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Ink and Ideas Manifesto Exercises for Shaping Equitable Cities

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Introduction

Recent decades have seen planning colonised by neoliberalism (Tasan-Kok & Baeten, 2012). The infiltration of neoliberalism into planning has manifested not only in the mere retrenchment of the state in the planning discussion (illustrated in The Netherlands by a gradual dismantling of the state's planning apparatus since 2002, until the dissolution of the VROM -the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment- in 2010) but also in its pervasion of various aspects of the planning practice. In the context of the neoliberal paradigm, space is commodified, and its value is predominantly determined by attributes such as its geographical location, which in turn is closely linked to land values. This commodification serves to primarily benefit investment and development interests. Although the juxtaposition of neoliberalism and planning may appear contradictory, current planning practice has primarily evolved to accommodate development and investment. As a result, cities engage in competitive branding to allure international companies, investors, and affluent classes, often employing large-scale redevelopment schemes or smaller neighbourhood enhancements through iconic architecture (Tasan-Kok & Baeten, 2012). This transformation of planning caters to a privileged minority, sidelining the crucial need to address broader urban challenges and fostering equitable development for all urban inhabitants.

This raises the question of how these developments resonate with the New Urban Agenda (NUA) and its global political commitment to sustainable urban development. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide an agenda for

ending poverty, fighting inequality, and tackling climate change by 2030. Within this framework, SDG 11 emphasises the crucial role of urban planning and design in realising the other 16 SDGs.

Within this, the NUA's implicit vision of the Right to the City emphasises the equal use and enjoyment of cities, promoting inclusiveness and ensuring all citizens can inhabit just, safe, healthy, accessible, affordable, resilient, and sustainable cities. To achieve this, a strategic approach to planning that provides a spatial framework for the envisaged transition is required.

Achieving this transition through today's dominant neo-liberal approach will not be possible. Instead, the planning for the future must be transformative, integrative, and unapologetically normative. We need a strategic approach grounded in a strong, positive, and ethical vision that engages with the urban reality and acknowledges its messiness and complexity. This practice must not view reality as a problem to be solved but rather recognise the seeds of possible better futures in the current challenges and act on them using projective design.

In the international Manifesto for the Just City exercise, students demonstrated their understanding of the critical nature of creating a just and equitable city. This collective effort of reimagining the Just City highlights the potential for alternative spatial scenarios and imaginations, showing that architects and planners have a role to play in shaping the Just City.

This essay examines the indispensable role of imagination in urban planning and design, particularly its transformative capacity to conceive alternative urban futures. It scrutinises how these innovative scenarios can be delineated through the vehicle of manifesto writing, thereby integrating imagination and tangible articulation in the pursuit of systemic change. Manifestos are

illuminated as effective platforms that capture and convey these visionary urban landscapes. These documents then serve to catalyse communal aspirations towards an increasingly equitable and just urban future. Central to this discourse is the assertion that our imaginative prowess is the essential catalyst, equipping us to envision and consequently shape futures that transcend the constraints and disparities inherent in our present urban landscapes.

Manifestos and the Pursuit of Critical Consciousness in Education

Throughout history, manifestos have been powerful vehicles for advocating positive change and articulating ideas, values, and objectives across various disciplines. Both political parties and artistic movements have turned to manifestos to convey their messages, with the Communist Manifesto by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in 1848 standing as one of the most influential examples. Penned during an era of political and economic turmoil marked by revolutions, this manifesto captured the prevailing dissatisfaction with ruling political elites and monarchies, demanding democratic reforms, free speech, and public participation. In 2013, UNESCO recognised the global importance of the Communist Manifesto by registering it in the Memory of the World Programme.

In architecture and urban planning, manifestos have likewise been indispensable. The Charter of Athens, the renowned architectural manifesto from 1933, expounded modernist ideas in architecture and urbanism, primarily embodying Le Corbusier's principles and values. Despite the significant criticisms directed towards the modernist movement (e.g. Sennett, 2017; Till, 2009), the long-lasting influence of the Modernist movement and its

Charter is undeniable. The movement's idealised, Apollonian, and somewhat heroic approach to urban design and planning has persisted in numerous architectural schools, contributing to an outmoded perspective on city development. This increasingly antiquated view has finally been supplanted by the recognition that cities are not the immaculate creations of genius architects, but rather continuous, complex, and socially produced entities. The influence of Marxist urban theory and other progressive viewpoints have shed light on the limitations and shortcomings of the modernist movement, calling for a more nuanced and critical understanding of urban design and planning in the contemporary era.

