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SOCIOLOGY AND URBAN PLANNING¹

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to indicate the complexity of the phenomenon of urban planning, as well as the importance of sociological expertise for its success. A well-structured and designed urban space is one whose morphology and function are suited to the needs of the inhabitants (citizens) residing in the city, neighbourhood or quarter. For such a goal to be achieved, it is necessary to view the city spatial whole as a unique and one-of-a-kind social whole, and sociological research can provide an important contribution. Reducing urban planning to its technical dimensions does not provide insight into the complexity and multidimensionality of space, and so this paper indicates that its *social* dimension is

¹ The paper was completed as part of the Internal project “A step towards the professionalization of sociology: the analysis of the needs for the profession”, which was realized by the Sociology Department and the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš.

not only important, but essential. In addition, the paper provides an overview of some of the contemporary challenges faced by urban planning, such as the neoliberal model of urbanization, the crisis in patriarchy and the importance of ecological problems. At the same time, it is emphasized that such social occurrences are not important only for the practice of urban planning, but for the development of urban sociology as a discipline.

Key words: Urban planning, city, space, urban sociology, sociology

INTRODUCTION

Urban planning can be defined as a technical and political multi-actor and multi-dimensional process, with the aim of the controlled development of a city, and in a broader sense, society. It is a phenomenon which is one of the elements of urbanism, as the broader institutional mechanism which strives for harmony within heterogeneity which is immanent in city life. Considering that we are dealing with a complex process, urban planning requires expertise in several sciences and fields/professions, where in addition to architects, engineers, lawyers, geographers, historians and others, sociologists are an essential link in the chain.

The necessity of involving an array of various experts indicates the very “nature” of cities, where, provisionally speaking, it could be defined as being threefold. As settlements, they are primarily *physical spaces*, that is, material creations which have their own physical features, a center and periphery, streets, various edifices and objects, and provide spaces for movement, work, and housing. Which is why the determination of the means of exploiting land and the design of urban planning are the first important steps in shaping space and require the expertise of professionals in the field of technical sciences. What should certainly be added to this is the legal-administrative framework, as an important part of the level of regulation and legitimization of the construction process. However, cities are a reflection of man, which as a being of culture strives towards the beautiful, creation, games, and so they are also realized as *works of art*, while the aesthetic dimension means introducing harmony into the city space. Cities are visual creations which generate impressions, expression, interpretation and experiences, and within them synthesize the practical, symbolic, and imaginary (Lefebvre 2007: 74), creating at the same time both material and virtual works (Issin 2007: 212). Finally, cities are not only physical (morphological) structures, or works of art, and instead in their essence represent *social spaces* - a field of the manifestation of power, political relations, ideology, the relationship between inclusion and exclusion, expenditure, wealth, and poverty. It is precisely due to this humane and social dimension that the process of building a city and its management must also include the expertise of social-humanistic sciences, and primarily of sociology, which is best acquainted with the described social-spatial projections. However, Ljubinko Pušić makes the astute observation that simply speaking, in our case scientific work is actually the “production of space”, and has, for a very long time, been a primarily technical and only occasionally aesthetic-arts discipline, and in the very end (which actually does not exist) a social discipline (Pušić 2009: 121).

Sociologists, due to the extensiveness of the approach, can in the most adequate way gain insight into the social collage of the city, and can contribute to urban planning in several ways. One of the most important ways is objective scientific research and the analysis of social reality by means of sociological research methods (surveys and interviews with citizens/inhabitants of urban communities), which provides insight into the demographic, professional, and age characteristics of the urban population, then class differences, the origin of the population, and cultural and ethnic diversity, which represent the necessary initial “material” for the planning and development of a community. Based on the obtained

results, suggestions are made for the use of the space, its organization and urban design, so that the physical aspects of the city are suited to the structure of the population, its social characteristics and the cultural needs of the citizens. Housing, public transport, and city services must be spatially organized so as to reflect the social image of the city. In addition, except for research into the aspirations and characteristics of the city population, it is important to have insight into the workings of utility companies, social and other various city institutions. Primarily because their experience was gained through direct contact with various strata of society, it represents precious material on how the everyday life of the city pulsates, as well as the life of its citizens, which is a good basis for focusing the processes of urban planning (Todorović 1970: 243). Urban planning, therefore, is the result of teamwork, and sociologists can take part in all of its phases: from compiling data which are used to create an image of the social structure of the inhabitants, to the evaluation phase of urban projects, and providing recommendations for their improvement or focusing.

