DO IT YOURSELF (D.I.Y) URBANISM: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR RAPID DEVELOPMENT IN CITIES

Strategically formulated poverty reduction processes should take place at the local, city and national scale to ensure everyone realises their right to the city. Ensuring citizens’ full rights to the city involves more than just giving people access to the city but also the right to influence change and to use the city in ways that make sense to them. Historically municipal officials have always attempted to have some degree of control over cities and of what takes place in and around them. This control is exercised through policies and by-laws which are implemented in the final instance by law enforcement officials. This has ensured that anything that city-dwellers do to influence the look and feel of a city outside of the ambit of policies and by-laws is deemed lawlessness and is often criminalised.

Citizens have become creative in claiming their right to the city. In recent years we have seen a rise in what is called Do It Yourself (DIY) urbanism where residents have claimed back their right to the city, including the right to influence how they live and thrive in a city.

The key message of this article is that DIY urbanism is not necessarily a bad thing and that city governments can benefit from creating room and space that allows city dwellers to lay claim to the city and influence how the city space is used for the benefit of all and not just a select few. It is argued that this approach is what lies squarely at the heart of the notion of the right to the city in that city dwellers influence the form of the city, not the other way round.

Understanding DIY Urbanism

Urbanism can be understood as how inhabitants of towns or cities interact with the built environment. DIY urbanism is in essence resident driven, low budget, and often designed to be a temporary urban intervention (Finn, 2014:381). In recent years, there has been a significant increase in DIY urbanism, also often defined as incremental urban improvement. Scholars often refer to this form of urbanism as tactical, pop-up or guerrilla urbanism (Talen, 2014; Pagano 2013; Finn, 2014). There are various reasons why people choose to engage in DIY urbanism as a means to ensure rapid development in cities. It is further argued that through DIY urbanism citizens have laid claim to and have actively demanded and protected their right to the city. This article also provides a few examples of where DIY urbanism is taking place and the extent to which it has led to positive change with citizens fully claiming their right to the city.
the city outside of the confines of limiting government policies and by-laws. Street hawkers, for example, will conduct their business where there is potential foot traffic without so much as caring whether the city by-laws and policies allow them to trade in that area or not. Their primary concern is putting food on the table and in making a living. It is up to the city government to create a legislative environment that supports the hawker community to find space in the city, and not to criminalize or intimidate them only because the by-laws were never written with hawkers in mind.

The DIY urbanism approach is a direct opposite to the top down bureaucratically sanctioned and funded urban change that is largely associated with urban planning. Bureaucratically sanctioned urban development includes RDP housing development, township establishment and also the development of gated communities. These create a gap or barrier in the public space whereby access for some translates to lack of access for others. In some instances these bureaucratically sanctioned urban developments hinder or limit the degree of socio-spatial integration. Landman (2006) informs us that one of the best ways to measure the socio-spatial integration of an area is the degree of accessibility that is available to all urban residents. This accessibility refers to the ease in which opportunities and facilities existent within cities are accessed. In positive environments where integration occurs, it is possible for the poor citizens to gain access to opportunities that are created as a result of the resources of the wealthier citizens because of integration. In gated communities however this integration is not possible as only a certain class bracket gets to stay within these communities, thus the opportunities generated are limited to only local residents. According to Le Goix & Webster (2008), gated communities represent a form of urbanism, which is governed by the privatization of public space where access is limited to inhabitants only and those privileged enough to be invited to share the space with them. This infringes on the urban poors’ right to the city. Similarly RDP projects also limit socio-spatial integration thereby infringing on the right to the city. These projects are normally located on the urban periphery, worsening urban sprawl and achieving little integration between the rich and the poor.

Whereas bureaucratically sanctioned urban change is controlled by governments based on some master plan, DIY urbanism has the people at the centre and is a typical bottom up development exercise (Talen, 2014; Pagano, 2013; Finn, 2014). More often than not, government criminalizes DIY urbanism - this is seen in its response to informality particularly within city centres and surrounding urban areas. In South Africa, DIY urbanism though in existence is often criminalized. For example, street hawkers are often removed from their stalls, informal settlements are frequently demolished and informal taxi ranks closed due to lack of permits regardless of their convenience and favourable locations for the poor. Unlike many other parts of the world, the formation of South African cities is interlinked with both its history and present day struggles of many of its inhabitants and conversations about the right to the city are best understood in context.
The South African City and the notion of the Right to the City

Cities around the world are seen as a microcosm of society, and a place of opportunity. For many people the city is a ticket out of poverty, a chance to get a better life and improve their living conditions. The city is a hive of activity, a cultural and economic melting point (Wirth, 1938:10). The same is true for South African cities that host people from surrounding smaller towns who are all chasing economic emancipation.

