NORMS AND THE CITY

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Abstract

Conformity is the tendency to modify one's behaviour to match the behaviour of others. Lisciandra et al. (2013) introduced the concept of *conformorality* to refer to the susceptibility of moral judgements to conformity. While it is often suggested that conformorality is generally bad, recent interdisciplinary work indicates that conformorality can also promote epistemically and morally positive outcomes under certain conditions. In the literature, little attention has been paid to the geometry of urban spaces. Here we combine results from the philosophy and psychology of conformity with general insights from urban studies to distinguish three ways in which the geometry of urban spaces might relate to conformorality, namely: urban spaces can exemplify, afford, or constitute conformorality. This paper's analysis contributes a more nuanced understanding of the different faces of conformorality, as well as their bearing on urban planning and city living.

Keywords

Conformity, Conformorality, Social norms, Urban spaces, Utopias, Affordances, Hostile architecture

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1. Introduction

Conformity is the tendency of changing one's behaviour, emotions, or ideas to align with the responses of others. It is a widespread social phenomenon governed by increasingly well-understood biological, psychological, social, and environmental causal factors (see, amongst others, Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004; Bicchieri, 2005; Sripada and Stich, 2006; Morgan and Laland 2012; Brennan et al. 2013; Colombo, 2014; Lisciandra, 2023). Everyday examples of conformity with relatively unimportant consequences include fashions and dress codes (Workman and Freeburg, 2000), clapping and standing ovations (Muldoon et al., 2014), queuing, and tipping (Colombo, Stankevicius, and Seriès 2014; Elster, 2009). But conformity can also have more dramatic effects - for instance, on the spread of (mis)information, (un)healthy behaviour, and criminality (Krause et al., 2021).

Examining whether certain types of normative judgements are less prone to conformity than others, Lisciandra, Postma-Nilsenová, and Colombo (2013) introduced the concept of *conformorality* to refer to the human tendency to conform to other people's moral judgements. Lisciandra et al. (2013) defined moral judgements as those normative judgements that concern behaviours such as killing, stealing, cheating, and exploiting, whose seriousness is not conditional on specific times and places, the authority of an individual, and what other people do. Probing the scope and robustness of conformorality through two experiments, Lisciandra and collaborators found that all normative judgements, including moral judgements, are subject to some degree of conformity, and so especially in situations with a high degree of social presence.

This finding might be taken to indicate that conformorality always leads to unreliable or false moral judgements (Chituc and Sinnott-Armstrong, 2020). After all, while conformity is an important strategy for social learning - that is, for learning based on the observation of, or interaction with other individuals (Kendal et al., 2018) - moral conformity is often characterised in terms of "sheep or herd mentality", suggesting that moral judgements and behaviours that are formed because of others' influence are devoid of value (see, for example Kant, 1758/1959, p. 404).

Conformorality might be taken to have negative epistemic consequences too, as it might trigger informational cascades, such as epistemic bubbles and echo chambers (Nguyen, 2020), which foreground information that gets shared by a majority of people regardless of its limited epistemic value. Such informational cascades can result in increased intellectual arrogance, and misplaced trust in gurus and influencers who lack genuine (moral) expertise (Sperber, 2010).

The blanket conclusion that conformorality is epistemically and morally bad is, however, too blunt. The improvement of knowledge and moral progress require some degree of autonomy, as well as some degree of conformity (for a review of the beneficial effects of conformity, see Doris and Nichols, 2012). Recent literature indicates that whether, and how quickly, conformity can limit (or boost) knowledge depends on several factors, such as: who can communicate or interact with whom, who has social influence on whom, and how demographically or psychologically diverse a community is (see, amongst others, Weatherall and O'Connor, 2021; Fazelpour and Steel, 2022).

Similar insights about the multifarious roles of conformorality can be gained from theoretical and philosophical work on the city focused on the geometry of urban spaces. Cities, and the built environment more generally, have many geometric features which can afford specific behaviours or thoughts to their dwellers, such as physically constraining who can interact with whom, as well as with regards to when, where, and for what purpose. Such affordances and physical constraints can, in turn, promote or limit conformorality, and thus, the well-being and thriving of the members of different social groups.

Urban planners and philosophers have long thought about how to design good cities (Lynch, 1981; Batty and Longley, 1994). They have sometimes suggested that promoting conformorality can reinforce the wellness of society, while the shape, size, and other geometrical features of a city might reflect adherence to a specific social or political order. Intriguing as they are, these suggestions have not received significant attention in contemporary debates concerning the intersection of philosophy and urban studies.

