

The role of the university in the promotion of socio-spatial justice.

Eva Álvarez de Andrés¹, Ulises Falleiros Frare²,

¹DUyOT-ETSAM, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid (Spain), eva.alvarez@upm.es

²DUyOT-ETSAM, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid (Spain), ulisses.ffrare@alumnos.upm.es

Abstract: In 2016, The New Urban Agenda adopted in Quito recognized the persistence of multiple forms of poverty, increasing inequalities and environmental degradation as the greatest obstacles to the sustainable development of cities around the world.

In this paper, it is argued that, to begin to address these challenges, it is necessary to transform the formative itineraries of the disciplines linked to the production of the city. Likewise, it advocates the incorporation of socio-spatial justice and environmental sustainability as fundamental approaches into their curricula in order to respond effectively to the challenges of cities in the 21st century. In this sense, this work presents an innovative action-research-learning initiative to incorporate the socio-spatial justice approach in the context of urban planning education.

A review of theoretical approaches has been done in relation to the role of the university in the promotion of socio-spatial justice, from which an analytical framework has been developed. This analytical framework is applied to a innovative challenge-driven practices in Brazil. The research shows the actions carried out from the university in order to make visible the difficulties as well as the capacities of a community excluded from making their rights effective. Throughout these experiences, the importance of the co-production of knowledge (as a result of a collaborative work between the university and vulnerable communities) is shown, as well as the need for the university to put training and research activities at the service of society and, in particular, of social justice and not of other interests.

Keywords: Urban education and research, innovation, learning processes, social inclusion, international dialogue.

Introduction

All accepted By 2050, the world's urban population is expected to nearly double. This will pose enormous challenges in terms of access to housing, infrastructure, basic services, natural resources, etc. (UN, 2017: Section 2). Heads of State and Government, who have ratified the New Urban Agenda, recognize that the persistence of multiple forms of poverty, growing inequalities and environmental degradation will be the greatest obstacles to sustainable development worldwide (UN, 2017: Section 3). In view of this perspective, the "right to the city" is clearly included for the first time in an international agenda, as well as some of its key elements such as: the recognition and guarantee of all human rights; the social function of land; public control of speculation and gentrification processes; prevention of evictions and the fight against homelessness, and a wide range of access to housing and public services, including social production of habitat as well as other collaborative and cooperative models.

Nevertheless, it would be too naïf to think that the inclusion of these issues in the international agenda is a sufficient condition for their implementation. Many of these values and commitments have been collected for more than 40 years, from the Vancouver Declaration (1976) to the Habitat Agenda (1996) or some international declarations (ECE, 2013, 2015). Despite so many promises, the situation of human settlements around the world has only deteriorated dramatically (Pascual, 2016). According to the World Charter on the Right to the City (2004), this is because the development models implemented in most countries, both in the North and in the South, have been characterized by establishing patterns of concentration of power and income. These patterns have generated poverty and exclusion, and have contributing to environmental degradation and to the acceleration of migratory processes and socially and spatially segregated urbanization.

For decades, a paradigm shifts in the way of producing and understanding cities has been demanded. The dominant model of unlimited economic development, which is repeated as a mantra on numerous occasions in the New Urban Agenda, is incompatible with social justice and with the limits of growth of the planet (Zarate, 2017). Numerous social organizations and some local governments around the world consider *"the right to the city"* as an instrument for paradigm change insofar as it claims the city as a collective right and not as a commodity for the benefit of a few (Lefebvre 1969, Harvey 2012, Pascual, 2016, Zarate, 2017). The Right to the City would be determined, according to the World Charter of the Right to the City (2004) by three fundamental principles:

Full exercise of citizenship, understood as the realization of all human rights and fundamental freedoms, ensuring the dignity and collective well-being of the inhabitants of the city in conditions of equality and justice, as well as full respect for production and management Social habitat.

Democratic management of the city, understood as the control and participation of society, through direct and representative forms, in the planning and governance of cities, prioritizing the strengthening and autonomy of local public administrations and popular organizations.

Social function of property and of the city, understood as the prevalence, in the formulation and implementation of urban policies, of common interest over individual property rights; Implies the socially just and environmentally sustainable use of urban space.

