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Spatial justice and the NIMBY effect: An analysis of the urban densification debate in Switzerland and the Netherlands.

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Abstract:

This paper analyzes public debates around land use and densification in Switzerland and the Netherlands to understand how private and public interests are related in the context of urban growth. The paper is based on the hypothesis that, while there is consensus on the desirability of densification, its implementation can lead to tensions on a local level. Therefore, the acceptance of densification is considered essential for successful implementation. We report on quantitative and qualitative discourse analysis covering public media outlets between 2010 and 2019. During this period, both countries implemented policies to limit land take and promote densification. Focusing on indicators of spatial equity, we examined the debates in terms of distributive and procedural dimensions of justice. The results show that, in both countries, the debate revolves primarily around private interests related to ownership, property value, and character of place. Moreover, this set of arguments often relates to conflicting social values such as perceived restrictions on freedom of choice, fear of increasing social division, and lack of communality.

Keywords: Densification; Discourse Analysis; Spatial Justice; Urban Design and Planning

1. Introduction

Densification is a policy objective in itself and part of broader urbanization strategies like the Compact City (European Commission, 2011), Green Growth (OECD, 2012), or New Urbanism (Dierwechter, 2014; Westerink et al., 2013). Advantages and disadvantages of densification (Barresi, 2018; Cerin et al., 2020; Claassens, Koomen, & Rouwendal, 2020) and its potential to absorb population growth (Amer, Mustafa, Teller, Attia, & Reiter, 2017; Nabilek, Boschman, Harbers, Piek, & Vlonk, 2012) have been extensively studied. Less attention has been directed towards related perceptions of tensions between private and public interests (Honey-Rosés & Zapata, 2020). Whereas there often is broad support for protecting green space, providing needed housing, supporting urban services, and promoting more sustainable lifestyles, implementations of densification nevertheless often face opposition. Such resistance may lead to NIMBYism (for “not in my back yard”) and underscores tensions between public and private interests.

This paper addresses such tensions between private and public interests in public discourse on densification in Switzerland and the Netherlands. This discourse reflects both

substantive and procedural concerns and influences the extent to which the spatial distribution of benefits and burdens is perceived as equitable and whether individuals and communities consider themselves represented. More than a purely local issue affecting just a few, the debate shapes how spatial developments contribute to shared values (Campbell, 2006). This paper aims to understand better the connection between private and public spatial justice interests.

2. Theories and Methods

2.1 Values and public and private interests

Even when values, such as ontological security, autonomy, well-being, inclusiveness, sustainability, social stability/order, and market efficiency (Elsinga, Hoekstra, Sedighi, and Taebi, 2020), are shared, they can be incommensurable (Dignum, Correljé, Cuppen, Pesch, & Taebi, 2016). Value conflicts primarily surface when inherent values are translated into operational values, norms, and principles.

On the other hand, interests reflect a person's or group's stake, such as their welfare or gains and losses. Importantly, conflicting interests may be rooted in the same value sets. Consequently, our analysis of public discourse about urban development and the local implementation of densification focuses on expressed interests rather than the underlying values.

We distinguish between private and public interests. The former may be an individual's, a household's, or a bounded community's. Regarding public interests, we follow Campbell and Marshall (2002), who distinguish the following conceptions: the sum of private interests, a collective value that extends beyond the sum of private interests, the upholding of rights awarded to individuals, or the outcome of a process of deliberation and procedural rules. As a policy focused on the societal advantages of compact urban development (Dierwechter, 2014), densification reflects collective values beyond the sum of private ones, which may complement a procedural conception, e.g., planning law. Yet, public discourse may also express utilitarian views, and publicly stated opinions may differ from policymakers' or planners'. Moreover, even if there is broad agreement on public interests surpassing the sum of private interests, some may be more adversely impacted than others. Therefore, we investigated how private and public interests are expressed and how they interact.

2.2 Spatial justice

Fainstein (2010) names equity, democracy, and diversity as integral parts of the just city. Such social justice extends beyond the distributive issue of 'who gets what' (Moroni, 2020) and includes values related to how decisions are made and whether individuals' needs are recognized (Fainstein, 2010; Fraser, 1995; Young, 1990). Even though just procedures do not guarantee just outcomes (Fraser, 1995; Jonkman, 2021), distributive justice is only necessary, not sufficient for social justice (Marcuse, 2009).

Next to substantive questions regarding the immediate impact of urbanization processes, policy implementations have to balance public and private interests and address the localized effects. Madanipour, Shucksmith, and Brooks (2021, p. 6) regard spatial justice accordingly as a "struggle towards equity in social space, a search for a just process that aims at a just outcome, in a combination of the distributive and procedural aspects of social justice."

