

Spatial justice education in non-democratic planning spaces: A case study of Jordan

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Abstract

Spatial justice education provides urban planners with the necessary tools to employ just and equitable planning practices. However, current spatial justice education does not effectively explore spatial justice applications in non-democratic spaces. For example, when joining the workforce, urban planning graduates in non-democratic spaces are forced to navigate power dynamics, varying interests, and corruption in their everyday professional practices. Generally, sources of unethical planning practices and decision-making create barriers to applying spatial justice tools and theories. This research explores the limitations of spatial justice education in Jordan, where curricula are based on Western concepts and disconnected from the realities of local governance and decision-making.

This study answers two research questions: (1) What are the limitations of current spatial justice education in Jordan? and (2) What coping mechanisms do planners use to navigate non-democratic practices in the planning discipline in Jordan? Semi-structured interviews with educators and practitioners were employed in this study. The findings suggest that current education in Jordan does not adequately prepare urban planning students for the complexities of local power dynamics, nor does it integrate community knowledge necessary for just outcomes. Planners often rely on inefficient coping mechanisms, such as networking, to address power dynamics, while job insecurity and grassroots advocacy remain significant challenges. The study concludes by calling for adaptive spatial justice education that considers diverse sociopolitical contexts, emphasizing the need for local knowledge and broader support systems in urban planning practice.

Keywords

Power dynamics, non-democratic spaces, adaptive spatial justice tools.

1. Introduction

According to the literature, spatial justice education provides urban planners with the necessary tools to employ just and equitable planning practices. However, current spatial justice education does not effectively explore spatial justice applications in non-democratic spaces. For example, when joining the workforce, urban planning graduates in non-democratic spaces are forced to navigate power dynamics, varying interests, and corruption in their everyday professional practices. Generally, sources of various interests within the planning practices and decision-making processes create barriers to applying spatial justice tools and theories.

Taking a better understanding of this challenge, we explore spatial justice education and planning practice in local governments in Jordan. We argue that current spatial justice education in Jordan operates in a metaphorical space that draws from Western conceptions of spatial justice and planning practice without consideration of actual spaces of decision-making. Specifically, the research questions are (1) What are the

limitations of current spatial justice education in Jordan? And (2) What are the coping mechanisms and tools that urban planners seeking spatial justice employ in non-democratic spaces?

1.1. Planning in Jordan

Jordan has witnessed rapid urbanization combined with socio-economic challenges in addition to the political unrest in the surrounding countries. All these factors increased the pressure on the Jordanian limited resources and contributed to the recent planning practices and decisions (Alnsour, 2016; Ababsa, 2018). Urban development and planning initiatives in Jordan are typically carried out using a master planning approach (Okour et al., 2024). However, these master plans have faced criticism for lengthy preparation and approval times, as well as limited engagement with local communities (Abu-Dayyeh, 2004; Beauregard & Marpillero-Colomina, 2011; Meaton & Alnsour, 2012).

Several actions have been taken to reform current urban planning practices in Jordan including a shift toward strategic planning, supporting planning capacities at the municipal levels, and enhancing public participation (Beauregard & Marpillero-Colomina, 2011). Planning reform in Jordan requires a more robust alignment between the scientific research in the planning discipline and the governmental policies and strategies to contextualize sustainable development objectives to address the ongoing challenges facing the Jordanian cities. Thus, decision-makers need to prioritize a research agenda that align and responds efficiently to the urban challenges that face each city across Jordan (Okour et al., 2024).

1.2. Planning Education in Jordan

Several universities in Jordan offer undergraduate and graduate programs in urban planning and related fields, such as architecture. However, these curricula remain largely theoretical, with a predominant emphasis on planning history, urban theories, and technical aspects, often lacking integration of context-specific urban challenges. Additionally, as most of these programs are housed within architecture faculties, they prioritize the physical dimensions of the built environment, with limited focus on the social and economic dynamics that shape communities and lack the interdisciplinary approach needed (Tawil & Beaumer, 2018).