The right to the city is a call to overcoming the prevailing model *"the right to the city is like a cry and a demand, a transformed and renewed right to urban life"* (Lefebvre, 1996: 158). It is aimed at strengthening processes and claims against injustice and social and territorial discrimination, and therefore to promote social justice (Belda-Miquel et al., 2017). The right to the city is not a legal recognition but a social struggle (Kuymulu, 2013) oriented towards the collective self-government of the urban space (Purcell, 2013) so that the production of the city responds to the needs of its inhabitants and not to other commercial interests (Brenner et al., 2012).

This paradigm shift requires profound changes in all sectors (economic, social, political and cultural), from the production of knowledge to policies and practices carried out by actors and institutions at all levels. It is not merely a question to be discussed at an international conference once every 20 years. All institutions need to be forced to take concrete measures to promote greater urban social justice at local and global levels (Pascual, 2016). A struggle that is beginning to gain from the transformation of discourses, that is, from the identification of the causes of the problem and its possible solutions, and from the power relations that determine them (Kipfer et al., 2013). A process that cannot be led by the state, but arises from the creative experimentation of those who suffer the most from exclusion and segregation insofar as their needs become the engine of change in *"motivation, mobilization and Commitment"* (Max-Neef et al., 2010: 34).

The role of experts and professionals will not be to lead the processes of change, but to put themselves at the service of the excluded communities to make visible the structural causes of their exclusion and support them in their efforts to realize their rights (Vidal, 2009).

This vision of the role that professionals and experts must play implies important challenges regarding the training they must receive in the numerous disciplines related to the production of the city: architecture, urban planning, engineering, law, sociology, economics, etc. These disciplines should begin by incorporating the socio-spatial justice and sustainability approaches into their curricula if they really want to respond to the challenges of 21st century cities and not to other interests (Ngau, 2013; Zarate, 2017).

“In our opinion, it is time for the academic community to seriously rethink and redefine its role in society and in sustainable development efforts. This may require changes in how universities conduct operations, teaching, and research.... More than ever, holistic and cross-disciplinary initiatives are needed to link academic into a truly sustainable learning environment and experience.” (WEF ISCN-GULF, 2017: 3)

“..is the time to implement a ‘very different educational imagination’– one with equity at its core ... Listening and responding to communities who have in the past been ‘excluded, silenced, marginalized and ridden over’and fostering meaningful connections with them.” (Smyth, 2012: 9-11)

It should also be understood that exclusion and poverty are not only a matter of material dispossession, but above all a political issue, related to the position in the social space and the linkage that is established with the rest of the power structures. In this structure, professionals and experts are not neutral actors, as is often wanted to make them see. If they really want to promote urban social justice, they must put themselves at the service of people and communities private of power to increase their capacities and support their struggles (Freire, 1970, Frediani, 2007, Elizalde, 2007, Cabrera, 2015). They must be willing to give power, and to prioritize the interests of these communities over other possible interests.

As far as urban planning is concerned, this is a crucial question, insofar as planning has been systematically conceived as an instrument of control at the service of established power (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2008, Ngau, 2013), As an instrument it can be transformed or re-created to become a relevant tool to combat socio-spatial inequalities.

“Urbanism must return to life, but this time not to destroy or discipline it, but to open the doors: new tools will be necessary, new methods still to be done” (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2008: 157-174).

“I was more interested in the ways that planning could be used to ensure equitable distribution of resources and services.... I saw planning as a tool for social engagement” (Ngau, 2013:6)

“Facing these challenges undoubtedly requires a personal, ideological and political commitment to the field of urban research and management, with colleagues and with the generations that are forming.” (Cabrera, 2015:468)

Keys to forming promoters of socio-spatial justice

The question that arises below is therefore how to move from traditional training on "urban development" to a training centred on the promotion of socio-spatial justice. Or in other words, how to move from learning the design of the "formal" city to learning to promote the co-management of urban space, in order to promote "the right to the city" for all people and to address the challenge of the widening gap of socio-spatial inequalities in cities around the world. It is considered that this learning must be collective, active, integrative and critical.

