

Cities, Heritage and Transformation

Mohammad Ali Chaichian

The Transformative Power of Architecture and Urban Design

Planning for Social and Spatial Justice

 Silk Cities

 Springer

Cities, Heritage and Transformation

Series Editor

Fatemeh Farnaz Arefian, Bartlett Development Planning Unit, Silk Cities,
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*To my parents, who instilled in me the
passion to live and love*

Foreword

As happens sometimes, we might find ourselves in a situation with a soul-searching question or even a life-changing experience affecting our lives, personally or professionally: A situation that changes one's perspective and triggers evaluating her/his role and capacity as a professional architect, urban planner, etc. This can simply be triggered by a question, such as whether an architect should design prisons if she/he is asked to do so, as was posed by a friend to this book's author when he was a young architecture graduate back in the 1970s; assessing other architects and planners' unconditional yielding to proposals and ideas imposed by high-level authorities or owners of capital, and serving as their "spatial agents" by designing and executing large-scale profitable projects; or having to work in a corrupt construction industry and being asked to ignore technical safety requirements and standards in both public or private sectors. For me, that "awakening moment" happened 20 years ago while working with disaster-affected communities for the provision of post-disaster housing and urban design projects—an eye-opening experience that disturbingly revealed the insufficiency of mainstream educational routes and professional practice routines of architecture and urban design in dealing with such wicked problems, and complexities of large-scale post-disaster urban recovery projects.

In an urban world with ever-increasing challenges, the developmental path in response to "wicked problems," and improved understandings and advancements in our cities and settlements often go through a trial-and-error process within national and global contexts. As we know, many times "solutions" or "best practices" may lead to creating other problems, socially, economically, and politically. One example provided in this book is the humanitarian challenges of forced displacement of war-affected communities and societies that often lead to the design, planning, and establishment of deceptively labeled "temporary camps" to settle large refugee populations, often inadvertently creating and reinforcing social deprivation, poverty, and segregation for refugees and generations to come, in camps best described as "permanent slums." Another example is that despite achievements by social activists and grassroots organizations to eradicate social and spatial segregation and advance causes of diversity, equity, and inclusivity, there still exist disparities in the symbolic

representation of collective memory, manifested in monuments and statues honoring various social constituents that are displayed at many urban memorial landscapes.

It appears that there are two far ends of a spectrum in architects' and urban planners' professional careers as they face the contrasting forces and sources of local, regional, and global challenges—whether it be related to social inequalities, pandemics, climate change, disasters and conflicts, affordable housing, heritage disappearance, and more. One end represents the elitism of architecture, urban planning, and consultancy firms in the form we know, whereby design professionals act as “spatial agent” technocrats by serving the interests of capitalists and developers, influenced by the design and construction firms' needs to remain financially viable. In addition to designing and building mundane structures, these existential needs include a desire to propose cutting-edge global projects often funded by capital-rich developing nations, tourism-oriented ideation; and of course, the yearning for recognition by “signature” architects and designers, to be remembered for their created “masterpieces.” The other end of the spectrum is comprised of community development workers and socially conscious architects/planners serving underprivileged communities in the field as socio-spatial activists, with the latter often taking place at micro-level community settings. Then, what is the optimum position on the role of architects and planners within these two ends of the spectrum, whereby challenging or difficult issues can be considered along with other forces affecting the design and construction of the built environment?

With the recent, yet gradual recognition of shortfalls in mainstream practical and academic educational paths in the spatial design profession, we witness the emergence of problem-oriented discussions and even add-on post-graduate courses, such as topics around “humanitarian architecture”, “social architecture”, and “participatory planning.” Is it enough though? It is somehow shocking how most mainstream academic education, training and practices in architecture and urban planning still do not consider those very concepts in their routine curricula to be at least touched on. Thus, there needs to be advocacy for a “socially conscious” design and planning by architects, urban planners, and built environment professionals. But achieving that objective also requires exposure to real-world challenges and scenarios. In my view, this book offers such advocacy by making a case for bringing social justice discussions to the heart of mainstream professional training and practice, and triggering socially conscious professionalism instead of ad hoc add-ons, or afterward discussions. The book brings together critical analyses of existing spatial injustices as are manifested at various levels of designing the built environment, by providing various case studies from several countries dominated by neo-liberal capitalist economic policies; and contrasting them with transformative examples of architecture and urban planning projects from countries with socialist market economies, or social democracies with mixed economic systems. Given his overarching critical sociological analysis, and his socialist approach to design and planning influenced by “the Right to the City” movement and urban political economy, Professor Chaichian invites built environment professionals to rethink and re-define their roles as spatial agents; use the power of design and planning—in general, consultancy practices; and adopt an analytical and realistic approach even within a variety of existing political

and structural contexts, toward embracing ongoing social advancements in achieving social and spatial justice.

