

EDITORIAL: EXPLORING CONFORMORALITY IN PLANNING DEBATES

Stefano Cozzolino¹, Anita De Franco²

This themed issue on “conformorality” is inspired by the work of Chiara Lisciandra, Marie Postma-Nilsenová, and Matteo Colombo (2013), which explores the tendency of individuals within a particular group or community to align with certain ideologies and values. The term “conformorality”, which combines the concepts of “conformity”, “conformism”, and “morality”, was first introduced into planning debates by Claudia Basta, the former coordinator of the AESOP Thematic Group on Ethics, Values, and Planning, in her thought-provoking presentation entitled “Unequal, thus Unjust?”. This presentation was delivered at a research seminar entitled “The Just City in Practice: Operationalising a Broad and Varied Concept,” which was held on August 21, 2020 in The Hague after the long period of social distancing that had been enforced due to COVID-19 restrictions. In Basta’s presentation, conformorality represented the widespread sentiment that exists between planning scholars that economic inequality equates to injustice; she discussed the limitations of this uncritical attitude.

Inspired by this reflection, at the end of 2022, the AESOP Thematic Group on Ethics, Values, and Planning decided to take up the challenge of conformorality with a conference titled “Breaking Through ‘Conformorality’ in Urban and Regional Studies.” The event occurred in Dortmund at the ILS-Research Institute for Regional and Urban Development on September 14-15, 2023. It featured twelve presentations, and included the keynote talks “Conformorality: Some Consequences for Science and Society” by Matteo Colombo, and “On Academic Conformorality, and Why It Threatens Academic Freedom” by Claudia Basta. Other presenters included Stefano Moroni, Francesco Curci, Daniele Chiffi, Paulina Budryté, Mark Scherner, Raffael Beier, Brett Allen Slack, Anita De Franco, Nana Serwaa Antwi, Henry Endemann, and Lena Unger. Each scholar embarked on the challenging but stimulating task of discussing how conformorality impacts specific research topics and discourses. The conference had a predominantly experimental and exploratory character, and generated lively discussions as well as a strong desire to continue the debate via a dedicated special issue project that would be open to contributions from both senior and young scholars.

The special issue assumes that conformorality has significant implications for planning theory and practice. For example, planning practitioners are often subject to various forms of pressure, including their technical knowledge, administrative mandates, political biases, and social-local demands. Recent discussions, such as those by Hanna Mattila (2002), Angelique Chettiparamb (2016), Simin Davoudi, Daniel Galland, and Dominic Stead (2020), Stefano Moroni (2020), and Claudia Basta (2023), have highlighted these pressures. Similarly, planning scholars frequently propose ideas and solutions to urban issues that are influenced by widespread value-based arguments and moral pressure from the planning community.

1 ILS - Research Institute for Regional and Urban Development, Brüderweg 22–24, Dortmund, Germany. E-Mail: stefano.cozzolino@ils-forschung.de ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8873-1868>

2 Department of Architecture and Urban Studies, Polytechnic University of Milan, Via Bonardi 3, Milan, Italy. E-Mail: anita.defranco@polimi.it ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7399-7735>

In this special issue, the authors have framed the topic of conformorality in planning debates in an exploratory manner, and through so doing raised new questions and reflections.

In “Norms and the City”, Matteo Colombo and Chiara Lisciandra explore three ways (exemplifying, affording, and constituting) in which the intentional/designed geometry and shape of urban spaces might relate to and generate conformorality in society by exerting a degree of influence on people’s behaviour. The primary assumption is that a designed city form exemplifies ideals of moral order which are, in turn, internalised by its inhabitants. As the authors stress, this is a topic that scholars in different disciplines have largely overlooked.

In “To Plan or Not to Plan”, Anita De Franco provokes planners by rediscovering an old text by Rayner Banham, Paul Barker, Peter Hall, and Cedric Price titled “Non-Plan: An Experiment in Freedom” (1969). At a time when there is a strong proliferation of plans, the author reflects on the idea of the non-plan, why this idea has never been taken seriously, and question the value that this concept may have today.

In “Deal-Making Cities in Latin America: Why Should We Pay Less Attention to Master Plans?” Paulo Nascimento Neto, Clovis Ultramari, and Mario Prokopiuk explore how and to what extent moral prejudice plays a role in large urban intervention projects. They investigate the case of Vila Leopoldina in São Paulo through the lens of different interest groups: the inhabitants of informal settlements, the future inhabitants of new ‘luxury’ residences, developers, and the public municipality. The authors observe the tensions that exist between different moral perspectives and what this entails for public planners.

In “Planners’ Ideals and Realities: Normative Behavior and Confororality”, Qingyuan Guo investigates the normative behaviour of English local authority planning practitioners through a meta-ethnography analysis of 19 empirical studies from 1978 to 2022. The findings suggest that planners identify with two sets of norms: planners as professionals, and planners as bureaucrats, as well as the frictions that exist between the two. The author suggests three ways in which planners, within their communities, maintain a degree of conformorality: compliance, identification, and internalisation.

In “The Confororality of Residential Displacement Debates”, Brett Allen Slack argues that existent scholarly discourse on urban residential displacement can be an interesting example of conformorality, with this phenomenon often assumed to be inherently unjust. In this work, the author invites readers to reflect on often-overlooked aspects, such as the possible motives of displacers and certain ineffective yet widespread planning solutions. In doing so, Slack challenges scholars and practitioners to consider multiple points of view to engage less ideologically with this complex topic.

In “Confororality and the Economic Urbanism of Jane Jacobs”, Sanford Ikeda highlights the reasons why most economic scholars have overlooked Jane Jacobs’ contributions to the understanding of cities and their economics, as well as why many of her urbanist supporters barely consider her crucial contributions to economics. The author argues that conformorality in both disciplines may partially explain this oversight. This contribution shows that conformorality can not only hamper thematic debates but also limit the accurate understanding of the thoughts of well-known authors.

Overall, this special issue which, as already emphasised, has an experimental and explorative character, contributes to a more systematic introduction of conformorality within planning discourses. Clearly, there is still a long way to go. We are likely far from a real awareness of the impact of conformorality and its implications within the planning community. However, an attempt had to be made, and the authors of this special issue, whom we thank wholeheartedly, have tackled the challenge and opened new avenues for future scholars to contribute to the debate. As Matteo Colombo and Chiara Lisciandra point out in their contribution to this special issue, conformorality can also play a positive role in disseminating certain knowledge and good practices. Nevertheless, after months of discussion, we concluded that it is only by stepping out of the “conform zone” that we can aspire to new ideas, foster innovation, and overcome certain ideological and biased barriers that can hamper planning-scholarly debates and research.

In short, as the contributions to this special issue suggest, we believe that conformorality significantly impacts planning debates and can have various consequences in practice. Although this remains an open hypothesis, we wonder the extent to which conformorality may disadvantage (or benefit) the careers of planning scholars who are less (or more) prone to certain mainstream and unquestioned values and ideas. At the moment, this remains an open and highly stimulating unanswered question.

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