

## SYMPOSIUM

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# Planning Histories and Practices of Circulating Urban Knowledge

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### Abstract

*This symposium creates and stimulates new dialogue and cross-disciplinary exchange between planning theorists and geographers in researching the transfer of urban policy and planning models, ideas and techniques. The symposium challenges a restricted historical focus in much of the emerging geographical literature on urban policy mobilities by drawing on a rich tradition within planning history of exploring and documenting the trans-urban travel of planning ideas and models over the last 150 years. It is argued that this longer-term perspective is required to highlight important historical continuities and institutional legacies to contemporary urban policy circuits and pathways and to question what is particularly new, distinct and innovative about an intensification in the travel of urban ideas, plans and policies over the past decade — and the accompanying scholarly interest in them. The symposium also uses the emphasis on particular details and specific experiences within planning histories to foreground and develop approaches, particularly from recent geographical scholarship, that investigate the contingent and embodied practices and wider epistemic contexts that enable — or hinder — contemporary policy transfer.*

### Introduction

The past decade has witnessed an upsurge in academic interest in the travel, transfer and flow of urban policy and planning models, ideas and techniques. This has involved coverage across a range of themes and spatial forms, including business improvement districts (Hoyt, 2006; Ward, 2007; Cook, 2008), revanchist urbanism (Swanson, 2007; Mountz and Curran, 2009), urban drug policy (McCann, 2008), participatory budgeting (Crot, 2010), new urbanism (Thompson-Fawcett, 2003; Moore, 2010), urban transport (de Jong and Edelenbos, 2007) and creative cities (Wang, 2004; Peck, 2005; Luckman *et al.*, 2009; Prince, 2010a). There has been a focus across an array of agents and actors: consultants, experts, gurus and other ‘urban policy entrepreneurs’ (Hoyt, 2006), international foundations and think-tanks, all operating through a transfer infrastructure of conferences, publications, internet sites and study tours. Above all, the emphasis has been on a significantly faster pace to transnational urban policy exchange, often through new and globally extensive policymaking channels and circuits.

This emerging body of urban policy and planning transfer literature comprises what Healey (2013: 1510–26) calls a scholarly ‘ether’, ‘awash with new directions and

intellectual projects'. Although challenging a tendency within work from political science on policy transfer to focus on the national rather than urban scale (for example, Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000), this 'ether' contains often divergent aims, epistemologies and methodologies. For example, a comparative emphasis on territorially bounded contemporary 'planning cultures' within urban planning literature (Friedmann, 2005a; 2005b; Sanyal, 2005) contrasts with a focus on relational conceptions of place in work by urban and economic geographers (Ward, 2009; McCann and Ward, 2010). There is also a contrast between an emphasis on diffusional 'episodes' and models posited in planning literature (Ward, 1999; 2000) and a focus on 'mobilities' and 'mutations' in geographical conceptualizations of policy transfer (Peck and Theodore, 2010; McCann, 2011; Peck, 2011a).

Across both urban planning and geography literature, there is a tension between socially constructivist approaches and more explicitly poststructural emphases on a materially heterogeneous and emergent world of urban assemblages (McFarlane, 2009; Allen and Cochrane, 2010; Prince, 2010b) and the use of actor-network theory (ANT), practice theory and discourse analysis in theorizing transnational planning transfer (Tait and Jensen, 2007; Vetteretto, 2009). Furthermore, there is a significant strand within this 'ether' that seeks to re-orientate urban theory and planning policymaking from the global South and challenge a unidirectional flow of ideas and concepts (Roy, 2008; Watson, 2009; Robinson and Parnell, 2011).

This symposium seeks to map out new interdisciplinary directions through these tensions around theorizing the transfer of urban policies and ideas between and within urban planning and urban geography. It emerges from four sessions convened under the title *Urban Planning Terrains* at the 2010 annual conference of the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers. These sessions provided a forum for discussing the broad theme of how urban planning techniques, strategies and ideologies develop, travel, translate and diffuse. They featured researchers from across human geography and academic planning from a range of international contexts and sub-disciplinary perspectives. Through this cross-disciplinary exchange, important contrasts and commonalities in the analytical, methodological and critical frameworks adopted began to be identified and explored. We have selected four contributions from these sessions for this symposium that we believe open up and develop this productive interface between planning scholarship and critical geographical writing on contemporary urban policy mobilities.