While each chapter of the book can be read independently in its related field, for example, architecture and urban design education, affordable housing provision, refugee camp design and management, architecture for rehabilitation, or design of heritage and collective memory sites and monuments; in an easy-to-follow style the book takes us for a thought-provoking journey through divergent paths. For instance, cases exposing historical, social, political, and economic contexts within which such design and planning processes take place; spatial design examples influenced by architects and planners' social statuses mostly regarding their social class positioning; ethics of socially meaningful design that are informed by principles of social and spatial justice; and finally, these professions' potential to use spatial design and planning as effective transformative tools to contribute to positive and meaningful social change in societies.

If you haven't yet faced one of those soul-searching situations or questions about issues of social and spatial justice in the design of the built environment, this book portrays several cases and scenarios that are thought-provoking and intellectually challenging. However, for those who have already encountered such situations, this book also sheds light on the bigger picture from a critical sociological perspective and helps them position their professional outlooks in that regard and think ahead. In any case, this is an intellectually rich and informative book and at the same time, an engaging one, making a case for ethical and conscious professionalism in real-world contexts that affect design, planning, and implementation processes for the built environment stakeholders, including educators, practitioners, and scholars.

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Dr. Farnaz Arefian

Preface

In this book, I am embarking on a long overdue philosophical journey, based on a simple question that has been occupying my mind since my early professional years as a practicing architect and urban planner, and later during my research and teaching career as an urban sociologist: *Can architectural practice, designing the built environment, and urban planning serve as transformative tools to advance the causes of social justice?* In other words, is it possible to promote social justice using design and spatial planning that is informed by progressive social activism and policies to transform the built environment? My objectives in writing this book are two-fold: To evaluate academic and professional training processes that educate architects and spatial planners; and to provide examples of their final products in the design or transformation of the built environment that at times are influenced by progressive social movements and agendas. To achieve these objectives, I provide a critical comparative analysis of existing spatial injustices as manifested at various levels of designing the built environment on one hand; and alternative examples of transformative architectural and urban planning ideas and projects from liberal capitalist societies, socialist market economies, and social democracies with mixed economic systems that serve the causes of social and spatial justice on the other.

In his book *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, David Harvey (1991) points out that social justice is not a singular concept, and proponents of conservative/utilitarian, libertarian, and socialist/egalitarian philosophies each have their own definition of “justice.” Related to policy planning and design, here I adopt the definition offered by the socialist/egalitarian approach based on a single right—that of “justification”: *that individuals’ right to social justice is not conditional or arbitrary based on their privileged social class position or status in society, but rather universal* (Forst, 2012:2). This right is equally applicable to spatial justice and access to the built environment. It is reflected in the ideas and writings of urban geographers and urban political economists such as David Harvey (“geographical imagination” and the “Right to the City”); Henry Lefebvre (citizens’ inalienable rights to urban space, and to the “capitalist city”); Edward Soja (his critical examination of “locational discrimination” and “spatial

injustices”); Susan Fainstein (“The Just City”); and the activism of the Right to the City Alliance and similar groups in the USA and across the globe.

Further, in this book I provide diverse examples that represent either implementation of social justice principles in the design and planning of the built environment, or their absence. Although practicing architects and spatial planners may develop sensitivity to these principles based on their own social positioning and lived experience, as trained professionals they ought to be rigorously educated and informed about the significance and social implications of such principles. As an example, citing a lack of vision on how design can “save the world,” in an article published in 2015 entitled “*there are no urban design courses on race and justice, so we made our own syllabus*” (Mock 2015), Black students at Harvard Graduate School of Design explain how they have found it difficult to realize that vision when, their instruction has been based on the works of architects “whose worldviews don’t give heavy weight to social problems.” Furthermore, interviewed by Al Jazeera, Dana McKinney, the American Association of Student Union (AASU) President at Harvard at the time also argued that “issues of race and justice are not only not discussed among designers, but neither does Harvard’s Design School offer courses that consider these things together.” She also discussed her involvement with organizing *InFORMing Justice*, a conference that was held at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design (GSD) that year, that in her words was “the first of its kind at GSD” to initiate a conversation about “equitable, community-based design” among urban planners, architects, and social activists (McKinney, 2015). My initial research findings indicate that although there have been new developments in major architecture and urban planning schools to incorporate social justice issues including diversity, inclusion, and equity into their curricula, Harvard’s GSD example certainly is not an isolated case—a topic that is worthy of further inquiry and analysis.¹ To that end, this book is an attempt to bridge the existing gap between theoretical discussions of social and spatial justice and their realization in planning and design of the built environment.