Here, we contribute to filling this gap by distinguishing three ways in which the geometry of a city and conformorality might relate to each other, namely: urban geometry can *exemplify*, *afford*, or *constitute* conformorality. After illustrating these three types of relationships, and working out some of their moral and epistemic consequences, we conclude that conformorality has both positive and negative facets that play out differently in different environments and with different dwellers. Urban planners, especially those engaged in concrete policy making, should be sensitive to different shades of conformorality, and their subtle but complex relationships with the geometry of urban spaces.

2. Exemplifying conformorality

Cities can *exemplify* conformorality by embodying some desired moral, as well as social and political order. In this sense, cities themselves exemplify compliance with normative principles by being designed in a way that reflects such principles. This is the first relation between conformorality and urban geometry that we want to discuss. This relation focuses, at the highest level of generality and at multiple spatial and temporal scales, on the causal vector going from a political ideal to concrete urban planning to dwellers' moral behaviour. The key idea is that "cities have made and remade themselves in the image of political philosophies" (Hall 1998, p.6), often with the ideal aim of shaping and reshaping dwellers' moral agency to align with those philosophies.

Based on different views of what a morally ordered polity should be like, city plans can take different geometrical forms - for example, a grid, a circle, a star, or an irregular form. In turn, the form of a city exemplifying the ideal moral order can motivate dwellers to internalise certain norms, which may further sustain and reinforce the desired political philosophy.

Many illustrations of how the specific geometric features of a city can exemplify conformorality show up in utopias (Meyerson, 1961; Słodczyk, 2016; Baldacchino, 2018). For example, in the fourth century BC, Plato provided us with detailed descriptions of various utopian cities, including Kallipolis described in *The Republic*, Atlantis in the *Timaeus* and *Critias*, and Magnesia in the *Laws*. While the city of Atlantis is circular in shape with a concentric design built around three island rings, Kallipolis and Magnesia are politically ideal cities that have a rectilinear form with a regular grid pattern (Golding, 1975). Kallipolis and Magnesia are ideally just, self-sufficient, city-states, designed to enhance their dwellers' happiness and virtue. They were socially and physically structured to reflect a harmonic order geared towards the attainment of the good. Their parts, like the parts of the soul in distinct parts of one's body, were arranged in fitting relationships to each other and to the whole. Kallipolis included three social classes: a large working class of farmers and craftspeople, an educated military class, and an elite of philosophers ruling the city. In contrast, Magnesia, included four classes based on the wealth of each of its 5,040 households. Unlike Kallipolis, Magnesia allowed for private property, and political power was a less extreme blend of democratic and authoritarian elements.

Geometrical form is meant to embody and sustain the political and social order of the city. Kallipolis and Magnesia had grid-like geometries designed to prevent social change, and enable the internalisation and enforcement of strict norms regulating many aspects of people's lives. For instance, by constraining the size of the city, geometrical features may impose limitations on the size of a population, as well as on the population density of its different parts. Similarly, physical boundaries can identify the types of occupation that are carried out by different classes of people. Social change should be avoided, as it would generate a misalignment between dwellers' internalised norms and the social structure of the ideally just polity. In cities exemplifying a higher moral order, dwellers would at the same time experience conformorality as the tendency to jointly align to such higher order. This would be perceived as a pleasant kind of virtuous behaviour, which would produce happiness and social justice.

Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) also provides us with a detailed account of a grid-shaped collection of fifty-four cities on an island, each having six thousand residents. All cities in Utopia have the same spatial layout. Each city is standardised, divided into uniform, square neighbourhoods with identical, three-storied buildings made of bricks with common gardens. As in Kallipolis and Magnesia, strict norms govern all aspects of people's lives, from what they can wear and eat, to how long they can sleep and work. Similar to Kallipolis and Magnesia, geometrical forms in Utopia exemplify compliance with normative ideals which, in turn, seek to enhance people's happiness.

In these and other utopias, straight lines and the grid concretely exemplify a rational order. In Le Corbusier's (1924/1947, p. 28) words, the grid and the straight line constitute the "man's way" in contrast to the "pack-donkey's way". The straight line represents dwellers' dominance of their feelings through reason. The pack donkey's way, the curve, is "ruinous, difficult and dangerous; it is a paralysing thing."

The built space described in utopias would contribute to establishing and spreading unambiguous expectations about what specific people should or should not do in specific contexts; and it would also stimulate the alignment between private acceptance of social norms and public compliance. As a result, conformorality would not be motivated by a desire to be liked by others or avoid punishment. Instead, the motivation to conform would be adherence to the social, political, and economic order that geometrical features are meant to foster.

