

What is this thing called MULTICULTURAL PLANNING?

by Mohammad A. Qadeer

Summary

Multicultural planning is not a distinct genre of urban planning. It is a strategy of making reasonable accommodations for the culturally defined needs of ethno-racial minorities on the one hand, and reconstructing the common ground that underlies policies and programmes on the other. A set of policies is recommended for making urban planning more inclusive.

Planners' responsiveness to the ethno-racial diversity

Ask a planner about multicultural planning and he/she will initially wear a look of puzzlement, but on further prodding may start narrating stories of the approval process that a mosque or Gurdawara had gone through or the unmediated emergence of an ethnic enclave in his/her jurisdiction. The term multicultural planning is puzzling for planners. They are aware of the ethno-racial diversity of their clients and generally feel that they are sensitive to differences in their clients' material and aesthetic needs for community facilities, services, land uses and housing, etc. They maintain that they plan and manage by functions and not persons. Their professionalism demands a certain uniformity of treatment of all citizens. Yet the term multicultural planning suggests to them that it is a distinct genre of planning something like advocacy planning, collaborative planning or sustainable development. And they are apprehensive of the accusation that they are not practicing it, particularly in the Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal metropolitan areas.

Planners' ambiguity about multicultural planning is in contrast with the academics' exhortations about the need for responsiveness to the ethnic and cultural diversity of contemporary cities in Canada, the USA or Australia. Implicit in these exhortations is the notion that the planning institutions are covertly discriminatory against ethnic and racial minorities. They are guided by the values and preferences of the dominant majority, embedded in the singularity of public interest and incorporated in planning policies and standards.^{1,2} The academic discourse favours treating

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different people differently to fulfill the objective of equity in the outcomes of programmes and not be tied to the uniformity of measures.³ It emphasizes ethno-racial differences and reads in them disparities of power.

The divergence between the planners' perceptions and academic critiques points to a lack of clarity about how

planning institutions do, as well as could, respond to the ethno-racial diversity of people. The urban planning institutions, though a critical determinant of the quality of urban life, are not the only force shaping the structure and form of cities. Undoubtedly, the market, community initiatives and political processes significantly influence the quality of urban life. In the discussion of the planners' responsiveness to the culturally defined needs of various ethnic groups, the domain of planning institutions should be kept in view.

For example, immigrants and minorities have higher unemployment rates and lower earnings than born-white Canadians of similar qualifications.⁴ For this systematic inequality, the planning institutions are neither primarily responsible nor do they have the policy instruments to fully correct the situation. It would therefore be inappropriate to attribute this condition as a failure of urban planning. Of course, planners can take actions that can alleviate the problem, such as local economic development measures targeted at increasing employment opportunities for immigrants. Yet it does not make them responsible for the existence of employment discrimination in the first place. The responsiveness of planners must be assessed in the context of the mandate of urban planning institutions. This article aims at answering two questions: 1) how can urban planning accommodate cultural diversity? and 2) what is the scope of practicing multicultural planning in urban planning? Before discussing these questions, we

need to clarify the notion of “culture” of ethnic groups within a city and society.

Culture and common ground

The term “culture” of an ethnic group within a city or society refers to beliefs, behaviours, symbols and customs of limited scope, largely followed in the family, community and religious settings, albeit in the private domain of the social life of a group. The distinct “culture” of the private domain is complemented by the public domain that cuts across the ethnic lines. The economy, laws, politics and administration, citizenship and technology are the institutions that are by and large common to all groups.⁵ Thus, in this sense, the culture of an ethnic group is just a sub-culture encased in the common ground of public institutions. It does not rise to the total way of life of a society.

The diversity of ethnic cultures thrives in tandem with the cohesiveness of the common ground. The challenge of multiculturalism lies in building a common ground that reflects the interests and concerns of most of the groups, while sustaining cultural differences in the private domain. In urban planning, the common ground is comprised of objectives and policies that reconcile the values and interests of various sub-cultural groups yet can be equitably applicable to all.

The (sub) culture matters, but it is not insulated from the physical, economic and technological factors operating in a city. For example, the courtyard house that may be the cultural inheritance of many immigrants cannot be recreated in the snowy Canada. Immigrants readily adopt new housing forms, limiting the expression of their traditional preferences to the organization of internal spaces and minor decorative features. There are no discernable differences in ethno-racial groups’ preferences for housing quality, ownership and location in the long run. Detached homes surrounded by grassy yards in suburban settings are often the desired family residences of many ethnic groups. The trade-offs between cultural values and norms on the one hand and the environmental, physical, economic and technological

factors on the other are enacted every day in a city. Multiculturalism plays out in this dynamic situation.