This type of understanding of the role and importance of sociology for urban planning is essentially based on the opinions of Jane Jacobs and her famous claim that when cities are being studied, it is actually life that is being studied, in its deepest complexity and highest intensity in particular (Džejkobs, 2011). These understandings of the author are based on the paradigm that the city is primarily made by its *people*, and only then by its architecture.² To this we add the exceptionally important fact that every city locality (neighborhood, quarter, block) has its own urban aroma and represents a unique mixture of social and cultural elements. It is precisely because of that that we need to approach it and study it as a special social-spatial whole, before one actually takes on the endeavour of transforming and building. In that context, Jacobs claims that planning no expertise can act as a replacement for knowledge of the place that is being built (Džejkobs 2011: 446).

URBAN SOCIOLOGY AND PLANNING

We could say that the 19th century is a watershed of sorts, both for the development of cities, and the emergence of sociology as a science. Industrialization and urbanization had already begun to change the world as we know it at the beginning of the 19th century, which, among other things, has influenced the emergence of new social sciences. Among other disciplines, sociology as a science emerges from the need to explain the newly created world and to determine its possible paths of development. The new age has on the one hand given rise to an uncritical optimism in terms of the creation of a *new man* who has parted ways with traditional society, privileges, and the pressures of religion and aristocratic practices. However, social reality has, on the other hand, shown its flipside which is manifested in poverty, epidemics, a high mortality rate, and the erosion of the environment. The described contradictoriness is taken into consideration by Castells when

² Jacobs claims that urban planning must be preceded by observation of the lives of the people, which requires walking through city quarters and talking to the inhabitants. This is the first and necessary step in compiling sociological material on the urban community which we want to build and develop. This is the horizontal type of urban planning, as opposed to the vertical and hierarchical, which would probably lead more to destruction of the city as a living community, than to its organization and cohesion.

he speaks of the emergence of an *urban sociology* as a special branch of the sociology. The author in that sense cites that it emerged at the beginning of the 20th century as the result of the desire to establish a certain cohesion between American cities and the cities in the West, which were spread afar by competitive individualism and the desire of an individual to survive in a cruel environment.³ At the time, some socio-spatial experiments emerged, among them the *garden city* of Ebenezer Howard, a scientist who proved that sociological knowledge with the addition of imagination can create a different urban world (see Mirkov, 2009). Beginning with 1902, with the city of Letchworth (and somewhat later Welwyn), until the 1970s, approximately twenty more cities were erected on the premises of ecology, of which many today can boast of higher quality and better organized life. Howard's ideas spread during the 20th century throughout the USA and Russia (with sometimes unsuccessful modifications), and it is estimated that there are approximately 2.6 million people in the world today living in approximately 30 cities which were inspired by Howard's idea of garden cities (<http://labourlist.org/2014/02/a-new-generation-of-new-towns-and-garden-cities/>).⁴

Later on during the 20th century, it was increasingly more easy to recognize the importance of the profession of a sociologist in the process of social and urban planning (Lamont, 1973). Tomas H. Jenkins studied sociologists who integrated dual roles and established themselves as sociologists (that is scientists) on the one hand, and planners or social designers on the other. The author refers to them as “sociologist-planners” (Jenkins, 1996), and includes among them Patrick Geddes, Karl Mannheim, Robert E. Park and Louis Wirth. Wirth said that in order for someone to become a social scientist, he primarily had to be an active citizen, and in his works he did not separate theory from practice.⁵ Geddes studied social science primarily as an applicative one and confirmed that by his active involvement. Even before he became a well-known sociologist, he was an activist who strived for the improvement of the position of marginalized groups and slums in Edinburgh.⁶