In urban exemplifications of conformorality, the geometry of the city is set from the top-down. Some individual or group with relevant epistemic, moral, or political authority imposes on the rest of the community a unified plan for how to structure urban spaces in line with a general view of good society. The motivation for this type of planning is that the way the environment is built is not only a reflection of aesthetic or functional criteria but is also directly informed by the intention to shape people's morals via their use and experience of the geometries of their surroundings.

This species of conformorality dovetails with totalitarian polity. It will likely have negative epistemic consequences too, as it favours the emergence of *epistemic bubbles* and *echo chambers*, which consist of informational networks from which outside voices are purposely excluded or mistrusted (Nguyen, 2020). The advancement of knowledge requires conformity, as we are dependent on each other in every domain of knowledge; but it also requires some degree of autonomy, as well as a degree of diversity with regards to outlooks and opinions. If the degree of diversity of citizens' opinions on both moral and non-moral issues is very limited, and if citizens' opinions, - particularly their moral opinions - are dependent on the opinions of a small number of other people in their community, then conformorality may bring about widespread ignorance in places such as Kallipolis, Magnesia, and Utopia.

It will take anti-conformist mavericks to lay bare ways of social living foreclosed by the urban spaces embodying conformorality. Over time, the strength of the motivational power of urban spaces embodying conformorality will weaken, as an increasing number of dwellers conform to the ideal social order solely because of fear of punishment. As a result, private acceptance and public conformity will lessen.

Perhaps sensitive to the negative epistemic consequences of a totalitarian polity embodying conformorality, Tommaso Campanella (1602/1990) describes a utopian city with seven concentric walls that are painted with images and inscriptions of an encyclopaedia of universal knowledge from which its dwellers may learn; thereby avoiding a state of ignorance.

Written in 1602, Campanella's *City of the Sun* represents an urban instantiation of the perfect order of the cosmos. Founded on a hill, this city is arranged along seven concentric walls which represent seven planets, with the city accessible via four gates, each one facing a differing compass direction, that led to four streets that provided communication between the seven rings. The circular plan represents the relationship between centralised power and the cosmos, even though, and similar to other utopias, the city of the Sun has a salient communist organisation with many norms that govern most aspects of social living, including education and demographic dynamics.

In summary, at the most general scale, the geometry of a city can exemplify conformorality to some higher normative ideal. Cities exemplifying conformorality are often associated with totalitarian societies, where dwellers' descriptive and normative expectations, as well as their private and public behaviour, are perfectly aligned, but in which epistemic bubbles and echo chambers are also likely to emerge.

3. Affording conformorality

Cities can *afford* conformorality to some specific norm in specific contexts. This is the second relationship between conformorality and urban geometry that we want to discuss. In urban affordances of conformorality, the relationship between the geometrical form of a city and conformity is focused, at local temporal and spatial scales, on the causal vector from the specific, perceptible, and geometric features of a given socio-material environment to dwellers' conformity to a specific norm based on their perceptions of those features in the environment.

Affordances consist in possibilities for action offered to us by the environment, particularly by certain objects, shapes, surfaces, colours, distances, and other agents (Gibson, 1979; see also Chemero, 2003; Rietveld and Kiverstein, 2014). In habitually conforming to the possibilities for action that the spaces we inhabit afford us, conformorality is experienced as a habit that smoothly fits individuals' perceptions of the surrounding space, along with its shapes, surfaces, volumes, and other geometric features. When we resist salient affordances to conformorality, acting is instead experienced as tension; a deviation from a certain form of social living, a breakdown of one's *umwelt* (see Feiten, 2020 on the concept of umwelt).

Illustrations of how specific geometric features of a city can afford conformorality appear in several policy interventions that can locally shape dwellers' behaviour, by changing their descriptive expectations about what others do in a specific situation, or their normative expectations about what others expect them to do in a given situation. These local policy interventions are generally top-down, voluntaristic attempts to alter some geometric feature of a given space to afford conformity with a specific social norm, and are often unbeknown to dwellers of that space. Geometric affordances of conformorality can also emerge from the bottom-up, from unplanned, unintentional, and extended, micro-behaviours and interactions among dwellers in specific situations, such as when many walkers follow the same path to the point where it becomes a trail or a route.