First, the symposium challenges a restricted historical focus in much of the work on urban policy mobilities with limited analyses of urban circulations prior to the early 1990s (see also Stone, 1999: 55 on the ahistorical framing of policy transfer literature). In so doing, it draws on a rich tradition within planning history of exploring and documenting the trans-urban travel of planning ideas, technologies and models over the last 150 years (King, 1980; Sutcliffe, 1981; Banerjee and Chakravorty, 1994; Freestone, 2000; Rego, 2011). It is argued that this longer-term perspective is required to highlight important historical continuities, genealogies and institutional legacies to contemporary urban policy circuits and pathways and to question what is particularly new, distinct and innovative about an intensification in the travel of urban ideas, plans and policies over the past decade — and the accompanying scholarly interest in them. Secondly, the symposium aims to use the emphasis on particular details and specific experiences within planning histories to foreground and develop approaches, particularly from recent geographical scholarship, that investigate the contingent and embodied practices and wider epistemic contexts that enable — or hinder — contemporary policy transfer.

## Planning histories and urban policy transfer

This symposium, in creating and stimulating new dialogue and cross-disciplinary exchange between planning theorists and geographers in thinking about what Jacobs

and Lees (2013: 1559–83) term ‘urban borrowings’, addresses what Phelps and Tewdwr-Jones (2008: 567) characterize as ‘an unhealthy distance between human geography and planning at present’. Planning has arguably a longer engagement with the transnational transfer and travel of urban ideas, policies and techniques (King, 1984) and is intimately attuned to the forward-looking gaze of policymaking and governance issues. Moreover, it has a historical perspective that often extends beyond the 1990s, especially considering the international cross-fertilization of ideas and techniques in the creation of modern urban planning during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Sutcliffe, 1981), and the central role for exporting urban planning in colonialism (King, 1980; 2004). Nevertheless, there has been little explicit and in-depth consideration of the empirical findings, conceptual frameworks and methodologies of planning historians and theorists in the ‘urban policy mobilities’ field recently emerging within Geography.

Bringing urban planning histories into greater dialogue with the conceptual language and analytical emphases prevalent within work on contemporary urban policy mobilities can help challenge and disrupt the assumed novelty of recent processes. For example, an influential idea within planning such as the Garden City, which first came to prominence in Britain during the 1890s, can be understood, to use poststructuralist language, as being ‘assembled’ from Christian Socialist, Land Reform, Arts and Crafts and Anarchist movements (Sutcliffe, 1981). The Garden City’s general technical rendering, especially once shorn of its more socialistic features, can be conceived as offering what Collier and Ong (2005) term a ‘global form’ that was easily decontextualized and recontextualized in other locations such as Germany, the United States and Japan.<sup>1</sup> This ‘enrolling’ of the Garden City across transnational networks was importantly facilitated by the formation of organizations such as the Garden City Association and the International Garden City Congress, and learning opportunities offered by study visits and international conferences.

Generating new exchanges between research on the history of urban planning and research on contemporary urban policy mobilities within geography is also key to distinguishing the salient characteristics of ‘urban borrowings’ in the current era. For instance, recent urban ‘policy tourism’, such as international study tours to Bilbao and Barcelona (González, 2010), could be productively compared and contrasted with international trips by urban policymakers to the garden cities of Letchworth and Hampstead during the early twentieth century. Nick Clarke (2012) has begun to develop these important historical perspectives on contemporary urban policy mobilities, identifying how urban policy circulation in the twenty-first century, when viewed through the lens of historical research on municipal connections during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is comparatively disorganized, geographically extensive, fast and anti-political. Historical strategies, enquiries and sensibilities also offer the possibility for deploying genealogical tools to open up new critical questions on embedded presuppositions of how urban planning and policy ideas and concepts emerge and are configured. As Huxley argues in this symposium, ‘policies and programmes come into being in response to specific conditions and within specific sets of presuppositions, and are rarely the products of unified histories or singular rationalities’ (see Huxley, 2013: 1527–41).

In addition to offering opportunities for challenging the presentism of recent research on urban policy mobilities and providing scope for new comparative and genealogical analyses, planning histories also help emphasize the power relationships inherent to the travel and transfer of urban ideas and practices. These range in Stephen Ward’s (2000) multidimensional matrix from synthetic borrowing to authoritarian imposition. In

1 For example, Watanabe (1980: 141) suggests that ‘the whole idea of “garden city” was taken very loosely by many people, especially by those outside Britain, so that it was used to describe almost anything. This ambiguity seems to be one of the reasons why the Garden City idea became well known all over the world’.