The dialectical process of the development of social science and society, that is, theory and practice, continued into the 1970s, when the so-called *new urban sociology*, rebellious and critically minded began to turn towards the topic of the right to a city, which is precisely most closely bound to the right to space (Castells 2002: 10). The neutralization of the process of urban planning, that is, its de-ideologization and the relinquishing of ties it has with the

3 The search for a better urban society found its expression in social utopias as well, but also numerous literary works. Authors also negatively write about how city life influences the psychology of individuals torn between tradition and modernization: Virginia Woolf speaks about the alienation and atomization of individuals in a big city (London), while James Joyce describes random encounters between people, their destinies and attempts to find the meaning of life in Dublin at the beginning of the 20th century, at a time of rapid and intense social change (Gandy 2006: 64).

4 In addition to Howard, a noteworthy mention is the importance of one of the pioneers of the idea of an eco-city, Patrick Geddes, who stood for the ideology of *constructive anarchism* and founded a laboratory for the sociological study of cities and their ecological development (*Patrick Geddes Centre for Planning Studies*).

5 Wirth was also for a time the chair of the Planning Committee of Illinois.

6 For more on sociologists as social planners see Jenkins, 1996.

ruling class was the basic problem which urban sociologists had contended with up to that point, pointing out the imperative that the city must belong to everyone who lives in it, and not to the class of capitalists and politicians.

The new social challenges of the 21st century confirm the continuity in the development of urban sociology through the interplay between science and practice. Numerous topics which are imposed upon urban sociology as a problem of study are reflected in the new problematization of urban planning, which must keep up with the overall social dynamics and take into consideration all the numerous social transformations. One of the most important frameworks for study is the neoliberal model of urbanization, which places economic interests before broader social ones. In addition to that, crucial social changes take place both in the field of climate change and weakening patriarchies, as believed by Castells, so it is necessary to consider those social aspects as well.

IDEOLOGY AND PUBLIC SPACE

That cities are social spaces permeated by a complex matrix of political-interest patterns was best proven by Henri Lefebvre. City space is never a neutral category, and instead is filled by the values of those in power. Writing about that in the 1960s, the author had in mind the interests of the capitalist class which when teamed up with the political class realized the reproduction of social relations, keeping in that way the working class in a subordinate position. Being pushed to the spatial margins was for Lefebvre equal to social and political isolation, and so the cure of revolutionary transformation of society and the destruction of the social order he saw in the fight for the *right to the city*. By articulating the struggle for the right to the city, broader systemic and essential social changes can be made, due to which cities must become the centres of study of all social relations and the main subject of study of social sciences. This is how sociology is manifested and how it imposes itself as having exceptional importance.

Analysing urbanism as a profession, Lefebvre sees it, first and foremost, as an ideology in the service of the ruling class and profit, and states that architects and urban planners, either consciously or not, work for the working class and thus take part in the reproduction of social relations. Urbanism thus does not represent anything other than a mixture of ideology and practice which through the appropriate institutions suppresses real life, instead of being in the service of human and ecological goals. Or, as Pušić puts it, when the urbanists “conquer” the vocabulary of political rhetoric, then their profession ceases to be creative (Pušić 2009: 213). Urbanists act upon dictates in favour of liberalism and technocracy, without analyzing the real world and the needs of the inhabitants.⁷ They do not note that space is a *product*, and not a given, and that their role might be of special importance. Lefebvre stated that it seems that urbanists either do not know or pretend not

⁷ Lefebvre distinguishes between three types of urbanism for which he provides various qualifications. One type is the urbanism of humanists (architects, authors, etc.) or *the urbanism of people of good will* (Richter, 1975), the second is the urbanism of the state as public administration urbanism, and the third type is technocratic urbanism, that is urbanism of entrepreneurs (Lefevr 1974: 170).

to know that they themselves are a part of the production relations, that they are adhering to their regulations. They are merely executing, while they believe they are managing space. They subjugate themselves to one social commandment which does not refer to an object or a product (goods), but instead to a global object, this ultimate product, this final object of exchange: space (Lefevr 1974: 173).

