An historical perspective on the viability of urban diversity: lessons from socio-spatial identity construction in nineteenth-century Algiers and Cape Town

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An historical perspective on the viability of urban diversity: lessons from socio-spatial identity construction in nineteenth-century Algiers and Cape Town

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Social heterogeneity is fundamental to many conceptions of urbanism. Social contact in diverse cities is valorized by theorists linking pluralism with social justice, democratic functioning and the psychological development of tolerance. Others express caution, noting that conflict and instability are equally possible outcomes of intergroup contact. This paper argues that these ongoing debates can be informed by longer-term, cross-cultural perspectives on urbanism. The nineteenth-century histories of Algiers and Cape Town, cities characterized by extreme diversity, are reviewed to show the nature of diverse social contact in open spaces. The intertwined construction of group and neighborhood identities in each indicate that the very definitions of ethnic and class diversity are contextual and evolving, contingent on both neighborhood interactions and structural socio-economic forces. Thus modern efforts to plan for place diversity must grapple with a moving target and may be most realistic when confined to a focus on the built environment.

Keywords: diversity; open space; neighborhood; group identity; urban history

Introduction

Social heterogeneity has been intertwined with conceptions of urban life ever since Wirth’s (1938) definition of urbanism in relation to large, dense and socially heterogeneous cities. Many scholarly attempts to comprehend urbanism, from a range of disciplines, focus on the pluralism of modern cities and propose ways in which the ethnic and class-based diversity within neighborhoods and cities should be either encouraged or limited (Sennett 1990, Fainstein 2005, Durrheim and Dixon 2005, Talen 2006). Although most contemporary urban studies focus on diversity in modern Western cities, this paper proposes that the relation between urbanism and social diversity can be usefully informed by longer-term and cross-cultural perspectives. The true breadth of urban studies ranges from archaeological probes of neighborhood formation (Smith 2010) to the normative debates surrounding modern urban planning (Sandercock 1998). This paper explores urban heterogeneity by recording historical instances of diverse social contact in urban space and connecting them to the formation of group identity, neighborhood identity and the construction of difference itself. By comparing the nineteenth-century urbanism of two colonial cities home to historic extremes of social diversity – Algiers and Cape Town – it is hoped that the socio-spatial basis of pluralism can be better understood, informing modern attempts to valorize and plan for ethnic and class-based neighborhood diversity.

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Standing on opposite tips of the African continent, Algiers and Cape Town differ greatly in their urban forms and socio-political histories, but also share a number of common features that allow for comparison. Both cities were highly dependent on harbors and sea trade for their growth and remarkable heterogeneity, from founding up to the present. Each was colonized by European powers, and became regional colonial political capitals as well as centers of economic activity and capitalist production — phenomena that decisively influenced their social histories. Each city also witnessed similar episodes of colonial urban planning, leading to proximity between colonial downtown districts, sizeable and ethnically heterogeneous working-class neighborhoods and industrial port areas, while also generating peripheral suburbs dominated by colonial white bourgeois. Furthermore, both cities had centrally located plaza spaces, initially planned for purposes of military assembly, which were critical sites for the experience of social heterogeneity and for socio-political movements. At the same time, there are marked differences in the character of each city which helps to explain their divergent social outcomes. Algiers was a pre-existing, vibrant Ottoman city with a long social history at the time of French colonization, whereas Cape Town was fully planned by Dutch and English authorities. Thus many neighborhoods in Algiers fall under the overly broad categorization of ‘Islamic’ urbanism, whereas Cape Town is fully ‘Western’ in its gridded, block-based layout. As this paper attempts to show, these divergent histories and urban forms may have influenced the evolution of neighborhood and group identities — and thus the very definition and perception of ‘diversity’ — ultimately leading to different neighborhood fates in the face of twentieth century authoritarian manipulation.