particular, there is an important body of work that emphasizes the long history of exporting and manipulating urban planning ideas, techniques and systems from the global North to South as part of colonialism (King, 1980; Home, 1990; 1997), developmentalism and modernization (Almandoz, 1999; Banerjee, 2005; 2009; Vidyarthi, 2010a; 2010b) and postcolonial power relations (Miraftab, 2009; Watson, 2009). These historical relationships and channels — and the often unsuitable and inappropriate if not iniquitous urban models and experiments that were imposed — have important and largely under-researched legacies affecting the recent growth in the transfer of urban models and expertise to cities of the global South by transnational architectural and design firms and urban planning consultancies, often with little regard for local context (Dyckman *et al.*, 1984; Banerjee and Chakravorty, 1994). Whether it is notions of sustainable urbanism implemented in Dubai, Business Improvement Districts in Cape Town or the American-led reconstruction of war-ravaged cities of the Middle East, it is crucial to explore how these urban policy and planning ideas and schemes are often routed through well-established economic and social networks, and can be considered part of longer histories of cultural and political dependency.

Planning histories, in their propensity for what Freestone (2000: 5) calls ‘virtual microscopic histology’, can also help highlight the role of particular actors in transferring urban policies and plans, and establishing, disrupting and experimenting with trans-urban connections. Although, as Stephen Ward (2000: 42) attests, interpretative stances have ranged from an emphasis on ‘charismatic visionaries’ and ‘great men with big ideas’ to a more structuralist emphasis on the global hegemony of Western imperialism, a general methodological focus within planning history on specific archives, biographies and organizations can avoid the determinism risked by an analytical reliance on terms such as neoliberalism, urbanization and globalization. A good example is the emphasis on municipal technicians, enlightened amateurs and official delegations of town councillors in Pierre Yves Saunier’s (2002) account of the ‘transboundary formations’ created by the municipal movement during the early twentieth century. Planning histories also offer an important means of recognizing the complex patterns of collusion, negotiation and interaction that are involved in the travel of urban plans, ideas and policies, especially to cities of the global South (Nasr and Volait, 2003; Beattie, 2004; Perera, 2004; Griffiths, 2009). Rather than leading to policy mimicry or geographical homogeneity, urban plans are shaped and hybridized by local actors in what can be understood as a complex traffic of ideas.

## Practices of circulating urban knowledges

This more explicit consideration of the historical travel and transfer of urban planning ideas and models can help bring contemporary urban policy mobilities into sharper focus, not least in exploring postcolonial legacies that often continue to frame urban policy circulations, and in emphasizing the importance of close empirical engagements with particular transfer agents. In turn, greater dialogue with poststructuralist concepts within human geography and the social sciences more broadly can encourage provisional, relational and situated understandings and accounts of how planning ideas and models travel.

First, it is important to examine how policy transfer and learning is invariably embodied and unpredictable (see Jacobs and Lees, 2013: 1559–83). The mobilization of urban policy is continually enacted, performed and practised through prosaic routines, banal activities and face-to-face interaction (Larner and Laurie, 2010; McCann, 2011; Cook and Ward, 2012). This requires ethnographic attempts by researchers to detail not only how a range of actors learn about and compare across cities in concrete settings such as conferences, workshops and study tours, but ongoing forms of imagination, persuasion, passive learning and informal interaction in less clearly defined situations

and ‘microspaces’ (Larner and le Heron, 2002; Campbell, 2009). An important component of these learning and comparative practices is the use of objects and artefacts, including diagrams, stories, posters, blueprints, anecdotes, scale models and — in more contemporary settings — PowerPoint presentations, brochures, websites and video clips. These are assembled into what McCann (2011) calls ‘a set of “actionable” ideas’, or what Colin McFarlane (2011) terms ‘coordination tools’ that synthesize and summarize different forms of urban knowledge in efforts to facilitate learning, emulation and adaptation across different urban contexts.

Secondly, there needs to be greater recognition that geographical context is more than ‘mere background scenery to the policy actors’ performance’ (Peck, 2011a: 8). This requires exploring more than simply the diffusion or circulation of a self-contained policy or planning model; it entails examining the milieu or factual terrain through and in which it has been shaped. This has been broached in a variety of different ways, often dependent on the policy idea or technique being studied, although with a shared emphasis on navigating across relational and territorial geographies and spatialities (McCann and Ward, 2010). For Peck and Theodore (2010: 169), policy transfer is ‘deeply structured by enduring power relations’, policy norms, and local politico-institutional contexts, while at the same time remaking the landscapes from and through which policies emerge and travel. In more neo-Foucauldian registers, the legitimacy and codifying of certain ‘best-practice’ policies and plans (Vetteretto, 2009), and the expertise of particular actors, is invoked and enacted by ‘epistemic communities’ (Haas, 1992; Prince, 2010b) and migrating neoliberal governmentalities (Ong, 2007). Another related perspective is a focus on ‘communities of practice’ (Healey and Upton, 2010) and the formation and institutionalization of policy discourses, storylines and performances within the field of interpretive policy analysis (see Healey, 2013: 1510–26).