What Lefebvre wrote about in the last century is equally valid today, since in their essence, social relations have not changed. The dominant model of urbanization today is *neoliberal urbanisation* which manages space by bearing in mind the interests of investors, and is led by the logic of entrepreneurial management of the city, while as a consequence; social polarization and spatial segregation are produced. Mass processes such as gentrification, ghettoization, commercialization and a specific kind of colonization of public space, are indicators that urban planning is in the service of capital and that the needs of citizens are focused increasingly more on consumption, where the *use value of a city* is suppressed as are its functions which are focused on everyday life and the needs of citizens.

The neoliberal model of urbanization is dominant in the post socialist countries. In most cities in Serbia, for example, we find a large concentration of cafes, fast food restaurants, and casinos in pedestrian zones, which is a reflection of a quasi-urban sensibility and a lack of taste. This type of spatial planning reminds us of the mass production of low quality goods and leads to an understanding of the city as a profitable entity (Pušić 2009: 168), and not complex material, spiritual and civilizational growth.⁸ Research has shown that the decisions on public space are mostly made by people holding high positions, that is, by the local self-government, without any consultations with the citizens, and sometimes even without consulting with professionals (see Vlahek and Kireta 2018; Pajvančić Cizelj 2016). Citizens do not take an active part in the decision-making process regarding space, and their participation is being increasingly more reduced to a formal possibility rather than an essential inclusion in the issues and processes which are of public importance. Apart from that, they do not believe that their opinion can change any decision which was handed down from above (Vlahek, Kireta 2018). This type of attitude is a reflection of a broader political culture of the countries in the Balkans, which is characterized by a weakly developed civic society, a low level of trust of citizens in institutions, and the lack of a willingness to take part in politics.⁹ Such an apathetic civic atmosphere is suited to a deeper neglect of a common interest and leads to a more serious democratic deficit in the management of a city.

Considering how public space represents a public good and common interest, various actors must take part in its planning, and not just formally, but substantively.¹⁰ In order

8 By analyzing urban planning in Serbia, on the example of the city of Novi Sad, Pušić claims that urbanism was not only a topic dealt with by experts (especially of sociologists who were not included in these processes), and instead was ruled by architects and engineers who loved politics or politicians who loved architecture. This indicates that education was not of primary importance for managing the space of a city, but instead political suitability, above all (Pušić 2009: 220). Thus it turned out that urbanism is primarily a technical and political matter, and only then a social one. The social dimension of the city was neglected and treated as something known to everyone, due to which the specific nature and significance of the social sciences, and sociology as well, were not recognized.

9 For more information on the research done in Serbia, visit the following website: <https://demostat.rs/sr/vesti/istrazivanja/politicki-aktivizam-u-srbiji/131>.

10 It is especially important to include the poor and marginalized social groups in the process of urban planning

to achieve such a goal, an *integral approach* should be applied to urban planning, which would include various participants in the decision-making process, beginning with the local authorities, then the professions, all the way to the citizens as the users.¹¹ Only through interaction can various interests, desires and needs be accommodated, and active thought regarding one's living environment stimulated (Vlahek and Kireta, 2018). This is an opinion shared by Jacobs when she criticized the modernist top-down approach, which she claimed in a way negated the city, because it negated the people who live in it, imposing upon them inadequate centralist solutions and projects. Contrary to that, she advocated a decentralization of urban planning, claiming that the opinions of "ordinary" men are important, since they possess "local knowledge", which means that they know that space best as they use it daily and know how it should be organized in accordance with their needs. Even when some form of centralized approach to planning is needed, more urbanistic options should be offered, that is, the possibility of choice should be left open (<https://marketurbanism.com/2016/02/21/who-plans-jane-jacobs-hayekian-critique-of-urban-planning/>).