In this context, the manifesto exercise is a powerful tool in reshaping our collective thinking and practice of urban planning. Much like their historical counterparts, these manifestos foster critical consciousness, pushing us to critically evaluate the entrenched neoliberal ideologies that have shaped our cities and imagine new, equitable futures. Through intellectual engagement, the manifesto exercise empowers students to challenge the status quo and imagine alternative paradigms for urban development. This reimagining, driven by the power of imagination, is a vital catalyst for societal change and forms the central theme for the discussion in the next section as it explores the transformative potential of imagination and its capacity to drive societal change.

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The Power of Imagination

Delving into the powerful message relayed by Frank Miraftab during her October 2021 lecture at the Manifesto event (Miraftab, 2022), it becomes increasingly evident how crucial the role of imagination is in shaping our future. Miraftab persuasively prompts us to free our planning imagination and reconsider the boundaries of what we deem possible. According to Miraftab, the future is an inevitable, open, and diverse expanse—it embodies an immense realm of possibilities, which is determined by what we choose to envision. However, she also warns that this openness can lead to vigorous contestation. If we hold back from daring to imagine the unthinkable, we risk stepping into a less open and more predetermined future, eerily echoing the continuance of the present.

Miraftab's critique of colonisation is especially poignant. She points out that our imaginations now represent the final frontier of colonisation, much like how physical territories and populations were once seized and dominated. Consequently, the future emerges as a battleground, where its definition and shape are continuously fought over. Her warnings underline the importance of keeping our imaginations “radically hopeful” as a catalyst for change.

This thought-provoking perspective reinforces the argument that an unrestrained and vibrant imagination is not merely an intellectual indulgence. It is, instead, a vital prerequisite for envisioning and constructing a future that can shake off the constraints and injustices of the present.

Following Miraftab's compelling argument, it is essential to stress that this unbridled imagination is not merely an abstract theoretical pursuit. Rather, it is intrinsically linked to an eth-

ical position that we, as planners and designers, need to adopt within our professional practice. We must recognise our roles as proactive participants within the process of urban development, grounded not just in the technical aspects of our practice but also in a clear set of values. These values aren't external constructs, but rather integral elements woven into our professional identity, shaping our perspectives, and driving our actions. As such, they are situated within a broader humanistic framework, inspired by a deep understanding of and empathy for the diverse range of human experiences that occur within our cities.

Our design and planning choices then become expressions of these values, mirroring our shared commitment to fostering inclusive, equitable, and prosperous urban environments. In this context, our role extends beyond the mere provision of technical or aesthetic solutions. It represents a significant contribution to a collective endeavour, underpinned by our shared belief in the potential for a better urban future.

This, then, is the true power of imagination in our field. As we free ourselves from the constraints of the present and envision futures that are both daring and diverse, we must remain mindful of the ethical compass that guides our practice. The transformative potential of urban planning and design is realised within this dynamic interplay of imaginative vision and ethical commitment. The resulting promise of a future guided by these principles offers a profound reason for optimism.

Within our professional arsenal as planners and designers, we have an array of powerful tools at our disposal - vision-making, visualisations, drawings, films, among other innovative media. These tools serve as our conduits to offer tantalising glimpses into alternative futures aimed at inspiring public enthusiasm and

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support for these forward-thinking concepts. Furthermore, we can devise strategic pathways that navigate the course from our present realities to these envisaged futures, thus framing our role as facilitators of transformative change.

Supplementing these tools, manifestos emerge as potent platforms for expressing these visions. Using compelling and evocative language, we can articulate distinct future scenarios, outlining the transformative steps required for their actualisation. This process can spark a collective desire for a more equitable and just urban future, reinforcing the significance of our work and affirming the transformative power of imagination in urban planning and design.

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