2.3 Methods

To investigate public and private interests and urban densification's social, economic, and environmental issues, we employ quantitative conceptual and relational content analysis of the public discourse in Switzerland and the Netherlands from 2009 to 2019. Two country-specific datasets of newspaper articles were compiled using a selection of 18 national and larger regional and local newspapers from public news databases (LexisNexis (NL) and Swissdox (CH)).

The two datasets were analyzed using a standardized bilingual coding list of 24 German and Dutch search terms. We chose analysis categories based on the model of values and norms in the field of housing suggested by Elsinga et al. (2020). For this paper, we focus on 9 codes (Table 1) that relate to both substantive (e.g., affordability) and

procedural dimensions of spatial justice (e.g., public support/protest, identity). To increase analysis precision, each code was defined by multiple terms and synonyms.

Atlas.TI was used for an analysis of the selected years 2010, 2015, and 2019 in two rounds of coding: firstly categories were quantified by automated coding, and secondly positions and arguments were manually analyzed. Changes in frequency and relative importance were determined through a longitudinal approach. As initial level of analysis, we searched for keywords within a sentence or related paragraph. Subsequently, the identified categories were analyzed for proximity of related concepts referring to societal values.

Table 1. Frequency table of auto-coding results for 2010, 2015, and 2019 in Switzerland and the Netherlands

	Switzerland			The Netherlands		
	2010	2015	2019	2010	2015	2019
Number of articles	59	117	111	28	10	97
Justice (distr.)	5	10	5	4	1	2
Affordability	18	17	19	2	4	37
Market	23	16	25	3	2	20
Costs	15	8	40	9	1	23
Spatial Quality	47	53	19	5	3	12
Community/ Social Cohesion	9	8	28	5	3	24
Public Support/ Protest	3	31	14	13	1	21
Identity	13	21	59	7	1	10
Freedom/ Independence	4	8	10	1	0	0

3. Results

3.1 Frequency of addressing issues

3.1.1 Switzerland

In Switzerland, the public debate on densification correlates with public referendums that ultimately determine legislature. Before a referendum, interest groups bring issues to the focus of the deliberation. For instance, the “Landschaftsinitiative” (literally translated as “landscape initiative”) in 2009 triggered a debate on densification. The referendum was accepted by public vote in 2013 and came into effect in 2014, tightening the regional planning act, “Raumplanungsgesetz” (RPG).

After 2014, the debate turned towards the law’s implementation on the level of federal states and municipalities, addressing densification strategies through communal zoning and land-use plans. From 2015 on, the debate has focused on local effects of built examples and extensive areal developments. The discussion continued on a more general level following a second public referendum initiative, “Zersiedlungsinitiative” (“Sprawl Initiative”), started in 2016 and rejected by the public in 2019.

The topic’s presence in the political agenda likely contributed to the articles addressing densification doubling in number from 2010 to 2015. It remained stable until 2019 (Table 1). Auto-coding results show that identity issues have been addressed most frequently and have further increased over time; similarly, cost-related matters. In contrast, spatial quality was highly present in 2010 and 2015. In 2019, it was discussed less, as were justice and public support/protest. The frequency of community/social cohesion, affordability, and market did not change significantly.

3.1.2 The Netherlands

For the Netherlands, the overall number of articles increased sharply in 2019 (Table 1). The fact that almost all topics have been addressed more frequently can be interpreted as response to the economic crisis of 2008 and its impact on the Netherlands’ housing market and urban development. Plans were stalled and canceled around 2010, and densification was less of an issue. After 2015, however, the housing market recovered again, and housing prices and the pressure for development increased rapidly. The data also indicate a shift towards urban densification. Compared to 2010, less housing has been developed on green-field locations (Nieland, Meijer, Jonkman, & Hartmann, 2019). This trend is the

result of the VINEX-program of large-scale urban extensions ending. In addition, the Ladder for Sustainable Urban Development policy requiring municipalities and provinces to prioritize inner-urban development.

More frequent references to affordability, market, and costs (Table 1) reflect the rapidly increased market pressure and concerns about housing prices. Cities increasingly struggle to secure affordability. Community/social cohesion was found more frequently in 2019, reflecting concerns about the effects of affordability and market developments. In contrast, in relative terms, public support/protest and identity were more frequent in 2010, addressing non-distributive issues related to the process of urban change.