AN OVERVIEW OF THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL CHALLENGES OF URBAN PLANNING

Among the topics which are imposed on urban sociology in the 21st century, Castells cites as the two most important the crisis of patriarchy and ecology. Even though patriarchy is still dominant, the 20th and 21st century brought with them certain changes in the patterns of life and gender relations, which urban planning needs to keep up with. The household has experienced a transformation, since women are to a greater extent included in the job market, which with itself carries the consideration of other spatial organizations.¹² It is especially important to properly connect city wholes by public transport systems and institutionally organize the issues of childcare and the city school system. Obstacles, however, occur since it seems that there is no sufficiently developed awareness of the spatial needs of new patterns of living. Among other things, one of the problems is that women are not widely included in teams for urban planning, considering that urbanism is traditionally considered a male and technical profession. This is why in almost all the charters on the right to the city the necessity to include women experts to a greater extent in public city policy is emphasized, including activities related to urbanism. Of course, this step does not necessarily mean the production of a gender sensitive city space, but is considered one of the most important assumptions of such a transformation. Dealing with gender-spatial problems, Castells leaves it to urban sociology which he defines as the *post-patriarchal urban sociology* (Castells 2002: 17).

According to the same author, the other great topics for contemporary urban sociology

(See International Guidelines on Urban and Territorial Planning, 2015).

¹¹ Sometimes we use the term *collaborative approach* for the type of approach which includes a broad spectrum of actors, and even the citizens themselves (Timotijević 2018: 67).

¹² For more see Božilović, 2018.

are the problems of endangering the environment. The dominant position of the citizens is that ecological problems are essentially political and that a political platform is necessary for the solution of the ecological crisis which will vertically be in harmony with all the scales of spatiality – from global institutions to the local level. Cities in that respect are considered especially important, since they, on the one hand are places where industrial facilities were located. However, they are the lifeline of capitalism and the consumer way of life, which with its logic of consumerism significantly contributes to the depletion of non-renewable natural resources. At the same time, this is not done for existential human needs, but with the aim of achieving a desired lifestyle and the social status which is imposed by capitalist society. In a more narrow sense, the organization of city space could be one of the initial factors of change in the paradigm of the everyday way of life, which would significantly contribute to the decrease in air pollution. Numerous organizations and urban movements develop specific suggestions and solutions regarding cities, such as places with more pedestrian zones, where the tendency is towards the decrease in the use of motor vehicles.¹³ This includes the spatial organization of neighbourhoods which have been provided with all the necessary social services for everyday life, but in addition to that, what is emphasized is the development of the idea of a decrease in the temporal and spatial distance between one's place of residence and place of work.¹⁴

Apart from that, an important topic is the increase in green surfaces in cities, since green areas are not only important from the point of view of cleaner air, vegetation, and a healthier life in the city, but instead have a cohesive *social* function. They are locations of socialization, and thus enable inter-generational, inter-cultural, inter-class and other encounters in a relaxed atmosphere. Connecting various ethnic groups in multicultural communities, city parks and gardens has a positive effect on the construction and strengthening of solidarity and social capital. Also, research has indicated that these areas are especially important for the integration of crime-stricken neighbourhoods (Foster, 2006), which is one of the arguments why it is important to include sociologists in teams for urban planning

Still, we should not assume that increasing green surfaces in quarters by building lawns will in and of itself have a positive effect on the local community. In her research into American cities, Jacobs reported the opinion of a citizen of a poor neighbourhood in East Harlem on why he and the other citizens are opposed to the existence of a large green surface in their residential area: "Nobody cared what we wanted they built this place. They threw our houses down and pushed us here and pushed our friends somewhere else. We don't have a place around here to get a cup of coffee or a newspaper even, or borrow fifty cents. Nobody cared what we need. But the big men come and look at the grass and say 'Isn't it wonderful!, Now the poor have everything'" (Jacobs 1961: 15). This example shows that decisions regarding the shaping of space should never be made from "above", even if they do have the best intentions. The urbanistic solution which can somewhere show positive results, in other places may just be adequate, which is to a great extent the consequence of the social position of the inhabitants of the given neighbourhood. This only confirms that in the designing of space, an integrative approach is needed.