Accommodating cultural diversity in urban planning

Ethnic groups as well as Aboriginals are the bearers of distinct cultures that constitute the mosaic called multiculturalism. The multiplicity of communities of distinct cultures living in the same space has long been a characteristic of cities. Weren’t the ancient and medieval cities known for their variety of languages and throngs of strangers from distant lands? Cultural diversity of cities is not a new phenomenon. What *is* new are the charters and bills of rights conferring freedom of expression and religion, rights of equitable treatment, peaceful assembly and association, mobility, democratic participation and in Canada the right of preserving one’s cultural heritage. These individual and group rights underpin the diversity of community cultures. They institutionalize sub-cultures, prompting ethno-racial groups to organize their private domain by their cultural and linguistic heritage and build religious and community institutions to realize their beliefs and values. How do these community cultures affect the public space? This is the question that goes to the heart of the problem of accommodating cultural diversity in urban planning.

Canadian multiculturalism is largely driven by immigration. About a quarter million immigrants and another 250,000 temporary residents come into Canada every year. Immigration has become the primary source of population growth in the country. It is continually restocking ethnic groups with newcomers who reinvigorate their communities’ cultures, religions and languages.

In cities, the culture of ethnic communities comes into play in the form of individual and group preferences for the provisions of housing, neighbourhoods, land uses, facilities and services, transportation and environment, albeit the functional areas of urban planning. The fulfillment of these cultural needs and preferences is a process of balancing competing

interests and forces. Thus, the first test of accommodating cultural diversity is to make the planning process inclusive by facilitating and actively seeking inputs from ethnic communities, particularly those who are stakeholders in planning policies. Much of the literature on multicultural planning concentrates on advocating making the decision-making processes inclusive and open.

The touchstone of multicultural planning is the sensitivity of the planning process to cultural diversity.

Culturally defined needs and preferences of people find expression at two levels, individual and group or community. They want particular types of houses, neighbourhoods, community services or jobs within the scope of their resources and opportunities. Households of Portuguese heritage may want two kitchens, one for the party room. Catholics and Hindus may want altars for worship at home. Such preferences may or may not fit into planning policies and programmes. If they don’t, then special permissions, exceptions or variances may be sought to accommodate them. The process of accommodating individual cultural preferences is an often-intricate involving committee of adjustment, appellate bodies, public hearings, etc. that fosters confrontations with neighbours, adding to the minorities’ feelings of being discriminated. The touchstone of multicultural planning is the sensitivity of the planning process to cultural diversity.

At the group or community level, cultural needs take more organized forms. Mosques, temples, cricket fields, parades and fairs, employment equity or heritage language classes, signage, etc., are examples of the institutions and services that ethno-racial communities seek. They expect planning policies and programmes to make provisions for their culturally specific needs as an entitlement of their citizenship. Yet planning institutions have evolved in the cultural idioms of the historic population and the mainstream culture. Thus new ethnic communities find themselves

confronted with policies and regulations that initially do not fit their needs. Their community needs may be met through the incremental and case-by-case modifications of policies and programmes.

Ethnocultural needs often have bearings on the operational and management policies of programmes. It is not just the availability of a service but how it is administered that affects different communities differently. The availability of subsidized housing affects all those in need, regardless of the culture, but the policy to allocate units only to nuclear families effectively bars the multi-generational or relatively large families of immigrants, for example. Even in death, community cultures come into conflict with the burial regulations conceived in the Judo-Christian tradition.⁶ The point is that in the provision of services, cultural norms and values determine the level of satisfaction of needs. In the provision of services, accommodation of different groups has to be very deliberately planned.

Immigrants as the new members of a society have special needs, such as job search and housing assistance, language classes, civic education, counseling, etc. Cities and local communities have to either provide or coordinate the supply of such services.

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Finally, ethnic cultures transform the urban structure and landscape. The emergence of ethnic enclaves, ethnic bazaars and malls affects the residential and commercial organization of a city. They necessitate drastic revisions of official or master plans and require wide ranging accommodations of cultural diversity. Policies of historic preservation, urban design, commercial development, neighbourhood and housing, signage, public transport and parking, for example, have to be revised to accommodate the cultural needs of ethnic minorities.

All in all, increasing cultural diversity calls for wide ranging policy revisions. That is what multicultural planning means. Does it mean people of different cultures will be treated differently?

Strategy of reasonable accommodation and the reconstruction of common ground

Undoubtedly, academic supporters of multiculturalism emphasize tailoring of planning policies to the cultural backgrounds of people. This viewpoint does not necessarily suggest that there may be different rules for different persons. What it implies is that the objectives and outcomes should be uniform but the measures to achieve them (inputs) could vary by the culture of clients. For example, there may be uniform performance standards for parking and transportation in siting places of worship, but they could be realized in different ways for a mosque versus a church. This is how reasonable accommodation works.