Thirdly, another aspect of emphasizing the complexities and contingencies to the circulation of urban policy and planning is to foreground not the usual success stories, best practices, favoured models and ‘hot’ policy ideas (McCann, 2011), but the ideas that have failed to travel or be successfully implemented elsewhere (see Hebbert and McKillop, 2013: 1542–58). In this respect, approaches from ANT are particularly useful in exploring how relations that make up a distanced actor-network can be insufficiently enrolled, negotiated and re-performed as social situations change (Latour, 1996). However, more institutional and geographically nuanced analyses are key too. Laurence Crot (2010: 120), for example, explores how models of participatory budgeting from Barcelona and Porto Alegre failed to be ‘relocated’ in Buenos Aires because of institutional incompatibility, the absence of popular calls for greater participation, and insufficient political will (see also de Jong, 2004, on the difficulties of transferring US models of public transport management to London). Furthermore, it is important to recognize that policymaking and planning practice often suffer from poor and insufficient levels of resourcing, staffing, training and infrastructure (Sanyal, 2005: 6). Transfer agents — and not only in cities of the global South — frequently have partial or incomplete access to the ‘coordination tools’ required to comprehensively ‘scan’ urban policy horizons. This means that direct emulation of ‘best-practice’ policymaking is not only severely limited and haphazard, but that learning and knowledge exchange across different urban contexts will always be incomplete and unpredictable.

## Urban planning and policy terrains: synergies and challenges

International urban policy transfer over the past two decades has been shaped by two new features: the ease of learning at a distance about cities elsewhere through new forms of instantaneous electronic communications, and the emergence of a speculative industry of ‘post-welfarist’ expertise led by management consultancies, intergovernmental agencies,

parastatal agencies and think-tanks (Goldman, 2011). Yet, as with eager declarations of a new era of 'globalization', it is important to challenge the novelty of recent processes of trans-urban circulation and travelling urbanism. Within the field of modern urban planning there have always been institutions, organizations and technologies that 'frame and package knowledge about best policy practices, successful cities, and cutting-edge ideas' (McCann, 2008: 885–904). For example, the travel and translation of 'new urbanism' ideas through the Congress for the New Urbanism since 1993 can be compared and contrasted with the activities of the International Garden City Congress during the early twentieth century; the fêted Barcelona model of the 1980s and 1990s can be set against the innovations of the Spanish Catalan urban planner Ildefons Cerdà during the nineteenth century; and trans-urban cooperation enacted through the European Union can be considered through longer histories of municipal internationalism. Moreover, urban borrowings do not necessarily begin with urban industrialization, but can be framed against older pre-industrial and classical histories of urban exchange and experimentation (LeGates *et al.*, 1998; see Healey, 2013: 1510–26).

This is not to deny that the overall scope, pace and intensity of transnational urban policy transfer activity has increased significantly over the past two decades. As Healey (2013: 1510–26) suggests, there is something 'distinctive about the flow of planning ideas and practices in the present period'. But without greater historical perspectives, as facilitated through a focus on the travel and transfer of urban planning models and techniques, there can be a danger that the emerging urban policy mobilities literature can replicate and reify the heady whirl of 'fast policies' and a ceaseless striving for the next innovative urban trend. As Colin McFarlane (2011: 121) comments on this literature, 'the reader can be left with a sense that urban policy mobilities are somehow new'. There needs to be more careful empirical probing of specific examples that disrupt assumptions of continual policy churn and seamless and inevitable global transfer. This is particularly apparent in case studies such as Hebbert and McKillop's focus on post-second world war urban climatology, and Jacobs and Lees' examination of the trans-Atlantic movement of Oscar Newman's idea of defensible space, which precede what might be deemed high-water marks of neoliberal urbanization during the 1990s and early 2000s (see also McFarlane, 2011: Chapter 5; and Peck, 2011b on the Greater London Council). Moreover, there needs to be greater reflexive engagement with how circulating urban knowledge is constructed and analysed. 'Neoliberal expansionism' since the 1980s and an accompanying surge in literature on policy transfer and 'best planning practices' (Sanyal, 2005: 11), we would suggest, is more than an 'ironic coincidence', as Peck (2011a: 21) argues.