“In both stages, and incrementally, students develop a critical understanding of the ways that the social and the spatial are entwined in urban space through devising and conducting action-oriented and people-centred acts of design research. Students actively engage with ...local communities, and the material conditions and socio-political complexities of a place.... knowledge are recognised as a collective production... Our educational approach starts by questioning the role of the expert and the way in which discourses of expertise are constituted in particular contexts... The Studio unfolds through a continuous dialogue within workgroups – often through role-plays – whereby design is understood as a non-linear process, influenced by the multiple and often divergent aspirations of different parties” (DPU, 2015:6-7)

“Social issues, inclusiveness and working more closely with community-based organisations were to be at the forefront of our programme.... Our students must be equipped with the relevant skills to address dynamic urban growth and inequality.” (Ngau, 2013:10 -19)

First, it must be assumed that the generation and production of knowledge must be understood as a collective effort between different actors (community organizations, public and private institutions, etc.) (DPU, 2015). A knowledge that must respond to the real needs of the population (Cabrera, 2015) and therefore be rooted in the concerns and challenges of the affected communities, who must be the protagonists of their own process of change (Max-Neef et al. Ngau, 2013, Belda et al., 2016). The professionals, researchers and / or experts are only an actor at the service of this communities.

An active training, that is oriented towards the resolution of real challenges (WEF ISCN-GULF, 2017), located in a specific context (DPU, 2015) in which students are invited to get involved to participate in the actual processes of promotion of greater social, spatial and environmental justice (DPU, 2015). In the specific case of training for the promotion of urban social justice, students should be immersed in real contexts of vulneration of the right to the city in order to be able to know both the needs of the excluded communities and their capacities to prioritize and respond to the challenges they face.

An integrative, trans-disciplinary learning with the capacity to: link theory and practice; understand the complexity of the object of study, that is the diversity of elements and actors involved and the relationship between them; make visible the conflicts of interest and mediate to overcome them in favour of the excluded community in order to rebalance as much as possible the initial imbalance of existing power relations (Álvarez et al., 2015).

A critical learning, as the result of the process of reflection-action. A learning that allows to make visible the structural causes of the exclusion as well as the capacities and collectives proposals co-produced with these communities to overcome them.

These pedagogical dimensions, explored in the previous paragraphs, are considered the starting point for urban education to really contribute to the fight against inequalities, both local and global, in the production of knowledge and of the urban space.

Following we present the results of the case to finally draw conclusions.

From theory to practice: The case of the Observatory of Removals in Brazil.

According to the 2017 Census, Brazil has more than 6 million unoccupied properties, a number higher than the housing deficit, which is 5.4 million units, as a result of the lack of housing policy coupled with the high concentration of property on the part of the dominant class. Culminating in a problem of complex solution that is tangent to particular interests.

A group of studies formed by professors and students from the University of São Paulo (USP), named Labcidade, was born in 2009 to understand the transformation of the urban environment and its process of peripheral expansion, supporting the diffusion of research related to the theme. One of the developments of this group of studies is later transformed into the Observatory of Removals that is consolidated in the year 2012 with the purpose of studying the appropriation processes and the informal city in the metropolitan area of São Paulo.

The main objective of the Removal Observatory is to make removal processes visible in the metropolitan region, giving voice and empowerment to the affected communities, through their participatory actions.

The project achieves its objectives being directed from two fronts, the collaborative mapping and collaborative actions both in the communities. In this way, the project is redefined in the field of action research, broadening its objectives of identifying, mapping and understanding at different scales, people and groups affected by forced removals from their dwelling areas and their causes (relatório final de projetos, observatório de remoções; 2016).

The map is co-produced using a GIS-based platform where everyone can contribute to the database by uploading information about affected communities with help of any device that has access to the internet. The purpose is that the platform can be appropriated by affected families, communities, lawyers and researchers in the area offering them a more accurate and reliable database.

In addition, for a participatory mapping the actions also are dividing between: Facebook site, which has helped communication between communities and researchers, as well as creating various practical activities and the “*Pill’s project*”, which are short quick videos published on Facebook and Blogs networks that help to visualize the living conditions of those affected.

A second step would be the project “*Observando de Perto*” (Observing closely), which, apart from the analytical exploration of the case for research purposes, the Observatory’s action may also, together with those affected, produce against proposals for expropriations, as well as a greater knowledge of the socio-spatial reality of settlements, instrumentalising this population, in order to strengthen it in the struggle for the right to decent housing and the city (FAU-USP, 2019). The final report of the project was published in Portuguese, helping to disseminate the actions carried out by the Observatory for a greater extent.