Urban planning education in Jordan is witnessing a notable development in the scope and applications to address national issues such as rapid urbanization, socio-economic challenges, and environmental concerns. However, there is still a gap between the acquired skills in academic programs and those required in the field due to a weak focus on practical, project-based learning and insufficient engagement with local planning authorities and private sector stakeholders (Zeadat & Haddad, 2024).

While many faculty members in Jordan advocate for integrating more critical issues, such as spatial justice, smart cities, and sustainable urban development, in planning education, they face challenges that limit abilities such as limited financial and educational resources, access to training, weak support to the role of researchers in the national decision-making process, and limited opportunities for international collaboration (Tawil & Beaumer, 2018).

Planning curricula in Jordanian universities require serious efforts to develop the learning outcomes to bridge the gap between the academic and the job market requirements, and thus, equip planning program graduates with the necessary knowledge, skills, and competencies needed to participate in the national sustainable development effectively. To achieve this, place-based learning practices and the involvement of local planning authorities and stakeholders in the learning process, especially when designing program learning outcomes, are urgent. Moreover, curricula reform will strengthen the role of academic institutions in shaping national policies and regulations through inter/transdisciplinary approaches that offer new

opportunities for professional development and capacity building to bridge the gap between academia and professional practice (Al-Kodmany & Ali, 2013; Tawil & Beaumer, 2018).

1.3. Study Objectives

The research seeks to bridge the gap between planning education and practice in spatial justice, fostering a more equitable and just spatial planning environment in Jordan. This study aims at:

1. Provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of spatial justice education in non-democratic planning spaces
2. Offer practical solutions to improve spatial justice in Jordan
3. Bridge the gap between education and practice in spatial justice.
4. Advancing spatial justice in non-democratic spaces and ultimately contributing to more inclusive and sustainable urban development in Jordan.

2. Methods

This study investigates the integration of spatial justice education and planning practices within local governments in Jordan. We contend that the current framework of spatial justice education in Jordan operates within a metaphorical space heavily influenced by Western conceptions, often neglecting the contextual realities of local decision-making processes. The research employs semi-structured in-depth interviews as the primary data collection method, engaging two distinct participant groups.

The first group consists of planning educators (N=10) from both public and private universities, who teach within planning or architecture programs. The interview questions aim to assess the existing tools and platforms for spatial justice education, evaluate the extent to which planning curricula incorporate spatial justice concepts, investigate the effectiveness of course content in addressing spatial justice issues, and identify the strategies educators employ to teach these concepts, alongside the challenges they encounter in integrating spatial justice into their pedagogical objectives.

The second group includes practicing professionals (N=11) who hold degrees in urban planning, allowing for an exploration of how they define and interpret spatial justice in their professional practice. This group's interviews focus on the challenges faced when implementing planning interventions for marginalized communities, the practical solutions adopted to overcome these challenges, and the role of community engagement in addressing spatial justice issues.

3. Findings and Discussion

Spatial Justice is perceived through 3 main lenses: physical built environment, social context, and urban governance and management. While each lens discusses spatial justice from a different angle, they all address the impact of urban practices and policies on shaping people's spatial experiences.

3.1. Physical spatial justice

The spatial justice concept refers to the equitable distribution of resources, services, and opportunities among different spatial and social landscapes particularly to disadvantaged populations (Soja, 2010). Literature on public open spaces pointed at the unequal distribution of public open spaces across different social contexts which indicates a sign of inequality (Jian et. al, 2020).

Physical spatial justice discussed by the participants focused on how urban planning practices ensure fair distribution of housing, transportation networks, health facilities, educational institutions, employment, and public spaces concerning the physical structure, layout, and systems of the built environment. Both participant groups argued that the inequitable distribution of these resources would create social segregation and increase social tension. Educators mentioned that class discussions always highlighted the importance of addressing accessibility considerations of different population groups with different abilities regardless of their economic status. Just cities must be walkable and provide easy access to all residents to city public services and amenities. They stated that class discussions included a debate on how to define a “disadvantaged population” regarding physical spatial justice. According to them, physical spatial justice can be perceived from the perspective of physical disabilities, age, and gender. Literature on social justice indicates that vulnerable groups feel unwelcome due to accessibility constraints (Low & Iveson, 2016; Wendel, Zarger, & Mihelcic, 2012). Thus, avoid visiting these locations and look for other alternatives (Rigolon, Browning, & Jennings, 2018; Xiao, Lu, Guo, & Yuan, 2017).