Consider driving. This is a complex behaviour that is extremely common in contemporary urban spaces. It is also a behaviour that causes thousands of deaths and injuries every year, as drivers tend to overestimate their driving abilities, while often being insensitive to the fines and other punishments that may be imposed for their breaching of road rules. Driving is also a behaviour that can be influenced by subtle geometric affordances.

Thaler and Sunstein (2008) describe an intervention aimed at changing drivers' behaviour in Chicago's Lake Shore Drive. This road includes a series of dangerous S curves that have caused several accidents. At the beginning of this series of curves, drivers encounter a sign warning them of the speed limit, but they generally do not pay attention to it. In 2006, urban planners intervened to increase the likelihood of drivers slowing down on this road by painting a series of white, evenly spaced lines perpendicular to the travelling cars, which would progressively narrow as drivers approached the sharpest points of the curves. The change in these geometrical features give drivers the illusion that their speed has increased, which nudges them to slow down. In other words, it triggers normative expectations signalling that others believe that they are exceeding speed limits. In Thaler and Sunstein's words, "we find that those lines are speaking to us, gently urging us to touch the brake before the apex of the curve. We have been nudged" (Thaler and Sustein, 2008, p.39).

Another example of geometric features in the environment affording conformorality comes from India. Thulin et al. (2022) aimed at decreasing unhealthy, open defecation practices in two towns by instilling expectations in those towns' inhabitants that most other people in their community wanted to, or had already started, using toilets. Because other people's behaviour, especially when it comes to toilet use, is not always observable, the researchers tried to instil relevant social expectations by changing the visibility of toilet users in a neighbourhood. In so doing, they focused on spatial proximity, rather than family ties, to afford conformorality with sanitary norms of toilet use. By decreasing the distance between available toilet facilities in the neighbourhood, and having toilets visible to neighbours, dwellers became convinced that toilet conformorality was widespread, and that others in their vicinity were likely to conform and to think that other neighbours should follow the same sanitary norms.

These subtle interventions might be thought of as limiting dwellers' agency and autonomy, since they often bypass people's capacity for rational deliberation, and afford certain behaviours without people's awareness of their purposes and effects (e.g., Gigerenzer, 2015; Hertwig and Grüne-Yanoff, 2017). Such a conclusion is too hasty. After all, affordances are well-visible: one can see painted lines on a road; and outdoor toilets need not be hidden either. If they are hidden and cannot be perceived, they would not afford any expectation or behaviour. Dwellers might not be aware of why certain geometric features of a space have been altered; and the decisions and thoughts afforded by those features might be quick and unconscious rather than slow and reflective. But it would be wrong to then conclude that affording conformorality must be manipulative (Sunstein 2018), or that it must have detrimental moral or epistemic consequences. Whether and how the conformorality afforded by specific geometric features of an urban space is good or bad very much depends on the specific normative behaviour that it motivates.

In summary, at local spatial and temporal scales, specific geometric features of specific urban spaces such as shape, volume, size, and distance to other places and objects, can afford conformorality to specific norms. Affording conformorality might usher in nudges that preserve freedom of choice, and may also steer dwellers, often unconsciously, towards conformity to norms deemed desirable by policy makers (see Sunstein and Thaler, 2003).

4. Constituting conformorality

Cities can *constitute* conformorality to "norms of normality" by sculpting and policing dwellers' moral agency. This is the third and final relationship between conformorality and urban geometry that we focus on in this paper. In this constitutive relationship, the relevant causal vector goes from human ability to exercise moral agency within and upon the urban space, to specific ways of intervening on the geometric features of that space. This, in turn, impacts human ability to exercising moral agency within and upon urban spaces. It follows, that the geometry of urban spaces can jointly affect the dwellers' (and others) sense of identity, as well as their ability to flourish.

Humans make distinctive and extensive use of tools and artefacts to design and modify the spaces where they dwell, learn, and interact (Sterelny, 2007). Tool use and environmental modifications change the modes and levels of human agency, make functional potential malleable, and determine regardless of (ab)normality in body shape, the range of opportunities available to individuals. "The present unequal distribution of opportunities among people with varying biological traits can only appear to be fixed by nature if we ignore the fact that all human beings use tools and live in built environments, and that the design of tools and environments is an outcome of human choices" (Amudson, 2000, p.47).

Kukla (2021) examines several, real-life illustrations of co-constitutive relationships between norms and urban geometry, including case studies about gentrification in Washington DC and repurposed urban spaces in Berlin and Johannesburg. Kukla emphasises various dimensions that influence who can access, use, control, and modify a given urban space, including wealth, age, and sex.