The project has grown a lot in recent years with a help of the most varied resource, one of them was The Ford Foundation with a financial support. Besides this, the collaboration and support for the creation and feeding of the web platform has been among them: residents and former residents of areas affected by removals and entities of society involved with the agenda; partnerships with social movements for the housing rights; besides to readings of databases of the public defenders of the city and news published in the press.

Today, the project encompasses approximately 868 cases of threats of expropriations and partial expropriations in São Paulo, Santo André, São Bernardo do Campo, Diadema and Mauá, reaching 287,926 thousand families; esteem almost 1 million people under these conditions, which would be equivalent to 10% of the total population of the municipality of São Paulo.

In any case, we can detect that the actions created have actively contributed to solving the most urgent issues of these communities, since these collectives gain visibility and empowerment, in order to strengthen their networks and stimulate the formation of a common identity.

However, it was possible to establish a general and behavioural view of these evictions by identifying a pattern in the eviction processes in the metropolitan area of São Paulo, as well as to draw a profile of these communities, reasons, actors involved and procedures. Most of them are made up of a population of greater social vulnerability whose conditions of occupation are linked to the deficiency of the State’s public housing

policies. These populations often originate from expropriations; eviction of formal or informal rent, high occupation of clandestine plots in risk areas such as favelas and slums or even housing complexes, prison population and homeless.

The practice of generating a mapping of these communities and of making this information public, besides serving as a denunciation of the precariousness of the public housing system, helps in strengthening the resistance of the affected communities, enabling the articulation between communities that go through a similar process. In this way the mapping opens the fields to other researchers and collaborative actions.

In a country where the lack of public policy and guaranteed access to quality housing benefited the concentration of private property by a dominant political elite makes throughout Brazil's history "illegal" occupations become the main form of access to housing and the right to the city by the most vulnerable population. However, all the actions mentioned demonstrate that collaborative activities show the ability of communities to make effective access to the city, even though in practice their rights are not guaranteed by the State.

Finally, as a great challenge, the replicability of this model is being studied at the moment, being able to extend the platform at national level, the compatibility of the database created with other Brazilian universities will help to highlight the problem on a national scale, and that could be used for the elaboration of a national plan of housing policies.

In conclusion, we must see the action-research initiative as a break from the historical and classicist model where the university should serve society. It is important to affirm that collaborative action is not simply a transfer of knowledge between the university and community, but construction of knowledge together, as a shared process of knowledge. This active sharing between researcher and resident is based on libertarian education, in which to build knowledge together one must recognize oneself as being unfinished as proposed by (Freire, 1970; Angileli, 2007).

In this way, it is intended to make the debate an inclusive, participatory and educational process for both sides, horizontally. When locals, leaders, social movements recognize themselves as producers of knowledge and not only viewers become more critical and aware of the process in which they live (of whom I serve, and what patterns I reproduce) (Angileli, 2007).

The role of the University in the promotion of socio-spatial Justice

In a context of persisting multiple forms of poverty and growing inequalities, it is our duty as educators and professionals to put our knowledge and skills at the service of the excluded communities to fight with them so that their right to the city becomes effective.

“It is the responsibility of the planning profession – including planning educators – to change perceptions... We have realised that we need to approach planning in terms of how it can be of value to people, rather than as an imposition from above... Universities can be part of this process. They can be innovative and responsive; but they cannot push for change in isolation.” (Ngau 2013:17)

In this article, it is shown how the Removal Observatory has contributed to produce a collective and integral knowledge with the set of actors involved: Residents, university, social movements, professionals, etc. An active training, oriented towards the resolution of real challenges (WEF ISCN-GULF, 2017), in which students are invited to get immersed in real contexts of vuleneration of the right to the city in order to be able to know both the needs of the excluded communities and their capacities to prioritize and respond to the challenges they face. A critical learning, as the result of the process of reflection-action. A learning that allows to make visible the structural causes of the exclusion as well as the capacities and collectives proposals co-produced with these

communities to overcome them. These pedagogical dimensions, are considered the starting point for urban education to really contribute to the fight against inequalities, both local and global, in the production of knowledge and of the urban space.

The experiences presented in this work have contributed to show that housing exclusion is a structural issue and that the way to its solution goes through empowering individuals and their communities to make their rights effective. The case studies show the relevance of the co-production of knowledge between different actors (affected, social movements, academics) and of different forms (formal and experiential), and their potential to make visible the struggles of socially excluded communities as well as their capacities to elaborate collective proposals that allow their right to the city to become effective.

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