The present South African city is a strong reflection of its apartheid foundations. South Africa entered the 1990s carrying the weight of a legacy of colonial and apartheid planning. This legacy manifested itself in spatially segregated, extremely separated and severely fragmented and isolated urban areas (Smith, 2005:58). Apartheid is viewed by Hansen (2009:239) as a spatial policy that was designed to keep people from different racial groups physically apart. This policy was, however, more than just a plan for building neighbourhoods, it was rather part of a larger network of plans to control the social and geographical mobility of black South Africans.

In post-apartheid South Africa, the legacy of apartheid planning still lingers, and the already inherited spatial patterns of uneven development have been supplemented by new forms of division and exclusion (Smith 2005:50). These new forms of spatial division are between the abandoned city (from a high income perspective) and the new luxury suburban enclaves. There is also the increasing gap between townships, the inner city and the suburbs (Smith 2005:50). Thus the reality is that cities in South Africa are highly polarized, displaying huge contrasts in wealth and poverty with the creation of exclusive enclaves for the rich and poor (Hansen, 2009:236). Thus though in apartheid South Africa race was a tool of exclusion, capital has replaced race and emerged as a new form of segregation in post apartheid South Africa (Mphambukeli 2018:4). This cycle of segregation, be it racial or economic, has led to many fighting to claim their right to the city.

The right to the city is framed by a strong ethical base aiming to reduce inequality across the local, city, national and international scale (Parnell & Pieterse, 2010:149). The right to the city is often misunderstood as just the right to access the city. Harvey (2003:939) however argues that the right to the city involves also the right to change the city to the desires of our hearts. Thus, as Lefebvre (cited in Marcuse, 2009:189) points out, the right to the city encompasses the right to gain access to information, utilize services within the city while also allowing residents the right to influence the shape and form of the urban environment. Parnell and Pieterse (2010:149) speak of four generational rights that individuals are entitled to within the city. First generation rights are focused on the individual and include the right to vote, health and education. Second generation rights are at the household service level and speak to issues of housing, water, energy and waste. Third generation rights are at the neighbourhood or city scale and include entitlements such as safety, public transport and social amenities while fourth generation rights are freedom from external risks such as war, economic tensions and climate change (Parnell & Pieterse, 2010). Cities generally do or at least try to do a good job in the provision of first generation rights. However a narrow focus on good governance or municipal planning is inadequate to upholding 2nd, 3rd and 4th generation urban rights.

A key component of the right to the city is the need for equity. Savas (1979:145) defined equity as the fairness, impartiality or equality of services. One could successfully argue in a city where every citizen has an equal right to the city that there is urban equity whereas when inequity thrives, one could argue that the right to the city ceases to exist for some. The reality is that in today’s ‘pay to use’ climate, achieving equity is difficult and often an impossible feat to achieve if one doesn’t have the capital to facilitate it. Bond (2000:38) contended that present South African urban governance reforms have cemented existing patterns of inequality by using market mechanisms. These market mechanisms are emphasised through a government that links the number of urban services to be provided to those people with the ability to pay (Bond 2000:37).

The Poor and the Right to the City

Poor people are often excluded from actively claiming their right to the city. The physical gap (space) and the market gap (money) are the two biggest tools that are used to exclude the poor from actively claiming their right to the city. The physical gap is displayed through restricted access to private spaces in the city; these private spaces are often spaces of economic opportunity such as shopping centres which generate a lot of foot traffic that would have otherwise been business for informal traders. This physical gap even extends to the gap between the poor and their ability to access decent housing within the inner city or at least close to the city. RDP projects are often located on city outskirts with no reliable public transport and thus people are forced, if they want to be close to opportunities, to erect informal structures in areas usually located closer to the city centre. The market gap manifests itself in how spaces to participate formally in the economy of cities are reserved for those who can pay. Street hawkers in many cities find themselves on pavements having to trade their goods in areas where no adequate shelter is provided. Informal taxi drivers have to create taxi ranks in spaces where there are no proper shelters, ablution facilities and other basic infrastructure necessary to support this kind of business. Often they take up parking spots in town “forcing” the city to recognize their rights to the city.

