News

Learning from Susan Fainstein: Do planners have a responsibility to fight for social equity?

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Susan Fainstein's ideas for the "just city" crystallized in the 1960s and '70s, during a time of great political unrest in the United States. She challenged the era's prevailing top-down planning and urban renewal policies, which she understood to be a regressive, copy and paste approach to urban development that wrote off planners as powerless pawns in a universal growth pattern driven fundamentally by profit. Instead, Fainstein argued, the role of the planner was inherently political. Moreover, she believed that planners, as agents of the state, have the capacity to work inside the system in order to reform it.

"At a time when everyone was gunning toward high profit margins as the dominant form of public decision-making, *The Just City* placed other values—namely that of social equity—on the negotiating table," reflects Sai Balakrishnan, an assistant professor of urban planning at the Graduate School of Design. Published in 2010 as the culmination of research that began in the '70s, *The Just City* is Fainstein's seminal text. In the first half of the book, she breaks down the categorical idea of justice into three tangible pillars: diversity, democracy, and equity. Surveying the ideas of key contemporary—often radical—theorists of justice including David Harvey, John Rawls, Iris Marion Young, Amartya Sen, and Martha Nussbaum, among many others, Fainstein works toward a pragmatic proposal for a more equitable form of urban planning that exists within capitalism.

In the second half of the text, Fainstein puts her ideas to the test with a comparative evaluation of hard data. She works across three case studies—Amsterdam, London, and New York—to examine the diverse strains of urban growth under capitalism. Moreover, Fainstein argues that intervention within a fragmented state by planners and communities leads to opportunities for a more equitable future.

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"Different capitalist cities have different levels of support for their citizens," says Fainstein. In her research, she discovered the make-or-break point to be privatized land. When comparing US city governments with those of capitalist European cities in the 1990s, Fainstein—along with her partner, Norman Fainstein—understood the latter to possess greater power, which enabled them to exert a tighter control on urban planning. (Of course, a contemporary look at most capitalist European cities, particularly London, renders that conclusion increasingly void.)

When Fainstein first arrived in Amsterdam in the late '70s, she saw a society that prioritized public ownership of land and a high degree of public housing that carried none of the social stigmas it did in New York. "Working in Amsterdam and later Singapore showed me that if the public sector owns land, housing prices are kept under control," reflects Fainstein. "Once land is privately owned, it becomes a scarce commodity, and development creates a housing crisis."

Grounded in the everyday practice of real-life planning, Fainstein can hold her own with both theorists and planners, calibrating her discussions of equity, diversity, and democracy to the right crowd. For theorists, she stresses the importance of concrete application of theory and of reaching a compromise rather than holding out for an unfeasible utopian solution. Perhaps more than anything, she takes up the task of reminding planners of their political agency in striving for greater social equity and representing those voices typically left out of the conversation.

Bestowing this authority and good will on planners and acknowledging the realities of a global capitalist regime has made Feinstein no stranger to criticism. It largely stems from more radical Marxist thinkers, including urban geographer David Harvey, who suggested Fainstein was "selling out" to capitalism by offering less than a full systemic overhaul. Fainstein countered this by challenging the hard-line Marxist belief that the state is merely an extension of the elite. She voiced skepticism about a proletariat revolution, arguing instead that the fractured nature of the state enables planners to act politically and redistribute public support to disenfranchised groups. She also critiques post-structuralism's rejection of universal norms of justice, a position she believes could result in the silencing of women and minority voices.

Though environmental justice was notably left out of *The Just City*, Fainstein's views on our contemporary environmental crisis and the Extinction Rebellion follows a similar thread of thought. "Protest is necessary in that it's the only thing that will force the government to deal with these issues, but real change can only occur through the electoral system," says Fainstein. "The triumph of a movement is when it gets represented by the government."

Fainstein pushed beyond traditional notions of urban planning to incorporate the role of tourism and travel in global urban development. First espoused in the 1990s, these ideas have only become more relevant in the era of digital neoliberal capitalism and sharing economy platforms like Airbnb. "We're all talking about tourism and gentrification now, but Susan was coming at it from a much earlier period," notes Balakrishnan. "She understood tourism as a constituent agent in urban development, because while the tourists' presence is temporary, their impact on a city's growth is fundamental."

In her research on tourism's impact on cities in India, Fainstein discovered that low-budget tourism did much more for the economy because backpackers spent money at local resources. Fainstein feels the same can be said about Airbnb, where hosts often meet guests and suggest local attractions. "I believe a lot of publicity about how Airbnb is taking houses off the market is financed by the hotel industry," says Fainstein. "Instead of profits going straight to Hyatt and distributed to corporate shareholders, Airbnb distributes revenue among middle-class investments." (She acknowledges the inherent class divisions of the home-sharing model, however: "There is always a division between people who benefit from tourism, and advocates of NIMBYism, and it's always about wealth.")

From a contemporary standpoint, *The City Builders* (2001) is Fainstein's pivotal work. Here, Fainstein hones in on a new phase of corporate-style global development, drawing an incisive comparison between urban development and the entertainment industry. She argues that both industries work through speculative, ad hoc developments that thrive on short-term hype but fall far short in terms of long-term sustainability, responsibility, and social equity. In Fainstein's analysis, urban governments set no standards on private development in their desperation for investment capital. So planners take on the role of businesspeople brokering deals with private developers—deals that all too often leave the public high and dry.

It is a theory that has grown stronger with age. "From then to now, my research has intensified in the sense that property and development capital is more international," says Fainstein. "Flows of capital entering the property market come from sovereign wealth funds, real estate trusts, and companies with no relationship to the cities they're building."

Revisiting Fainstein's original case studies of New York and London today, we witness Manhattan's megalithic Hudson Yards, the largest private development in the history of the United States. London's numerous redevelopment schemes include Greenwich Peninsula (complete with its own take on New York's High Line called The Tide: a mile-long "urban walkway," also designed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro, that offers depressing views onto a sea of soulless high-rises) and the corporate luxury of the new Kings Cross, a former industrial site now occupied by Google's HQ, a Heatherwick-designed private mall, and multimillion-pound penthouses.

These developments stand as cases in which private capital has outweighed public interest, with pseudo-public spaces, greenwashing, and artwashing campaigns that conjure a fictionalized community. Glossy, metal-clad towers reaching ever-higher into the sky and investors' pockets have become a ubiquitous sight on most city skylines. These buildings demand ever-higher investments from abroad at the expense of local residents.

Were Fainstein to rewrite *The Just City* for the present, she would include Vienna and Singapore. Out of all European cities, Fainstein suggests, Vienna has most maintained an orientation to welfare and provision of housing. Fainstein relocated to Singapore in 2011 and has extensively studied the country's government—which she refers to as a "benevolent despotism"—and its impact on urban planning. In this unique case, the model of government-led urban development has resulted in a highly structured, dense, and diverse society with great housing (over 90% live in public housing), while alienating its large foreign population, and preventing minorities from shaping the city.

Fainstein's work remains relevant because it is predictive as well as analytical. When she reflects on the influence of Airbnb or the Extinction Rebellion today, as she did with privately led global property development two decades ago, Fainstein leaves the playing field open to new ideas. Her line of inquiry is porous—she embraces her critics, often integrating their voices into her text. Perhaps most significantly, she acknowledges that she doesn't have all the answers; her work feels more like a discussion than a monologue. At a moment of crisis when everything feels on the line, her push for acting *now*, instead of waiting for a perfect future that's unlikely to arrive, is a timely inspiration.

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