Historical accounts indicate why both Algiers and Cape Town provide fascinating studies of urban social heterogeneity. The city of Algiers has a long history of ethnic diversity dating well before colonization. The pre-colonial Ottoman city hosted a diverse mix of ethnicities, spatially segregated under the Arab-Islamic system of filtered neighborhood access but united under the relatively stable political establishment and the tenets of Islamic law. The city contained 50 separate neighborhoods in the sixteenth century (Celik 1997), and at the eve of colonization hosted seven defined ‘races’: Moors, Jews, Arabs, Berbers, Negroes, Turks and Kulughlis (Clancy-Smith 2009). Diverse social contact did occur between these groups in street and market spaces, but it was limited by the relative lack of open spaces in ‘Islamic’ cities and by gender restrictions limiting the free movement of women (Celik 1997). Miege (1985, p. 173) observes how this arrangement allowed for the stable co-existence of cultures: “The city was thus a coherent whole where space, functioning, law, and demography and social divisions corresponded with each other. To this world, colonization was to oppose its own world”. French colonization of the city in 1830 indeed destroyed the established urban social order. The rapid flight of Ottoman residents was balanced by the mass arrival of immigrants from Mediterranean regions such as Sicily, Spain and the Greek islands (Clancy-Smith 2009). Foreign immigration continued throughout the nineteenth century, generating an extremely heterogeneous city of Muslims, Christians and Jews identifying with a variety of ethnic identities and neighborhood territories.

The city of Cape Town (Figure 1) also hosted high levels of diversity throughout its history due to continued colonial influence. Settled in 1652 as a service port by the Dutch East India Company, Cape Town quickly became a mosaic of cultures via European immigration and the importation of primarily Muslim slaves from colonies in Indonesia, India, Madagascar and Southern Africa (Marks and Bezzoli 2000). Initially planned by Dutch settlers under the European template of gridded streets and regularly spaced squares, the city expanded in a similar style once the British had permanently colonized
the city in 1806. By the abolition of slavery in 1838, ethnic social mixing was common in urban spaces in lower-class neighborhoods (Ross 1985). Cape Town’s social diversity only increased in the nineteenth century, as the consistent immigration of European settlers was matched by the arrivals of Jews, Africans, Chinese and other groups (Bickford-Smith 1995).

Although colonial African urbanism is clearly the product of specific historical forces that might seem little related to modern cities, the premise of this research effort is that there are durable qualities of urbanism shared by cities and neighborhoods across all time periods and cultures. By illustrating the mutable nature of social differences in long-term perspective, the ethnic and class histories of these cities can significantly inform normative endorsements of place-based diversity in the twenty-first century Western world. Both cities, to some extent, validate the suspicions of authors who emphasize that inter-ethnic tension, not tolerance, is often generated by close proximity between different groups in urban spaces. Yet they also point to a more deeply problematic aspect of the
modern debate over heterogeneity. Ethnic difference and group identities themselves are actively constructed, shifting over time in response to political or economic forces, and can be linked with the evolution of neighborhood identities forged through geographic proximity. Thus planners espousing the benefits of diverse urban experience (in terms of ethnic and class diversity) should keep in mind that diversity itself is defined subjectively and reinforced through cultural patterns and urban forms.

The paper first reviews an array of theoretical perspectives, from planning, geography and social psychology, surrounding the urban experience of difference and the socio-economic construction of group identities. Next, the following research questions are used to organize and compare historical data from Algiers and Cape Town:

(1) In these highly diverse cities, what types of urban forms and open spaces are conducive to diverse social contact?

(2) How are the instances and meanings of diverse social contact in open space conditioned by shifting group identities, and how do these evolving identities influence the long-term production of neighborhoods as social and spatial entities?

Finally, the paper suggests lessons gained from the shifting nature of diversity in colonial cities for modern urban planning’s quest for socially diverse urban environments.