On the other hand, while some practitioners and decision-makers have relatively similar perceptions of accessibility, others noted that planning practices in Jordan focus more on the actual accessibility definition regardless of the social dimension. They noted that planning laws, zoning, and land use regulations, transportation services, and housing policies mainly consider the national growth planning strategies and the governmental financial allocation for these types of developments. Governmental efforts, due to limited financial capacities and rapid urbanization, prioritize improving access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and public infrastructure such as water supply, sanitation, electricity, and transportation. The Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) project in Amman, for instance, is a regional transit project that presents a shift in the transportation practices in Jordan. The project aligns with the national strategic plan, Vision 2025, that focuses on promoting environmentally friendly transportation modes, supporting economic growth through transit-oriented districts along the bus corridor, and improving access to services and opportunities through affordable mobility.

3.2. Social spatial justice

According to Morani, 2020, social justice issues come to the surface when a specific power structure requires justification (Morani, 2020). This lens investigates how social factors influence the distribution of resources and how spaces are used and experienced by different social groups. According to the participants, this lens is the most complicated and least defined one. Social variables are intangible and, in many cases, hard to measure. Under this lens, several key issues were highlighted by the participants including power and control over urban space, spatial segregation and marginalization, resource inequity, limited public participation, gentrification, and security and surveillance.

Both participant groups pointed at the top-down political structure in Jordan and the centralized governance system as the main reasons to limit public participation and transparency and favor the need for higher income and more powerful population groups. Accordingly, service distribution and the quality of service significantly varies among neighborhoods. The unequal distribution of these services leads to spatial segregation. Planning decisions, zoning laws, and housing policies contribute to this spatial segregation (Talen, 2012; Denton, 2000). While many decision-makers avoided admitting that current planning policies created notable segregation between urban and rural communities, between one city to another, and even between communities within the same city, other participants highlighted this segregation and related it to the political economy of urban development. They noted that powerful actors such as real estate developers, investors, and political elite can orient spatial policies to prioritize economic development over spatial and social justice.

Several participants pointed to the AL-Abdali Boulevard project as an example of how current planning regulations in Amman created a semi-private district that limits access to population groups, even in a non-direct way. While the goal of this project was to create a high-end development in the heart of the city to modernize planning practices in Jordan (Sharaf, et. al, 2023), the project took over a significant part of the old downtown and replaced it with high-value luxury apartments, hotels, and retail stores. According to one educator who took Al-Abdali as a study area in one of her planning classes, this project favored attracting foreign investments over keeping the city's identity or providing more affordable public spaces. Many residents had to leave the neighborhood since they felt unwelcome and/or unable to keep up with the new lifestyle. She noted that while many students discussed this project as an enhancement of the physical built environment, other students highlighted how physical design decisions can contribute to social segregation and foster spatial injustice. Moreover, the Al-Abdali Boulevard project is also an example of how powerful economic players orient planning priorities to favor economic development objectives over spatial justice and inclusive design and urban expansion over disparities across communities.

3.3. Urban governance and management of social spaces

Urban governance structure in spatial planning draws the role of institutions, policies, and decision-making processes in ensuring equitable distribution of resources, services, and opportunities among various communities. This structure includes public and private institutions, civil society, and the laws and regulations that participate in managing urban spaces and resources. Both participant groups discussed the multi-level governing system that requires collaboration between local and national governments to formulate just urban policies that address the complexities of spatial issues and to ensure the success of implementing these policies.

Participants also discussed that to achieve spatial justice, a participatory planning approach should be enacted to ensure that marginalized groups have a voice in shaping their spatial experiences. Educators discussed some of their experiences working with the local communities of the study areas covered in their classes. They argued that involving local representatives in designing the development vision helped the students to propose design guidelines and solutions that were more welcomed by the local community. Moreover, local representatives noted that they were more willing to share their experiences and expectations with the students than with governmental representatives.