Generally, many of the cities in South Africa have adopted an “anti poor” stance as a lingering spatial planning design feature inherited from the apartheid government. As an example, cities have constantly adopted anti street vendor measures. Manoko (2012:20) notes that the City of Johannesburg in partnership with other private stakeholders has initiated city improvement district initiatives which have led to a certain level of privatization of previously public spaces, where activities such as street trading have been prohibited.
Strict control measures have been initiated in these private spaces, and failure to comply by street traders leads to confrontation and conflict with the law (Manoko, 2012:20). Operation “Clean Sweep” launched in 2013 by the City of Johannesburg as a means to “stop illegal trading, illegal dumping, littering, land and building invasions, and other by-law contraventions” (South African Press Association, 2013) can be linked in part to this privatization of public space. The city does this privatization through the demarcation of private from public space using a series of physical barriers and thus proceeds to fine or arrest whoever is in contravention of this demarcation. Furthermore in Cape Town sharp rocks have been placed under the overpass around a My Citi bus depot, touted as a security measure while in fact this is a way of chasing away the urban poor who sleep under the bridge and use it as a place of shelter.

**DIY Urbanism versus structured exclusion**

Many critics to DIY urbanism tout it as an unsafe and unregulated mode of development (Finn, 2014; Lee & Milstead, 2017). To some degree this may be true but one can argue that even controlled development can have some negative consequences. For example, gentrification has been at the forefront of this safe and regulated new wave of urbanism and though it has regeneration as its heartbeat, its outcome screams exclusion. Pacione (2009:211) describes gentrification as a process of socio-spatial change where the rehabilitation of residential property in a working class neighbourhood by relatively affluent incomers leads to the displacement of former residents unable to afford the increased costs of housing that accompany regeneration. Practical cases in South African cities include the Maboneng Precint in Johannesburg which has now been transformed into an arts and culture hub and a hive of restaurants but sadly out of reach for the poor urban dwellers who were once its inhabitants. Though they may have physical access they simply do not have the financial means to stay, play and enjoy Maboneng. They may still have jobs in the area but their participation in the economy is usually that of providing labour while commuting from the townships and spending a fortune of their income on transportation.

As explained above, the right to the city is linked to access. Access is a component of distance and how far one is from something defines the level of access one has to it. Distance can further be broken down into two parts: the physical distance and the psychological distance. Physical distance is the distance that can be measured between two places. The psychological distance is the one that cannot be measured and depends on an individual’s perspective. Psychological distance is thus a subjective experience judged on how something is far away or close to the individual (Trope & Liberman, 2010:1). Therefore it is possible for something to be located physically close to an individual but still be far from them as they do not have the means to access it. The right to the city as a concept is tied to the psychological distance, citizens can all have the same physical distance to travel in order to “access” the city but their perceptions on this access may differ. Hansen (2009:238) acknowledges how, due to desperation to find somewhere to live, the poor are often located far away from opportunities in areas that have insufficient public transport services with no recreation facilities. This is true for most South African cities where poor access to public transportation has forced the rise of informal taxis commonly referred to as “amaphela” which provide an important service that cities have failed to provide. In essence DIY urbanism closes the psychological gap between people and cities ensuring that even those people without the financial means to fully participate in what the city has to offer are still able to access the city without exerting undue financial pressure on themselves.

Cities often create programs for economic and social development, but these often do not seem to benefit everyone. Fainstein and Fainstein (1996:270) argue that public programmes (those created by government) create winners and losers, with the losers more often than not being those individuals already suffering from social and economic disadvantages. DIY urbanism presents a unique opportunity for cities to support bottom up development that has the people as its driver. Thus instead of criminalizing activities where people have sought to stake a claim to a city, cities could assist these DIY urbanists by allowing them a chance to explore their right to the city. Instead of creating smaller pavements in cities to deter street hawkers, cities could create spaces in the city whereby hawkers are recognized. Instead of creating by-laws against the poor, cities could create by-laws that assist them and facilitate their inclusion in the city. Instead of fighting informal settlement dwellers, cities could make land available and recognize the tenure of dwellers ensuring that they too can develop their land without fear of being evicted. Cities could then spend less money on building houses for everyone but rather assist people in incrementally building their own homes. Furthermore, instead of arresting informal taxi drivers, cities could issue them with permits to transport passengers, and rather than criminalizing their operations, spend money on assisting them ensure the road worthiness of their vehicles thereby protecting passengers and ensuring that these taxis also contribute to the economy.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, at its core DIY urbanism pushes for cities to support what residents are already doing by ensuring that they too can use informal means to access and use the city in ways that benefit them. DIY urbanism doesn’t stop cities from continuously finding ways to improve formal development in the city but asks for a parallel process that also recognises informality. This article asks of cities to look through their by-laws and polices and to interrogate the extent to which these recognise informality and the extent to which they create a conducive environment for the poor to thrive in the city. Above all, it asks of city administrators and decision-makers to find ways to bridge the inequality gap in their cities by not only formally developing the city but also recognising and accommodating informal forms of DIY urbanism as well. After all, who does the city belong to?
References


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