**Diverse social contact in urban space: theoretical approaches**

Hagerstrand’s concept of ‘time geography’ represents a good starting point when attempting to track and categorize how diverse social contact occurs in urban geographical space. Time geography involves a process-based mapping of human behavior based on a unified approach to space and time (Hagerstrand 1975, 1985), where each individual’s movements through urban space are recorded as a ‘lifepath’ – a personal trajectory that, in a structural view, provides all environmental inputs to the development of the psyche. ‘Coupling’ describes instances in which individuals come into socio-spatial contact, and the notion of ‘constraints’ is emphasized to show how individual experiences are necessarily highly limited relative to the totality of possibilities for experiential learning (Pred 1977). Although the time geography framework is simple and phenomenological, the focus placed upon constraints in particular is valuable when envisioning the physical scale of and accumulating social effects created by diverse social contact between individuals – contact which, limited by space and time, may generate either tolerance or conflict. Although time geography remains too limited to fully theorize the dynamics of socio-spatial practice, it can be useful for tracking the basic instances of diverse contact in urban spaces.

The notion that the accumulation of diverse social contact in urban open space can be beneficial for individual development and collective democratic functioning has been elaborated in a number of disciplines. In social psychology, this idea is termed the ‘contact hypothesis’ – “the idea that regular interaction between groups tends to reduce prejudice and is therefore a precondition for a more tolerant society” (Durrheim and Dixon 2005, p. 4). Yet the causality between contact and tolerance is by no means clear, since in practice diverse contact has been shown to either reduce or increase inter-ethnic and inter-class tensions. Pettigrew (1998) emphasizes that the contact hypothesis may be most valid when intergroup contact proceeds through carefully managed stages. Tolerance is best generated when cross-cultural groups first decategorize and positively experience individual personalities, next associate feelings for individuals with their larger subgroup,
and finally cement a newfound cultural acceptance by creating a new cross-cultural level of mutual identification. Other researchers search instead for specific variables explaining beneficial outcomes. For example, research continues to support Allport’s (1954) original hypothesis that equality in socio-economic status between ethnic groups in close urban contact is the best indicator that tolerance, rather than tension, will be produced (Ihlanfeldt and Scafidi 2002).

Many authors in the modern planning literature either implicitly or explicitly endorse the contact hypothesis when proposing normative arguments for coupling between diverse ethnic and class groups. Richard Sennett (1990), theorizing the eye as an ‘organ of conscience’, strongly links diverse urban experience with the generation of tolerance and psychological resilience. To him, the city represents a sort of ‘school’ where exposure to diversity in vibrant urban spaces represents a ‘positive human value’ essential for the maturation of individuals and human societies. Hajer and Rejndorp (2001, p. 11) define the ‘public domain’ as “those places where an exchange between different social groups is possible and also actually occurs”. Similarly equating diverse experience with tolerance, the authors posit “that the concrete, physical experience of ... other cultural manifestations ... is important for developing social intelligence and forming a judgment. Personal perception and direct confrontation can be an antidote to stereotyping and stigmatization” (Hajer and Rejndorp 2001, pp. 12–13). Echoing other normative positions, they argue that space-time contact between different groups is decreasing as modern society increasingly fragments into an ‘archipelago of enclaves’ physically disconnected from one another. Other authors observe how these growing spatial separations are accompanied by increasingly mono-functional public spaces geared towards corporate symbolism or class-based consumption (Sorkin 1992, Boyer 1994, Low and Smith 2006). Franck and Stevens (2007, p. 4) counter with the idea of ‘loose spaces’, multi-functional urban open spaces that “allow for the chance encounter, the spontaneous event, the enjoyment of diversity and the discovery of the unexpected”, under the implicit assumption that such spaces will generate more tolerance than strife.

