

## **Hidden positivities within the urban planning education in the neoliberal era: the case of Middle East Technical University Department of City and Regional Planning**

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The global financial crisis that has initiated in 2008 can be seen as an aftershock of the global restructuring of the neoliberal policies that started at the beginning of 1980s. Since that time policies of deregulation, decentralisation and privatisation have been adapted to different contexts and implemented at various degrees at various localities. But their essence (maximisation of economic gains through liberalisation of markets) had never changed. This high emphasis on liberated markets not only produced financial problems like credit crunch and chronic poverty but also caused social and cultural problems that range from loss of public space to social consumerism.

As cities are considered to be the concretisation grounds of neoliberal policies, it became rather easy to create relationship between neoliberalism and cities. But the effect of neoliberalism on planning education is hardly discussed within the literature. Throughout this work, the author would like to follow a three level deductive approach to the case of education in neoliberal era. At the first level the author will develop a historical look to the transformations of universities by giving special emphasis on the neoliberal era. At the second level, the focus will be given on urban planning education and changing priorities within planning programs will be investigated. At the third and last level the author would like to concentrate on a peculiar cases of Turkey and on the Middle East Technical University Department of City and Regional Planning (METU/CRP). After describing the role of urban planning within the political economy of Turkey, a critical look will be provided to METU/CRP's curriculum and its influence on the students.

Level 1: First universities have been established almost a thousand years ago. Universities survived as they adapted to the changing life conditions of the societies they were raised. With the developments in trade, religion moved out from the focus of the social order and universities institutionalised as parts of rather secular societies. Later in time, with further secularisation universities contributed more to the universalisation of knowledge and its development. After the enlightenment universities became places where scientific knowledge socialised and developed much faster than before. This attracted the attention of the states on to universities as the primary source of knowledge production. In return to states' financial support universities gave up some part of their independence. This has continued until the end of the World War II when the role of the state has been replaced more and more with private firms. With the neoliberal era, universities started to be seen as sources of “economic” knowledge, a kind of knowledge that produce added value to the economy.

Level 2: Despite major transformations at universities urban planning education did not change as much. Being a field of social concern and legitimised itself to solve spatial problems, urban planning education mostly resisted to changes dictated by the neoliberal era. At some contexts urban planning profession is reduced to a mere instrumentality. In these contexts, the priority is given to the internationalisation (of curriculum, staff and students) and development of competencies (in visual and verbal communication, information technologies, database management, GIS, etc.). At some other contexts where urban planning is considered as a tool to overcome deficiencies of the neoliberal system, the education is constructed around much critical competencies to make planners more political, audacious, creative, and therapeutic. Following this perspective curriculums started to include courses on social and cultural diversity, participation, social justice and environmental problems.

Level 3: Turkey followed the path of western countries not only in terms of its economic and social restructuring but also in terms of urbanization process. Planned development (economic and urban) has become the key term to guide Turkey's development strategies during 1960s. However, with the 1970s Turkey started to be distanced from planned path of development. Starting from 1980s Turkey started to follow neoliberal policies again following the western cases. Today, Turkey

experiences almost all of the negative consequences of the neoliberalism and neoliberal urbanisation process. Urban planning activity has been reduced to a procedural activity to legitimise socially unacceptable spatial propositions not only affect urban lands but also distress rural and natural areas.

Level 4: METU/CRP were established in 1960 part of the planned development program to provide experts in the fields of architecture and planning that would potentially guide spatial developments in Turkey and in the Middle East. Practical concerns that lead to the establishment of the university and of the department can be seen in the early curriculum of the department. But later, the curriculum changed to address urbanisation problems in Turkey like the lack of housing supply and urban poverty. With the political movements of 1970s and 1980s, the university took a much critical stand and approached to left wing political views. Despite such a move, the department's program did not change as much and kept following the rational path emphasising the importance of scientific objectivity and specialisation within planning. Despite the lack of explicit evidence favouring a revolutionary position, METU/CRP still contributes to the development of its students by adding an objective but critical look to the theoretical courses and by considering practical realities. At the end of the research this assumption on implicit critical formation is tested with a small questionnaire distributed to all four urban planning licence studios and answered by 171 students in total.

With the help of this presentation I would like to initiate a discussion on urban planning education and learn more about differing priorities and different positions taken by departments of urban planning. I think the discussion will contribute to the development of innovative approaches in planning education that not only contribute individual development of its students but also providing solutions to urban problems that we are facing today.