3.2 Public and private interests

3.2.1 Switzerland

A primary concern of public debate in Switzerland is on identity-related topics, for which there are two distinct sets of arguments. Most arguments focus on private-interest concerns regarding changes in local identity, e.g., the shift from rural to urban lifestyles. The second set comprises arguments of cultural heritage protection as public interest. It reflects an inherent conflict between preservation and sustainable development, stating that conservation often prevents densification and hinders the protection of landscapes and ecosystems (2019: 7 sources).

The topics costs and market rank second in terms of quantity of citations. Similar to the topic identity, views on costs are inward-looking. They articulate the residents' fear of rising housing costs causing gentrification. In 2019 the most cited argument was the critique that municipalities and developers used densification projects to attract good taxpayers as new residents (8 sources).

Market-related arguments link the issue of gentrification to a mismatch between need and demand. Most of the arguments relate to private interests, e.g., finding suitable housing despite the increasing shortage in metropolitan areas of affordable options for middle-income groups. Criticism that speculation rather than environmental concerns is driving densification is part of this chain of arguments (2015: 5 sources). Similar to the cost debate (8 sources), the call for municipalities to intervene to prevent higher prices addresses, in effect, public interests.

Loss of social cohesion is also a prominent concern. The number of sources addressing community/social cohesion is in the midfield but gains importance as the debate progresses. The predominant argument against inner-densification projects is the fear of gentrification effects and the loss of social diversity (2019: 28 sources). Both reflect private interests. However, when politicians target the middle-income strata, they address social cohesion as a public value. Social cohesion is particularly important in Switzerland because the promotion of national cohesion is enshrined in the constitution (Federal Constitution, Art. 2). It is also perceived as an essential aspect of economic prosperity and sustainable development. From 2010 and 2015, a relatively low number of quotes suggest public-interests arguments calling for strengthening social cohesion in densification projects, such as a diverse social mix, citizen participation, and new forms of community housing and public infrastructure. The transformation of arguments from private to public interest is particularly present, for example, when it is claimed that the new zoning law will not only affect inner-city areas but will also make suburban living too expensive for the middle class.

The call for public interventions to ensure affordability appeals also to the public interest. In 2010, this argument led the debate, demanding additional policies or mechanisms against speculation (5 sources). In 2015, the debate focused on the potential impact of downtown densification on the housing market. This shifted in 2019 to more precise observations. In 2019, for example, three articles noted that high-rise buildings were not suitable for affordable housing due to their high construction and maintenance costs (2019: 3 sources).

In contrast, topics of justice and public support/protest do not register significantly. One reason could be the Swiss right of appeal for construction projects, a mechanism that may require a project to be adjusted before the building permit is granted. In 2010 and 2015,

concerns focused on the anticipated surge in appeals and compensation claims that would result in delays and increasing development costs. In 2019, however, concerns shifted toward the unequal distribution of burdens from densification projects at the local level. Arguments on public support/protest relate to private interest and do not touch on public concerns. In 2015, however, the number of quotes increased due to a conflict about a public referendum in the city of Kriens. The 2019 quotes, finally, reflect homeowners' opposition to high-rise buildings with arguments associated with NIMBYism.

3.2.2 The Netherlands

The primary concern in regard to densification's distributive effects is the potential impact on segregation (4 sources). It is argued that urban expansion has favored suburbanization and enhanced the segregation between urban and suburban dwellers. In contrast, densification is thought to result in fewer socio-spatial divisions and more social cohesion. In 2019, however, also high-rise developments were criticized for their distributive effects. According to architect Sjoerd Soeters, high-rise buildings are exclusive and expensive and not suited for families.

Also regarding affordability, densification is described both as a solution (8 sources) and a problem (5 sources). It can be part of a strategy to add much-needed housing and provide suitable housing opportunities for the young and elderly. Densification and large-scale redevelopment projects are feared, however, to displace low-rise social housing, e.g. in Amsterdam and Eindhoven. Residents expect they cannot afford to return once their neighborhood has been redeveloped. They highly appreciate the present sense of community and their neighborhoods' quiet spaces within the buzzing city.

Between 2010 and 2019, market conditions changed significantly. The pressure for new construction has increased, but municipalities' requirements to include high fractions of social and middle-income housing reduced new developments' financial lucrativeness. It is questioned whether high-rise, with high construction and service costs, provides the needed affordable housing. Similarly, the longevity of demand for high-density living environments is challenged. Because of the urgent housing crisis, pressure to use green fields for development is expected to increase.