Some planning scholars, however, are wary about making simple theoretical connections between diverse social contact and cultural tolerance. Fainstein (2005) argues that this causal relationship is by no means clear, providing examples in which diverse contact has led to serious social tensions. Talen (2006) agrees, reviewing an array of works indicating natural group proclivities towards self-segregation and noting failures in planning efforts directed at creating mixed-income communities. Skerry (2002, p. 23) aptly summarizes this dose of realism, arguing that prescriptions for place-based diversity must be accompanied by a “tolerance for the conflict that typically follows”. Sandercock (1998, 2003), in two book-length treatments of the subject, perhaps provides the most eloquent theoretical balance between recognition of the vast difficulties associated with urban diversity and dogged adherence to multicultural ideals. The diversity of Sandercock’s imagined ‘cosmopolis’ is clearly problematic on pragmatic social, political and cultural grounds, a deep challenge to the planning profession’s recent embrace of place diversity. Drawing inspiration from Young’s (1990) association of justice with multiculturalism, however, Sandercock (1998, p. 121) insists that the planning of twenty-first century ‘mongrel cities’ is crucial for the advancement of social equity and democratic functioning, and proposes “an epistemology of multiplicity ... [that] validates experiential, embodied, contextualized knowledge” only gained through the everyday conflicts and triumphs of diverse social contact.

Yet Sandercock (2003) diverges from the many theorists who envision open, public spaces as the ideal sites for tolerance-generating contact; instead, she sees institutions
such as schools, workplaces and community centers as more effective sites of inter-group negotiation. Whether public spaces or private institutions are the best targets for public policy, her ultimate return to the daily contexts of diverse experience is congruent with social psychology’s current emphasis. Recent authors note that much psychological research on contact has been detached from wider societal relations, risking a preoccupation with the causality between contact and attitude change without recognizing how socio-economic structures and cultural attitudes can affect the nature of contact. More attention must be trained on the social contexts of diversity, “the situated, variable and highly consequential practices through which ordinary people construct the meaning of contact and desegregation” (Durrheim and Dixon 2005, p. 5).

**The socio-spatial construction of inter-group difference**

The 1996 Charter of the New Urbanism helped to codify the link between planning practice and the active creation of place diversity, explicitly stating that “within neighborhoods, a broad range of housing types and price levels can bring people of diverse ages, races, and incomes into daily interaction, strengthening the personal and civic bonds essential to an authentic community”. This sentiment has been accompanied by a litany of studies investigating the neighborhood-based factors that may help produce successful income and ethnic diversity (Ostendorf *et al*. 2001, Joseph *et al*. 2006, Galster 2007). Yet is the planning profession truly able to promote sustained, heterogeneous social mixing, arrangements that are relatively rare in urban history? Talen (2005, 2008) presents a cohesive argument that neighborhood-level ethnic and income diversity is best accomplished indirectly, through the physical diversity of the built environment. Others question whether even indirect strategies can foster the types of social diversity needed for experientially diverse contact in open spaces (Grant and Perrott 2009).

Yet there is danger in characterizing diversity as the distribution of relatively static groups, and the purpose here is to critique planning’s short temporal understanding of diversity and examine the historically and geographically derived nature of group differences. Planning based on aiding income-based groups, for example, risks cementing the very status intended to be affected. Jacobs (1961) is one of the first to propose investments in existing, mixed housing, instead of low-income estates, because income-based mobility rather than welfare is the ultimate goal of policy. It is important to treat ethnic and racial groupings, over longer time scales, as equally fluid. Ethnic group identities are quite mutable in urban history, changing in response to both structural socio-economic forces and local neighborhood processes. To fully explore the impulse to plan for diversity, it is critical to recognize how and why group identities appear and disappear in the first place.