¹³ For more information go to www.newurbanism.org

¹⁴ Historically speaking, the time which man needs to get from his home to work has increased, and this trend is still ongoing.

Another topic worth mentioning in the analysis of contemporary challenges faced by urban planning is the orientation of cities towards tourism, which significantly changes the function of cities, especially their central zones. Often during that process, requirements occur which could be contradictory: how to please a stranger/visitor to the city so that he could experience the content of the city (both historical and cultural), and at the same time not allow the commercialization of the space in the desire to attract tourists and profit to endanger the local city population by suppressing their essential needs and everyday rhythm of life. In practice, the central parts of public city areas are usually given a commercial, service industry purpose.¹⁵ This is especially problematic when only the urban planning of *tourist cities* is taken into consideration, since pedestrian zones are reduced by the spreading of terraced areas of service industry objects. Space, in that way, is viewed partially (solely as a form), which does not correspond to the social, cultural and historical environments in which a city emerges and exists (Vlahek and Kireta, 2018).¹⁶ The described conflict takes place between the economic and social function of cities, and it would seem that the former is dominant.

CONCLUSION

Based on the aforementioned, it emerges that urban planning is a complex social phenomenon. Usually it primarily includes the physical, that is material aspect of a city; however, its social and human dimensions are essential and must be of primary importance when considering urban planning. Without people and society, cities as material spatial constructs would be empty shells.

In this paper we attempted to indicate the importance of the profession of a sociologist in the process of urban planning, both by indicating the specific activities through which a sociologist can contribute to this process, and by pointing out the very development of urban sociology which was always in a certain way connected to practice, that is, the attempts to measure the urban world. What was also pointed out was the influence of ideology on space and the model of neoliberal urbanization, which with its orientation towards profit renders urban planning pointless, as it neglects the needs of citizens which must be the basic reference point of urban planning. Numerous sociological studies offer insight into the described processes, which confirms that the findings that have scientifically been obtained are a precious basis for possible corrections for a more just urban planning.

We should, however, bear in mind the important fact that the development of cities

¹⁵ Jacobs criticizes the reduction of city space to a single function and as one of the central principles of urban planning advocates diversity. She believes that the ethnic, cultural, racial, socio-economic, residential, functional and other types of variety make up the foundation of a healthy urban community, and that every neighborhood should be organized in such a way as to offer a variety of services and encourage various activities (<https://www.cppr.in/article/how-to-plan-a-city-lessons-learned-from-jane-jacobs>). In that context, she compares cities to ecosystems, since they both need diversity to be sustainable.

¹⁶ It is important to look at space both contextually and as a totality, that is, as a field in which all social processes take place, where cultures overlap, and on which history leaves its mark (Šakaja 1999: 7).

cannot completely be planned, or carried out based on some abstract planning or statistical principles. No science, technical or social (even sociological), can ever fully predict the influence the direction of development of the city, since it represents a “living” dynamic entity, which has its own pulse which sometimes eludes controlled development. It is in the nature of a city to have a spontaneous path of development, and that is precisely how cities and the life taking place in them differ and have their own appeal. Their identity is a mixture of controlled and spontaneous development, which was confirmed by Jacobs: “The main responsibility of city planning and design should be to develop - insofar as public policy and action can do so - cities that are congenial places for this great range of unofficial plans, ideas and opportunities to flourish, along with the flourishing of the public enterprises” (Jacobs 1961: 241).

However, when public policy based on scientific research is applied to the development of a city, we should always bear in mind that there is no single best spatial pattern which can successfully be applied everywhere, and instead each city quarter is a social whole unto itself, and which is how it should be approached. Just like a suit is tailored to fit a unique set of measurements and dimensions of a man, so must a city be designed in accordance with the social structure and needs of its inhabitants.

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