Since 2010, a recurrent point of discussion has been whether urban expansion or densification is cheaper (11 sources). This depends on the extent to which commentators consider costs related to new infrastructure (e.g., public transport) and externalities (e.g., traffic jams) and on the type and scale of the development.

Next to large-scale green-field developments' effect on segregation, commentators stress their impact on the sense of belonging and social cohesion in suburban city districts (3 sources). As part of densification strategies, diversification of neighborhoods is seen as a suitable strategy to strengthen social sustainability. However, residents in low-rise neighborhoods who fear large-scale redevelopment expect densification processes to diminish social cohesion (5 sources).

Whereas for cities like Eindhoven and Rotterdam, new developments are seen as adding new layers to the city, several articles critically assess how densification projects blend in with the existing city. In particular, large projects (e.g., Sluisbuurt in Amsterdam and Eindhoven city-center) provoke opposition for the sharp contrast they provide vis-a-vis the existing city. So, the question is how to reconcile the new with the old.

Many projects face opposition from residents who resist change in general or disapprove of particular elements like size, scale, or height, or expected effects on parking or other services (e.g., public, green space). Often, local opponents stress that they are not against densification per se but that they do not think the location is well chosen. Sometimes they explicitly distance themselves from NIMBYism and claim rational arguments for their opposition.

In contrast, urban professionals support densification passionately. They are much less unanimous, however, about the desirability of high-rise buildings. Some take a principled stance, whether in favor or against. Others see high-rise developments as a possible strategy, but only if implemented with care. Several professionals stress that high densities can be achieved without high-rise buildings and that high densities can be

realized while still providing sufficient high-quality public spaces. Politicians, e.g., mayors and council members, seem to struggle to connect the desirability of densification in terms of public interests and residents' concerns and their affected private interests.

4. Discussion

The empirical analysis of public debates in Switzerland and the Netherlands shows remarkable similarities. In Switzerland, building projects' legitimacy is based on a system of planning that leaves extraordinary decision-making power to the municipalities while providing processes through which citizens may intervene. When public referendum initiatives are discussed, the debate shifts to public interests and involves many stakeholders. This results in a lively public debate of densification and a variety of arguments. In contrast, while the Netherlands' governance system is also increasingly decentralized, there are fewer participatory processes, and planning discussions are more confined to professionals. The new law to prioritize inner-urban development, for example, was hardly mentioned in public discourse.

Our findings show that the debate focuses in both countries on private interests, e.g., protection of ownership, private autonomy, and identity. In contrast, arguments that address public interests and communal values are less well represented. For example, with rising costs and inefficient market strategies being the target of the debate, densification is seen in Switzerland increasingly as a threat to social cohesion, especially by middle-income groups. In the Netherlands, the discussion is more on what type of development is suitable and whether high-rise projects can provide affordable housing for inclusive communities.

Most arguments take an inside perspective, referring to current residents' perception of densification as an unwanted agent of change. NIMBYism dominates the debate. Outsiders' views or potential benefits of change are rarely addressed. For instance, public interests are not well represented compared to statements about loss or prices and costs. There is only a minimal acknowledgment of public interests that would demand political intervention, such as measures for affordable housing or greater distributive justice. Accounts on public interests are mostly limited to abstract discussions on the advantages and disadvantages (e.g., saving green space, support for public transport).

Private and public interests are primarily discussed separately and by different groups. Public interests are frequently more abstract and often not addressed by residents who focus on changing their immediate environment. Accounts of concrete plans and projects are, on the other hand, focused on the impact on the residents here and now. In these accounts, deliberation of the potential for 'outsiders' and benefits concerning public interests only plays a secondary role. Thus, there is a disconnect between private interests and non-distributive dimensions of justice, including recognition and diversity, on the one side, and public interests and the insider/outsider problems. Both discourses are incomplete and miss essential elements for a thorough and fair "situated ethical judgment" (Campbell, 2006).

5. Conclusions

This study aimed to understand how private and public interests regarding urban growth interrelate in view of spatial justice. The results have shown a disconnect between private and public interests in the public discourse on densification. The fact that decisions may result from systematically incomplete deliberations presents a challenge to fair negotiations and may be detrimental to spatial justice.

The process of public debate may be improved, firstly, by increased engagement of professionals discussing concrete plans and projects and, secondly, through concretization or spatialization of more abstract policy discussions. Such stronger connections of private and public interests by making conceptual considerations more tangible and linking concrete discussions to a broader perspective could facilitate situated ethical judgments. Spatial justice cannot be assessed without connecting private and public interests and situating policies.

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