The common ground of norms, values, laws and institutions of the society at large, particularly of its public domain, continually affect the culture of communities. It is the common ground that provides the functional coherence and unity to a city. The common ground has its roots in the historical mainstream, but it is evolving and changing with the times. Multiculturalism lies not only in cultivating sub-cultures but also in reconstructing the common ground to reflect the interests and values of ethno-racial communities.⁷

Part of the challenge of multicultural planning is the reconstruction of the common ground of urban planning, namely its values, objectives and criteria, to reflect the shared interests of different communities. It requires re-examining the behavioural assumptions by which people's needs are defined and compatibilities of land uses, for example, are determined. The broadening of the processes and products of urban planning to reflect the evolving mix of cultures in a city is a critical element of multicultural planning.

Multicultural planning in Canada

Canadian metropolitan cities have become strikingly multicultural in the past three decades. Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal in particular are now home to people from all parts of the world. There are thriving Chinatowns (the Toronto area has five) Indian bazaars, Jewish and Italian neighbourhoods, Korean churches, mosques and temples. For example, the Toronto area has about 65 mosques and an equal number of Hindu temples. Almost every project to build a mosque eventually – sometimes after a long drawn out struggle for approval – came to fruition. It is not just the buildings but community services and institutions that have come to enrich the life of ethnic minorities. For example, there are about 300 ethnic newspapers and magazines published in the Toronto area.

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There are claims of Toronto being the most multicultural city in the world.⁸ Vancouver is the home of about 200 ethnic groups. Even Montreal, so insistent of its French identity, has transnational neighbourhoods like Cote-des-Neiges and Notre-Dame-de-Grace. Ethnic communities have carved a space for themselves and their cultural life is imprinted on the metropolitan landscapes. Multiculturalism is spreading to the second tier cities as well as small towns in the form of ethnic institutions and services.

Obviously this transformation of these metropolitan areas is not without the contributions of urban planning. Thus, one can say that practically multicultural planning is alive and well in Canada. Yet this outcome has come about incrementally with the demands of ethno-racial communities for their charter rights as citizens. It has been a reactive and not a proactive multicultural planning. There is the need for systematizing and incorporating the

process of reasonable accommodation of ethnic needs in urban planning.

Finally, meeting cultural needs as a goal of urban planning comes in combination with other goals. Urban planning aims at making cities and towns environmentally sustainable, energy efficient, physically compact and transit-oriented along with culturally diverse. There is no formula for reconciling these divergent goals other than working through them on both ends, namely by balancing competing concerns on the one hand and by promoting new mores and values through intensive civic education on the other. Multicultural planning means a strategy of reasonable accommodation

of ethnic cultures as well as cultivating of shared values in ethnic communities through informational and (civic) educational activities.

This strategy can be operationalized as a set of policy measure and planning practices to be followed by the urban planning agencies. Following is a set of such policies that the planning agencies can implement as well as use as an index to assess their progress in promoting multicultural planning.

These policies and practices will institutionalize reasonable accommodation and lay the basis for forging a common ground that applies to all communities. This is what multicultural planning means. It is not a distinct genre, but a culturally responsive practice. ■

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Policy and Practice Index of Multicultural Planning

1. Providing minority language facilities, translations and interpretation, in public consultations.
2. Including minority representatives in planning committees and task forces as well as diversifying planning staff.
3. Including ethnic/minority community organizations in the planning decision-making processes.
4. Recognition of ethnic diversity as a planning goal in Official/Comprehensive Plans.
5. City-wide policies for culture-specific institutions in plans, e.g., places of worship, ethnic seniors' homes, cultural institutions, funeral homes, fairs and parades, etc.
6. Routinely analyzing ethnic and racial variables in planning analysis.
7. Studies of ethnic enclaves and neighbourhoods in transition.
8. Policies/design guidelines for sustaining ethnic neighbourhoods.
9. Policies/strategies for ethnic commercial areas, malls and business improvement areas.
10. Incorporating culture/religion as an acceptable reason for site-specific accommodations/minor-variances.
11. Accommodation of ethnic signage, street names and symbols.
12. Policies for ethnic-specific service needs.
13. Policies for immigrants' special service needs.
14. Policies/projects for ethnic heritage preservation.
15. Guidelines for housing to suit diverse groups.
16. Promoting ethnic community initiatives for housing and neighbourhood development.
17. Development strategies taking account of inter-cultural needs.
18. Promoting and systematizing ethnic entrepreneurship for economic development.
19. Policies/strategies for promoting ethnic art and cultural services.
20. Accommodating ethnic sports (e.g., cricket, bocce, etc) in playfield design and programming.

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