The articles in this symposium, exploring what Phelps and Tewdwr-Jones (2008: 569) term 'new synergies' between the intellectual terrains of planning and geography, offer a more rigorous assessment of the context and critical possibilities for research into trans-urban knowledge transfer. Healey examines the intellectual tools within the present-day scholarly 'ether' that can help tell 'rich stories' about the transnational flow of urban policy and planning ideas and practices. She foregrounds three fields that, although not always commensurate, she suggests are particularly helpful in establishing methodological and conceptual approaches: actor-network theory, interpretative policy analysis and 'circuits of knowledge'. Huxley develops critical historical depth to Healey's wide-ranging synthesis of different frameworks and theoretical resources, demonstrating the importance of deploying genealogical perspectives to interrogate historical presumptions embedded in urban knowledges. This is pursued through a focus on problematizing 'participation' in the fields of British and North American urban planning and international development practice. The third and fourth articles in the symposium develop a more in-depth engagement with specific historized examples of circulating knowledge. Hebbert and McKillop investigate the application of urban climatology in town planning, tracing the role of particular organizations and individuals involved and, importantly, emphasizing failures rather than only the success stories. In

the final article, Jacobs and Lees examine the trans-Atlantic movement of the concept of 'defensible space' with a focus in particular on the British geographer Alice Coleman. Not only does this thicken the historical engagement with transnational urban knowledge formations, it also highlights the role that academic researchers themselves can often have as transfer agents.

It is important to recognize that, despite the synergies generated through this symposium, certain tensions remain between the articles. Authors develop and combine an array of contrasting disciplinary approaches, languages, methods and traditions, from cultural geography to science studies, planning theory to critical history. Differences emerge between 'probing' and 'problematization', national contexts and relational geographies, and an emphasis on origins and 'landing' against genealogical multiplicities. But we hope that bringing together these contrasting approaches can help enrich the range of resources and tools available to researchers in their attempts at cultivating new critical exchange around policy and planning mobilities. We contend that it is through careful cross-disciplinary dialogue and more historically nuanced analyses that new insights can be developed into a range of contemporary circulating urban knowledges. The articles in this symposium, for example, offer important and innovative new perspectives on issues of participatory planning, climate-change adaptation in cities, and the 'impact agenda' in UK universities.

These new critical perspectives can, in turn, help open up and explore alternative circuits of urban knowledge, part of what Massey (2011) calls 'counterhegemonic globalization'. This can involve forms of what Purcell (2008: 153) terms 'fast resistance transfer', where subaltern or oppositional groups replicate the global scans and exchanges of more formal policymakers, often by inhabiting similar channels and technologies. The rapid, global spread of urban Occupation movements during 2011, and their 'fast' transfer, facilitated by transnational media networks, can be analysed in this way. Counterhegemonic circuits can also involve strategies of emancipatory urban comparison that are used to identify and foreground issues of social injustice and formulate alternative imaginative geographies of the urban (McFarlane, 2010).

The pursuit of counterhegemonic globalization also requires that conversations, circuits and relations are established and performed across a broader array of cities and urban experiences. At present there remains a highly problematic geographical unevenness in policy transfer and the institutional locations for its analysis. As John Friedmann (2005a: 185) admits in his survey of contemporary global planning cultures, 'I found no suitable sources for Middle Eastern, Latin American, and Pacific Asian countries whose stories would have added variety, if not novelty, to my account'. There need to be attempts not only to refuse assumptions that best policy practices, such as those around urban sustainability, necessarily have Western points of origin, but efforts to learn from urban practices, knowledges and encounters in what Healey (2013: 1510–26) terms the 'far-away' (Sanyal, 1990). This requires new institutional links and exchanges, especially with non-Anglophone research contexts, and new spaces of reflection and reflexivity, particularly in education (Streeten, 1974; Robinson, 2003; Bunnell and Maringanti, 2010). Contemporary practices and citations of circulating urban knowledge occur not simply between cities of the global North, but — as hinted at by the more global geographies of planning's colonial histories — between cities such as Mumbai, Singapore, Shanghai, São Paulo and Dubai (Roy and Ong, 2011). Not only do the histories of urban policy mobilities need to be more carefully explored and unpacked, but future analyses will need to be more theoretically and empirically sensitive to policy and planning models, ideas and techniques emerging from and mutating in rapidly growing cities of the global South.

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