



Negotiating an Asiatown in Berlin: Ethnic diversity in urban planning

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ABSTRACT

Cities are increasingly affected by migration which raises new questions for urban development and planning. In the paper at hand, this issue is addressed from two perspectives: First, we stress the high social, representative as well as economic potential of ethnic economies and the emerging neighborhoods, showing that they serve migrant communities as well as urban development. Second, we bring in perspectives from the ‘planning for diversity’ and ‘multicultural planning’ discourses into the German debate. This paper takes the planning conflict on the development of the Dong Xuan Center (DXC), Germany’s largest Vietnamese-run trade center, into an Asiatown as empirical basis. It examines legal implications for the German context and therewith contributes to the ‘planning for diversity’ discourse from a non-multicultural setting.

1. Introduction

While the consequences of immigration are often debated with reference to the national scale, cities and neighborhoods are the sites of lived experience, encounters and everyday negotiations of inter-cultural relations (Fincher & Iveson, 2008; Valentine, 2008). Ethnically diversifying urban societies raise several questions for urban planning and make difference a central category (Fincher & Iveson, 2008, p. 118 f.; Young, 2008). This goes along with a call for a local turn in migration studies (e.g. Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2009). The paper at hand picks up the debate of diversity-oriented urban development and discusses it within the German context. It therewith addresses the tension between ‘planning for diversity’ based on equity and German planning principles in accordance with equal treatment. In doing so, the paper contributes to the current debate in urban planning studies, which is inspired by the multicultural principles of public recognition and accommodation of ethnocultural diversity (Banting & Kymlicka, 2006, p. 7). Based on this debate, we discuss controversies and dilemmas challenging the debate in Germany, where political debates, programs and the national integration plan is still in accordance with the principle of assimilation. However, a paradigm shift contests this concept suggesting a new concept of a ‘multicultural integration’, which is best to be characterized as Taft’s ‘pluralistic assimilation’. In this concept, neither individuals nor ethnic groups are forced to give up their identity, values, social ties or loyalties (Pries, 2015, p. 10, 25; Taft, 1953, p. 47).

Although Germany has become a top destination for immigrants and refugees and a self-declared ‘country of immigration’ (Beauftragte der Bundesregierung, 2016, p. 9), German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s

declaration of the failure of multiculturalism in 2010 is still reflected in local planning approaches. Strict legal frameworks often limit the possibilities for a diversity-oriented urban development that recognizes diversity or actively engages with migrant communities.

The paper takes a planning conflict on the further development of the Dong Xuan Center (DXC), Germany’s largest Vietnamese-run trade center, as a case study for arguing, firstly, that the rise of migrant-led urban development shows a need for culturally sensitive modes of governance and for a broader discourse on appropriate opportunities for equity-based urban planning and politics. Secondly, it illustrates that ethnic economies bear an important social as well as economic function, thereby serving both the migrant communities as well as urban development. Based on these arguments, the objective of the article is to contribute to the discourse on diversity in planning in countries with assimilationist integrations paradigms like Germany. This leads to the following research questions: Why is migrant-initiated urban development hardly recognized in urban planning? And what can we learn for diversity-sensitive urban planning from the presented case study?

The article theoretically rests upon the discursive link of planning and diversity and its implications for and inconsistency with German planning and integration debates (Section 2). In the third section, we outline Vietnamese migrant history in Germany and in Berlin. Section 4 contextualizes used methods and gives an overview of the empirical data and the involved guidelines and conflicting parties. In Section 5, we illustrate the planning conflict over DX GmbH’s vision for developing the center into an Asiatown, which is in contrast with the legal framework. Section 6 discusses the local conflict based on the district’s

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main arguments against the envisioned Asiatown. The conclusion sums up our arguments and widens the discussion towards the planning cultures and the theoretical basis of the discussed planning approaches.

2. Planning for diversity

Fed by scholars from several disciplines and policy networks, the ‘planning for diversity’ approach particularly addresses planning issues related to ethno-cultural diversity (Fainstein, 2005; Fincher & Iveson, 2008; Fincher, Iveson, Leitner, & Preston, 2014; Sandercock, 1998, 2000; Zhuang, 2008). It proceeds from the assumption that “the effectiveness of urban planning is assessed by its responsiveness to citizens’ needs and goals. Given that interests and preferences differ by social class, race, gender, and cultural background, the responsiveness of urban planning depends on its ability to accommodate citizens’ divergent social and cultural needs and to treat individuals and groups equitably in meeting those needs” (Qadeer, 1997, p. 482). The approach thus promotes collaboration among municipal authorities, planners and local stakeholders, such as migrant organizations, residents and entrepreneurs.

Contributions to the discourse are dominated by planning scholars from multicultural societies, especially from Canada and Australia. However, only a few scholars have contributed to the debate from a German perspective and problematized obstacles in German planning practice, such as processes of inclusion and exclusion and the performative power of planning (Huning, 2014; Schuster, 2014; Waltz, 2014).

Despite rising academic and political interest in urban planning directed towards ethno-cultural diversity, neither the ‘planning for diversity’ approach, which encompasses diversity, e.g. in age, gender, religion, ethnic background and income (Fincher, 2003) nor the ‘multicultural planning’ approach, which explicitly focuses on cultural diversity, is clearly defined. Furthermore, ethnic entrepreneurship is not in their focus (Zhuang, 2008, p. 42). As a result, the role of migrant entrepreneurs in the initiation of spatially concentrated economic developments is rarely noted in previous studies - although there are some exceptions, such as Zhuang (2008) for the case of Toronto and Rath and Swagerman (2011) for a comparison of 27 European cities. The latter highlight the political sensitivity of particularistic versus universal policies towards ethnic entrepreneurship and the possible adverse effects of spatial interventions under the umbrella of urban revitalization (ibid.).

