveson (2008), additionally, explore social connection as a tool to “plan with diversity” as one of the “three social logics of urban planning”, i.e., redistribution, encounter and recognition. There is no doubt that social connection is a powerful tool and that it can tackle complex issues like urban diversity and spatial justice. However, the Brazilian context shows that there are still many uncertainties about how spatial connection can be used to promote social connection.

Several authors have shown that social connections became more complex and ephemeral in modern society, such as Castells, with the concept of “network society” (2010), or Bauman, with the concept of “liquid modernity” (2000). Although the virtual world plays an important role in the creation of social connection in the present context of the ‘Post-Industrial Society’ (Bell, 1973), physical space still has a part in the creation of social connections. A banker living in a gated community in the suburban area of São Paulo has more social contacts with a banker in London than with a construction worker living in poor housing at the other side of the street. Thus, urban intervention aiming to promote social contact can be extremely challenging, especially in such complex and uneven urban contexts.

This paper aims to establish in what ways the frameworks of the Just City (Fainstein, 2010) and Planning with Diversity (Fincher & Iveson, 2008) can be applied to the metropolitan areas of developing countries. Fainstein argues that the Just City approach could be implemented in developing countries, if certain pre-conditions like democracy and a relative material equity or a culture of commitment to equity are met (Fainstein, 2000: 471). Since inequality is one of the most common challenges of the developing world, it becomes clear that the Just City framework has more chances of success only on urban contexts that have similar challenges of the developed world. This problem is also present with Fincher and Iveson's Planning with Diversity framework. The authors have created a normative guide of how to plan urban spaces for redistribution, recognition and encounter. Nevertheless, this strategy was not only created based on a North-American urban environment, it also does not acknowledge the complexities of extremely unequal cities.

Yet, the fundamental objectives of the Just City framework or the Planning with Diversity framework have no theoretical incompatibility with the aims of most the developing countries cities. They all could profit from having stronger social connections. The main dilemma here is how to achieve that in an urban context where inequality hinders the capacity of promoting social connections. Creating spaces of encounter, recognition and redistribution does not seem to be sufficient in complex and uneven urban environments. In other words, the simple promotion of spatial connection in developing countries' cities does not necessarily lead to the promotion of social connection. With this in mind, this research focused on the spatial variables, beyond simple spatial connection, involved in the promotion of social connection. The main question that this article addresses is *to what extent can spatial connection promote social connection in metropolitan cities?*

To address this question the strategy of this article is to conduct a comparative study between the cities of São Paulo and Brasília¹. São Paulo was defined by Caldeira (2000) as the "City of Walls," where spatial segregation would be so strong that it would corrode citizenship and promote violence. In the other hand, Brasília is the

¹ This article is part of a broader research plan investigating resilient issues in Brazilian metropolises, where social connections are an important aspect. This is way two Brazilian metropolises were selected.

concretization of the modernist dream, where its residential buildings are elevated by *pilotis* on the ground level and they do not have any physical spatial barriers. In theory, they would be extreme examples of “bad” and “good” planning practices to promote social connections. Nevertheless, physical connection between fragmented spaces in the city does not necessarily bring social connection between diverse groups or individuals. Moreover, the fragmentation of space does not necessarily lead to the corrosion of social connections. The relation between these two concepts is not as straightforward, especially in complex urban environments of developing countries. In that sense, this comparative study will shed some light on the underlying forces of how social connection is related to spatial connection in contemporary complex metropolitan cities.

The methods used on this research are mainly qualitative. The strategy is to use interviews and field observation to investigate in detail the social challenges involved in this complex relationship between spatial and social connection. The article will present the data collected from 40 in-depth interviews conducted in São Paulo and in Brasília. During the one-month field trip, besides the in-depth semi-structured interviews, field observation techniques were also applied. As aforementioned, the article started as a theoretical reflection, which will constitute the first section of the paper, followed by a second section about the contextualization of this problem in Brazil. The third section focuses on the methodology and describes the strategy, the strength and the weakness of the methods used. The fourth section presents a discussion of the data analysis, followed by the last section with some concluding remarks to contribute to the debate on the promotion of social connection through spatial connection. Challenges of complex and uneven urban environments, such as the Brazilian metropolises, can contribute extremely to the understanding of the underlying forces of social connection not only in the developing countries, but also in developed countries cities.

References

- Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid modernity*. Cambridge, UK: Blackwell.
- Bell, D. (1973). *The coming of post-industrial society; a venture in social forecasting*. New York,: Basic Books.

- Caldeira, T. P. R. (2000). *City of walls. Crime, segregation, and citizenship in São Paulo*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Castells, M. (2010). *The rise of the network society* (2nd ed.). Chichester, West Sussex ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Fainstein, S. S. (2000). New Directions in Planning Theory. *Urban Affairs Review*, 35(4), 451-478. doi: 10.1177/107808740003500401
- Fainstein, S. S. (2010). *The just city*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Fincher, R., & Iveson, K. (2008). *Planning and Diversity in the City: redistribution, recognition and encounter*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.