Practitioners and decision-makers highlighted some of the challenges that might hinder the efforts of implementing spatial justice in a non-democratic planning context. Adopting a participatory governance and management approach may face power imbalances, limited resources, weak institutional capacities, a lack of political will, and limited trust between citizens and the government. They noted that even in democratic or non-democratic contexts, power dynamics and political economies play a critical role in shaping the way that governments implement spatial justice. They added that identifying "marginalized" groups and development "objectives" when discussing spatial policies and actions are linked, in most cases, to the national economic growth priorities, international development agendas, and funding international organization scope of work. Accordingly, suggests developing a new governance approach that can be adopted at multiple levels including individuals, communities, institutions, as well as new groups of actors and practices (Jansson et. al, 2020).

Achieving spatial justice in a non-democratic planning context requires urban planners to adopt a holistic approach to adequately navigate the multi-dimensional aspects of the concept, political and economic power dynamics, and complicated political interests. The adaptive approach must emphasize participatory urban policy development, promote equity-focused planning laws, and target balanced growth and social inclusivity (Alnsour, 2016).

3.4. Integrating spatial justice in planning education and practice

The findings suggest that current spatial justice education in Jordan does not incorporate diverse levels of learning beyond academia and the importance of cumulative local community knowledge to achieve spatial justice. The findings also highlight that students are not equipped with the necessary tools and skills to address power dynamics in urban planning decision-making. Moreover, coping mechanisms employed by urban planners are not efficient in addressing the multi-dimensionality and political conflicts in planning practices. Specifically, job insecurity associated with challenging power dynamics and advocating for and empowering grassroots movements are key barriers. The main coping mechanism identified is networking within and outside the spaces of planning practice and maintaining broader support systems.

Integrating spatial justice into planning education and practice requires addressing the interconnected relationships between equity, access, and social inclusion into the planning curricula and the professional settings. Several actions can take place including curricula reform to create an interactive learning environments, facilitate designing with the community workshops to localize planning solutions, implement public engagement platforms to enhance participatory approach, and building institutional partnerships to foster interdisciplinary collaboration.

Advancing spatial justice in Jordan requires enhancing urban planning education through a comprehensive place-based framework that addresses the unique socio-economic and political dynamics of the Jordanian context, promotes collaboration among different disciplines, and empowers future planners and building their capacities to equip them with required knowledge, skills, and competencies to navigate power dynamics. This can be achieved through integrating local community knowledge and sociopolitical realities into planning curricula, reforming the urban governing system, and supporting innovation in planning practices. Some challenges may hinder efforts to promote special justice including institutional barriers, social and cultural factors, economic constraints, and political dynamics.

4. Conclusion

In general, this study highlights the limitations of current spatial justice education in nondemocratic planning spaces and calls for adopting adaptive spatial justice teaching and learning practices that consolidate broader sociopolitical contexts. The findings of this paper underscore the urgent need for an integrated practical approach to spatial justice integration in Jordan. Curricula reform, incorporating community knowledge, equipping future planners with the necessary knowledge, skills, and competencies to address and navigate power dynamics, and providing robust support systems for urban planners, we can move toward more ethical and just planning practices. Empowering both planners and communities to advocate for equitable spatial arrangements is essential for achieving long-term sustainability and justice in urban development.

Future research should investigate different adaptive pedagogical approaches to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching methodologies tailored to spatial justice education in nondemocratic planning contexts. Analyzing the learning outcomes of these methods will provide educators with toolkits and insights into best practices for spatial justice education. Future research should also investigate the multidimensional relations between governmental policies, educational institutions, community knowledge, and urban development agenda to examine the broader sociopolitical factors that influence the integration of spatial justice principles into urban planning education. Future research will also aim at developing a framework for curriculum reform that aligns spatial justice and addresses the limitations and challenges within nondemocratic planning environments to propose strategies to overcome resistance.

5. References

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