

Circulating ideas and policymaking: The mobilization of strategic planning from Barcelona to Rio de Janeiro

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According to Rio de Janeiro's Mayor Eduardo Paes 'Barcelona was the model for the Rio 2016 Olympics'. Often referring to his political networks with the Catalan city the mayor is eager to allude to the scale of urban change currently experienced in the Brazilian city as lessons learned in mega-event-led transformation. However, the networks bringing together the two cities in urban policy transfer are not new. On one hand, local political leaders have turned to Barcelona at different degrees over the past two decades in search of a blueprint for their policy proposals. On the other, engagement with Rio de Janeiro offered an important platform for the internationalization of Barcelona's urban agenda. This paper examines the historical origins of this relationship through a perspective of 'relational policy making'. It considers the institutional reforms and the co-production of a strategic plan that took place in the 1990s as a rich ground to examine how policies are not just defined 'in place' and how globally circulating ideas are embedded into concrete urban policies.

There has been a renewed interest spanning disciplines to critically engage with the way context-specific policies and expertise are mobilised, translated and adapted into new plans. The international circulation of knowledge is an integral feature of the development of the planning discipline. Planning scholars have long been interested in the role of circulating planning models; individuals; international networks; and conferences and exhibitions in the development of town planning as a distinct field of knowledge. More recently there has been a call for 'thicker' descriptions of transfer processes (Friedmann, 2010); one that takes into account the 'complex interplay of exogenous and endogenous forces' that enable ideas and practices to flow from one context to another (Healey, 2010). A similar and more urgent approach has been taken by geographers to interrogate how contemporary urbanisation, although grounded at the local scale, is shaped by global circuits of knowledge through which circulate particular sets of urban policies, models and practices (McCann, 2011). This is particularly relevant at times in which cities are frequently measured against each other and encouraged to learn from 'successful' policies; as one can witness in the proliferation of urban performance tables, reports produced by think-tanks, and in the activities of international consultancy groups and multilateral institutions advocating the take-up of best practices.

Despite the efforts to critically engage with the implications of mobile policies these literatures have not been immune to criticism. In a reflexive summary of the challenges to advance research, Temenos and Baker (2015) point out critiques of presentism in many studies and the oversight of grounded policy processes. Scholars, particularly those working with planning history literatures, have noted the importance of institutional legacies shaping the production of policies (Harris and Moore, 2014; Clarke, 2012). Others have stressed the need to be more attentive to the grounded dynamics of policymaking and how actors 'arrive at' policies, a perspective privileged by scholars working from the perspective of Global South urbanism (Robinson, 2014; Roy and Ong, 2011).

In light of these points of contention this paper brings into analysis the political science literatures concerned with the role of ideas, interests and institutions in the public policy process (Béland and Cox, 2011; Gofas and Hay, 2010; Cairney, 2009). An appreciation of how ideas are brought onto political discussion, whose interests are on board and how they are institutionally accommodated can potentially shed some light on the contested process of grounding and replicating urban policies. This analytical framework is applied to the case study to examine the mobilization of strategic planning from Barcelona to Rio, the interests of policymakers and consultants in the policy transfer, and how it became a constitutive part of the redesign of planning institutional frameworks. The analysis draws on data from archival research and semi-structured interviews carried with policy actors (policymakers, planners, architects and consultants) conducted in both cities. This paper contributes to the discussion of relational thinking and points out the implications of selective appropriations of circulating ideas.

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