Another dimension that clearly influences the accessibility, usability, and control of urban spaces, as well as possibilities for agency within them as well as perceptual experiences of them, is the body, and its fit with the geometric features of the urban spaces in which people dwell. Based on the shape of individual bodies, their size, and weight, people can be sensitive to different geometric features of a space, which can constrain, facilitate, or restructure their capacities for movement, perception, reasoning and so forth; thereby simultaneously sculpting embodied identities and possibilities to conform to specific social norms.

Most obviously, geometric features determined by stairs, corners, and distances, will make certain spaces hostile to, say, wheelchair users, and people with limited mobility; seats with a certain geometric design can be hostile to large people, or people who are deaf and need to see one another to communicate, whilst those suffering from sensory processing disorders can find geometrically disordered spaces hard to navigate and unsuitable for social interactions.

As Susan Wendell's (1996, p.40) reminds us: "We have built spaces around the idea that 'normal' bodies can lift things, move quickly, and be available any time for 'production.'" Spatial geometries that are fit for "normal" bodies will sustain and enforce conformorality to certain norms fit for "normal" people, who in turn reinforce those spatial geometries as "normal" geometries for urban spaces. Wendell explains that the network of geometric features in urban spaces that invisibly enforce conformorality to norms for "normally" bodied people, for instance the pace with which they move in specific urban spaces, is often taken for granted; but this network of geometric features can have significant consequences that impact on individuals' identities and social relationships.

A possibly less vivid, but equally socially significant way in which the geometry of urban spaces constitutes conformorality to "normality norms" is *hostile architecture*, where the built environment purposefully restricts possibilities for action, particularly for members of certain social groups, such as homeless people (e.g., Rosenberger, 2020).

Hostile architecture can be as subtle as not providing a place to sit, or a table on which to dine or play in public spaces such as parks and squares, and as obvious as metal bars dividing public benches so as to prevent dwellers lying on them, or spikes placed on ledges and doorways to deter seating, standing, or sleeping. These are all features of several public, urban spaces that restrict public access and usability for people with certain bodies as well as those from certain social classes. The space itself, with its geometry, can then be hostile, inhospitable, hard. But this spatial hostility does not target everybody equally; it instead makes certain people unwelcome and excluded from public dwelling and social interaction by virtue of their "ab-normal" body or social class.

While hostile architecture is sometimes intended to maintain order and curb unwanted behaviour such as loitering and sleeping, it also constitutes conformorality to norms of normality that exclude certain urban dwellers such as homeless people from active participation in the polity. This, in turn, impacts their moral agency and limits social encounters with the abnormal as well as the creative usage of public spaces.

In summary, specific geometric features of specific urban spaces such as stairs, curves, sizes, distances, can enter a looping, co-constitutive relationship that will literally sculpt the agency of certain city dwellers. Different geometric features of different urban spaces can be hostile to certain targets, and may afford opportunities only to normally functioning individuals. The web of concrete geometric features disciplining agency is often invisible; but it is also potent, and it can have significant social, political, and even psychological consequences on dwellers with different capabilities and opportunities. It can promote or block their flourishing.

5. Conclusion: Conformorality and urban studies

Conformity is a complex strategy for social learning with several known biases and causal determinants, which might bring about both good and bad epistemic and moral outcomes. Despite a lot of interdisciplinary work on conformity, and particularly on conformity to moral norms, or *conformorality*, little attention has been paid to how the geometric features of urban spaces may relate to conformity. In this paper, we have focused on this issue, and clarified three distinct relationships between a city and conformorality, namely: urban spaces can *exemplify, afford*, and *constitute* conformorality through their geometric features. We have pointed out various epistemic and moral aspects of these relationships, and have suggested that it makes little sense to suggest that conformorality is generally bad. The advancement of knowledge and virtuous behaviour require not only autonomy, but also some degree of conformity; we are dependent on each other in virtually every theoretical and practical domain. This is evident in academic debates too. Researchers in urban studies debating such notions as *resilience, adaptation, sustainability, commodification, segregation, gentrification, Disneyfication, diversity, inclusion, peripherality, post-growth, post-coloniality, post-workerism,* and so on, are themselves susceptible to conformorality. To limit the possible negative effects of conformity in academic research, it is important to systematically investigate the dynamics of conformorality. This is another reason why urban planners, especially those involved in concrete policy making might find collaboration with experts on norms helpful to foster further understanding as to how the geometric features of the built environment may influence dwellers' conformity to specific norms. Awareness of this influence might, in turn, reshape and constrain those very academic debates that should ideally inform the design and geometry of urban spaces.

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