Academics researching the construction of race and ethnic identity in urban history direct attention to how group identities can be both negotiated internally, within groups, as well as imposed by external forces. Max Weber was one of the first to argue that ethnicity does not represent a biologically primordial state, and modern anthropologists and sociologists have confirmed how ethnicity is subjectively constructed (Barth 1969, Jenkins 1986). Always produced and reproduced in a contextual relation to other groups, race/ethnicity often derives from unequal arrangements of social power, where politically motivated classifications of difference can magnify and evolve over time (Jenkins 1986). “Ethnic and racial categories may be delineated first by others, but when groups begin to fill those categories with their own content...they are engaged in a classical process of constructing ethnicity” (Cornell and Hartmann 1998, p. 30). The ‘instrumentalist’ hypoth-
esis, as well as ‘split labor market theory’, proposes that ethnic and racial constructions primarily emerge from economic competition and class conflicts, where group identities become political means to purely economic ends (Rex 1986, Cornell and Hartmann 1998). While other theorists contest this structuralist approach, highlighting the cultural reproduction of ethnicity as an end in itself, the lessons of history indicate that ethnicity is fluid and constantly evolving in response to urban conditions. In fact, modern racial categories emerged from centuries of European colonialism, and were highly contingent on both the exertion of colonial urban power and the daily experiences of subjugated populations. The nineteenth-century belief in primordial races quickly spread throughout Europe and its empires after 1850, as ‘scientific’ notions of biological race were advocated through the new discipline of anthropology (Lorimer 1978, Nicholson 1999). In many colonies, the fluid interplay between state-imposed racial categories and group-defined ethnic identities provide some of the most transparent examples of how urban diversity represents an evolving process.

The neighborhood emerges as a crucial variable when applying theories of ethnic and racial construction to the urban context. Like ethnic group identities more generally, the neighborhood can be seen as a ‘group-specific’, intermediate social institution between the individual and the state, often deriving from subjective definitions of resident members or by government decree (Rapoport 1997). Neighborhoods can be defined socially, by perceived demographic or cultural boundaries, as well as geographically, by physical boundaries or attributes – and neighborhood identities are strongest when these definitions coincide (Rapoport 1997). These identities emerge from the daily spatial trajectories of social practice.

Within such areas the various formal and informal interactions which take place … reinforce residents’ awareness of the neighborhood image as part of their identity, leading to a complex interaction between social and physical variables which could be described as a ‘socio-spatial schema’. (Rapoport 1997, p. 96)

Cornell and Hartmann (1998, p. 184) link the density and frequency of neighborhood interaction with the construction of ethnicity, noting that “it is in daily experience that the boundaries between groups often are most clearly drawn or most subtly reinforced”.

Recognizing how neighborhood and group identity formation can be intertwined, a number of theorists support the need for pre-existing, spatially clustered groups when promoting stable, socially just social contact through planning (Young 1990, Rapoport 1997, Hajer and Reijndorp 2001, Talen 2006). Rapoport (1997, p. 104) argues that “people (like other animals) interact most if they have a secure ‘private’ area which they ‘own’, and to which they can retreat. They can then emerge to interact”. Talen (2006, p. 243), focused on urban planning, summarizes arguments that “successful place diversity requires neighborhood organization” because neighborhood units provide the contextual framework for comprehending diversity. Some authors train the theoretical spotlight on the ‘liminal spaces’ between neighborhoods and groups – neutral urban zones allowing non-threatening diverse contact (Rapoport 1997, Hajer and Reijndorp 2001). If planned at the proper scale, liminal spaces promise to encourage group identity formation through boundary construction while also providing mentally stimulating difference. Hall (2003) emphasizes how face-to-face contact with others can actually heighten awareness of one’s own culture, while Sennett (1990, p. 201) focuses on how “at the boundary one transgresses one’s identity, as one had known it in the past”; either way, group identities are constantly reproduced or subverted in daily socio-spatial practice.
The cultural meanings exchanged when the trajectories of diverse individuals coupled in the liminal spaces of nineteenth-century Algiers and Cape Town were influenced by consistently evolving group identities. These daily practices, which in turn affected neighborhood identities, had significant socio-political ramifications in both cities. This comparative urban study is intended to show how social and spatial contexts can impact the definition of urban diversity, and thus the possibility for the development of tolerance. A range of sources indicate that diverse social contact in urban open space was a common feature in these historic cities, given their walkable scales and the proximity of downtown, workplaces and ethnically clustered residential areas. Yet the causal relationship between contact and social stability was inseparable from particular political and cultural contexts, indicating that even in modern cities, diversity should not be approached as a static end state of proactive planning policies divorced from the continuous reproduction of difference itself.