We argue that the missing link in research is related to the micro perspective that dominated ethnic economy research for a long time (Bonacich, 1973; Light, 1972; Light & Gold, 2000; Waldinger, Aldrich, & Ward, 1990). Only within the last decade, scholars increasingly embedded ethnic economy research in a spatially differentiated perspective on urban development, thus, touching planning questions. At least two strands of research can be differentiated in this macro perspective. The first strand looks at ethnic economies’ provision of neighborhoods with groceries and services, their shops as spaces for community life, job creation and social cohesion (Hall, 2011, 2015; Kaplan, 2015; Lo, 2006, p. 89 f.; Nuissl & Schmitz, 2015). The second strand looks at the symbolic value of ethnic economies on urban development, which is often related to branded districts and to gentrification (Chabrol, 2013; Hackworth & Rekers, 2005; Schmitz, 2016; Shaw, 2011; Stock, 2013).

As a result of this missing link, urban planners and municipal authorities lack specific tools tailored to the needs of ethnic economies and a broader understanding of their specifics. Further, migrant interests are not included in the planning guidelines that are binding for local governments. This becomes apparent in the inappropriate application of dominant planning regulations to migrants’ diverse commercial strategies such as sidewalk sales and street vending (Zhuang, 2008, p. 39). This practice is anchored in planning systems that still rely on universal standards and regulations to govern citywide developments (ibid., p. 42), such as the German planning system (Stilike, 2010, p.

130).

In response to these controversies, several studies have promoted a diversity-oriented planning approach. Especially in multicultural societies, such as Canada and Australia, planning scholars have been addressing the concepts of ‘planning for diversity’ and ‘multicultural planning’ (Qadeer, 2009) for many years (Fincher & Iveson, 2008; Fincher et al., 2014; Murdie & Ghosh, 2010; Preston & Lo, 2009; Qadeer, 1997, 2009; Sandercock, 2000; Zhuang, 2008, 2013). The philosophy and practice of planning in the field of diversity has been inspired by several social-science theories and is strongly influenced by ideologies such as multiculturalism (Fincher et al., 2014, pp. 3; Schuster, 2014).

However, the concepts of ‘planning for diversity’ and ‘multicultural planning’ have been critically addressed since their advocates hail diversity as the new orthodoxy of city planning that often occupies a normative stance (Fainstein, 2005; Huning, 2014; van der Horst & Ouwehand, 2012). Further, the approaches might unintentionally support neoliberal and entrepreneurial ideas of urban development. Examples are ethno-culturally branded commercial premises that are initiated by business-led alliances. The approach might further be used as a celebration of ethnic diversity which is criticized as an act of essentialism, be it through parades or festivals as place-making activities (McClinchey, 2008; Veronis, 2006) or through branding initiatives, e.g. of Chinatowns (e.g. Rath, 2005; Sales, d’Angelo, Liang, & Montagna, 2008). The critique of ethnic essentialism is reflected in the work of Anderson (1991, pp. 30) who problematizes Chinatowns as products of the construction of a racial category and thus as Western constructions (see Schmitz, 2016 for Berlin). This Western hegemony is also expressed in planning regulations and design guidelines which are dominated by Western aesthetics, styles and constructional expressions (Zhuang, 2008, p. 42). However, entrepreneurs themselves may draw economic and social benefits by proclaiming their ethnicity (Fincher et al., 2014, p. 28). This ‘strategic spatial essentialism’ (Veronis, 2007) draws back on Spivak’s (1987) postcolonial theory of ‘strategic essentialism’ and is also part of migrant-initiated urban development processes.

Despite this criticism, the debate on ‘planning for diversity’ is highly topical for German cities, as they are affected by global urban processes including a rising cultural diversity as demographic reality (Destatis, 2016a; Fincher et al., 2014, p. 3), often accompanied by social and ethnic segregation. It has only recently been picked up for Germany and connected to the concept of difference (Huning, 2014; Schuster, 2014).

This rising academic interest in diversity within planning theory and practice has not informed the German planning practice yet. As shown below, German urban planning focuses on social mixing (Harlander, 2000, p. 109) and equality. These factors shape both the local experience of ethno-cultural diversity and the local restrictions for planning (Fincher & Iveson, 2008, p. 121). The examined planning paradigm is often challenged by the debate of whether it is more appropriate to mainstream services (equality) or to provide ethnically-specific facilities (equity; see Fig. 1)(ibid., p. 123). Within the German context, this debate is politically based on the General Equal Treatment Act (Allgemeines Gleichstellungsgesetz) and the assimilationist integration paradigm (Fincher & Iveson, 2008, p. 123; Hussein de Araújo & Weber, 2014; Pries, 2015) and has a long tradition in urban studies literature (Dunn, 1998, p. 509).

The General Equal Treatment Act prohibits the provision of specific services to ethnic groups and is thereby contrary to the constitutional paradigm of equitable living conditions (Art. 72 German constitution), which encompasses public services, income and employment options (ARL, 2006, p. 6), all enhancing equity. The highly debated German ‘mainstreaming’ approach (Stilike, 2010), which rests upon the principle of equality, means “treating people the same, despite their differences” (Silberman Abella, 1984, p. 3).

The dilemma of equality versus equity also resonates with the debate around the ‘planning for diversity’ approach and its basis in equity

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