The book is organized into four parts. Part I includes an introductory chapter that begins with a brief narrative about my rationale to work on this book project, that is, to explore architectural design and spatial planning potentials to advance the causes of social and spatial justice, particularly in the context of Western capitalist democracies. In a search for an answer, the chapter provides a critical evaluation of American higher education institutions’ experiments with two significant initiatives in American academic circles, namely, “multiculturalism” and “justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion” (JDE&I) from the 1980s to the present. This is accomplished by examining the extent to which top-ranked programs in architecture and urban planning have incorporated JDE&I objectives in their respective graduate curricula particularly during the past ten years. Chapter 2 sets the theoretical tone for the following chapters. In the first part, it traces the historical evolution of architectural design and urban planning as a profession; and the second part provides a critical analysis of conservative, liberal, and progressive-Marxist paradigmatic approaches to design,

¹ In Chap. 1, I discuss recent efforts to address these curricular deficiencies at Harvard and other ivy league design schools.

each with their own interpretations regarding issues of social and spatial justice. The chapter concludes by recognizing the significance of architects and planners' roles as transformative individuals or collective "*spatial agencies*," by incorporating social and spatial justice concerns in their design of the built environment.

In Part II, divergent examples of conceptualization and design of three types of urban "shelters," namely affordable housing, refugee camps, and prison complexes are discussed in detail. In Chap. 3, strategies, planning and design of affordable "public" and "social" housing and their significance for administration of social justice are discussed, as envisioned by liberal and progressive-Marxist paradigm assumptions. By reviewing and analyzing public housing policies in the USA, Sweden, and the People's Republic of China, the chapter focuses on 1) issues of equity and citizens' right to housing; and 2) comparing the liberal approach to the provision of adequate living space as a consumption good with the progressive/socialist approach that at least in principle guarantees citizens' equal right to housing (as was the case in the former Soviet Union). The chapter also includes my field observations and research findings about public housing provision in the People's Republic of China. What is notable, is the creeping influence of neoliberal economic principles in shaping housing policies in all three countries during the past five decades.

Another example of housing provision, often perceived as short-term "emergency shelter," is planning and management of refugee camps. However, in most cases the sponsoring nations are from the global North that on one hand contribute to this global human tragedy by instigating regional conflicts and wars, and fund resettlement of displaced populations via their proxy humanitarian agencies such as the UNHCR on the other. Using the Al Za'atri camp in Jordan that houses Syrian refugees displaced by Syrian civil war as a case study, Chap. 4 focuses on the camp's design, planning, and its evolution and transformation from a temporary camp into a planned and managed permanent settlement. Related to social and spatial justice issues, three features of the camp stand out: Its minimal living space/per capita standards that are similar to those in shanty towns and slums; security measures and enforced regulations resembling those implemented in total institutions as described by sociologist Ervin Goffman; and a refugee population that is often preyed upon by for-profit enterprises and corporations for monetary gains. Furthermore, inclusion of incarceration sites as examples of urban "shelter" in this section might sound ironic (Chap. 5). But the design and administration of inmates' living quarters particularly in maximum-security prisons that often become their long-term "shelter" in captivity, represents each society's ultimate ideological and ethical approach to social and spatial justice issues, depending on its adopted paradigmatic assumptions about administration of justice. To that end, focusing on conservative and liberal left-of-the-center approaches to social justice in the USA and Norway, respectively, Chap. 5 examines how each paradigm assumption perceives and manages treatment of citizens who have violated established legal and moral laws by committing the most serious crimes. In brief, while the former paradigm denies criminals their citizenship rights, focuses on "just" punishment, and pays lip service to inmates' rehabilitation; the latter bestows criminals' inalienable citizenship rights and invests in their rehabilitation regardless of the severity of their crimes.

Moving on to Part III, Chaps. 6 and 7 are devoted to evaluation of mezzo-level urban spaces that are designed and transformed either by violating the principles of social and spatial justice, or by advocating such objectives. Chapter 6 provides a historical and theoretical context to examine urban memorial landscapes that ideally are designed and built to represent a nation's shared collective memory ('de lieu de mémoire'), yet they often reflect certain political and ideological agendas in clear violation of citizens' democratic rights to a fair and equal representation. In particular, using the State House grounds in Columbia, South Carolina as an example, and based on this author's field observations and archival research, the chapter analyzes the architecture of racial segregation in an urban memorial landscape that has been designed to glorify a morally questionable past based on the inhumane treatment and exploitation of an enslaved population of African origin in the USA. Furthermore, focusing on the unintended and unexpected global consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for the vitality of cities and urban spaces, Chap. 7 examines various new strategies implemented by urban administrators and spatial planners during and after the pandemic to reorganize urban social spaces, aimed at maintaining cities' economic and social viability. However, while strategies influenced by the "liberal" paradigm mostly focused on implementing the mandated social distancing protocols in public spaces; the progressive "Right to the City" advocates were mindful of the organic, interwoven relation between production and distribution in cities—a prerequisite analytical framework to tackle issues of social and economic equity related to the provision of housing, urban services, and goods by adhering to principles of social and spatial justice.

Finally, by providing American and global examples, the last chapter (Epilogue) examines the role of architects, spatial planners, and citizen-activists as "transformative spatial agents" in three different situations and capacities: 1) Architects and spatial planners as proxy spatial agents serving the interests of ordinary citizens with little or no political power; 2) citizen-activists who act as spatial agents defending and protecting citizens' right to a just and equitable access to urban spaces; and 3) architects/urban planners as proxy "collective spatial agents" who, unlike the other two groups serve the interests of global capital, corporations, and real estate developers that have been increasingly dominated by neoliberal economic principles. As a final note, the book's focus and critical approach to architecture and spatial design related to issues of social and spatial justice is by no means a dismissal of great architectural works and urban planning projects; or rejection of their designers' achievements in creating such conceptual, aesthetic, and engineering feats. Rather, it is to emphasize and reiterate that good architectural design and spatial planning that is mindful of aesthetics, structural integrity, or environmental impacts; and a design that advances causes of social and spatial justice ought not to be two mutually exclusive categories.

I am indebted to many colleagues, individuals and institutions who have shared information, maps, photographs and illustrations, and helped me to achieve the objectives of this ambitious project. In particular, I would like to thank department chairs and deans of architecture and urban planning programs at Columbia University,

University of Central Florida, University of Florida, George Washington University, Georgia Institute of Technology, and Harvard University for sharing information about their JDE&I initiatives to incorporate social justice content into their graduate program curricula (Chap. 1); photographer and social critic Johnny Miller for graciously allowing me to use one of his drone images of urban segregation in post-apartheid Johannesburg, South Africa from his excellent collection of aerial photographs of cities (Chap. 2); Prof. Ayham Dalal and the UNHCR Communication Office for granting me permission to use several maps, charts, and illustrations related to refugee camps (Chap. 4); the HLM Arkitektur A. S. colleagues for their generous permission to use several photographs and maps related to the Halden maximum security prison's architectural design in Norway (Chap. 5); Dr. Spyros Sofos at the London School of Economics and Political Science for sharing valuable information on the *Lieu de Memoire* ('Realm of Memory') school that has enriched the content of chapter 6 about landscapes of collective memory; and finally, Kevin Beaty for granting permission to use his Drone photograph of the new park "cap" over I-70 in Elyria Swansea neighborhoods in east Denver (Chap. 8).

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Los Gatos, USA

Mohammad Ali Chaichian

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About the Author

Mohammad Ali Chaichian is Professor Emeritus of Sociology. He received his Ph.D. in Sociology from Michigan State University; as well as two Master's degrees in architecture and urban planning from the University of Tehran and University of Michigan, respectively. A native of Iran, in addition to practicing architecture in Iran for ten years, he has more than 40 years of research and teaching experience in the USA. His areas of expertise and interest are urban sociology, critical analysis of architectural design and the built environment, global political economy, international migration, and racial/ethnic inequalities. He has authored three books, *White Racism on the Western Urban Frontier: Dynamics of Race and Class in Dubuque, Iowa* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2006); *Town and Country in the Middle East: Iran and Egypt in the Transition to Globalization* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009); and *Empires and Walls: Globalization, Migration, and Colonial Domination* (Leiden: Brill/Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014 & 2015); and has published numerous scholarly articles related to above-indicated subject matters.

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