Open space and diverse contact in Algiers and Cape Town

In colonial Algiers, the Place du Gouvernement – centrally located in the Marine Quarter neighborhood close to the port, the colonial administration and the working-class Casbah neighborhood – hosted some of the most extreme diversity in the city due to its ‘crossroads’ location and social importance (Celik 2009) (Figures 2 and 3). Swiss artist Otth, in 1839, noted that “the central square in Algiers has become a sort of meeting place for the entire population. Each morning, the market is frequented by Kabyles, Biskris, Kulughlis, Africans, Jews, Spanish, French. German is spoken here in addition to
Arabic, Kabyle, Spanish, French, etc.” (Clancy-Smith 2009, p. 27). The plaza clearly exhibited the qualities of a multi-functional “loose space:” it functioned as a promenade, aided by the existence of a balustrade overlooking the sea, and it was also hosted market activity, cultural processions, political proclamations and demonstrations, and social commemorations. The possibilities for experiencing and developing appreciation for diverse cultures in this space are clear – one’s time-space trajectory though the plaza, especially after 1870, meant “spatially confront[ing] the compressed history of migrations to Algeria” (Clancy-Smith 2009, p. 49).

Other Algerian open spaces are notable for diverse social contact. Areas just outside of the main city gates, especially the Bab Azoun gate, remained open spaces through the mid-nineteenth century and hosted a variety of uses that surely brought diverse groups into contact (Figure 4). The space was simultaneously the entry way for peasants and mountain tribesmen entering the city to trade, the transfer station for the carriages of wealthy colonial villa owners, and a space of recreation for city dwellers of all types, where storytellers, musicians, healers often conducted sessions (Clancy-Smith 2009). The harbor unloading area also promoted daily social diversity, bustling with the activity of laborers and merchants from different ethnic groups. Street spaces in the Marine Quarter, however, hosted perhaps the greatest ethnic and class mix. A colonial planned, gridded section of streets along the waterfront, the Quarter was highly residentially mixed, including a host of working-class Mediterranean immigrants, ‘native’ residents and colonial bourgeois (Celik 1997). Certain streets in the district directly abutting the large Muslim population in the Casbah district provided even more diverse contact. The Rue Bab al-Oued, for example, is particularly cited in this regard as “the first stop for people descending from the Casbah” to go to work, shopping, or cultural facilities (Celik 1997, p. 51). Daily processions of Muslims from the Casbah to central mosques located in the Marine Quarter translated into daily inter-group exposure (Celik 1997) – the type of consistent exposure theorized to promote the development of tolerance in society.
Figure 4. Open space outside Algiers’ Bab Azoun Gate, 1839. Source: Lithograph, Otth, 1839, pl. 20; presented in Clancy-Smith (2009), p. 33.

Figure 5. Social interaction in Cape Town’s Greenmarket Square, 1860. Source: Illustration from Le Monde Illustré, April 14, 1860; presented in Picard (1969), p. 23; reprinted with the permission of the Mary Evans Picture Library.
The urban geography of Cape Town, remarkably similar to Algiers in some ways, also promoted social contact in plazas, streets and peripheral recreational spaces (Figure 5). The Grand Parade, a centrally located plaza with similar proximity to white bourgeois merchants, a working-class neighborhood (District Six) and a working port, also witnessed a diverse array of ethnicities and classes mixing during processions, demonstrations, and public markets (Figure 6).

To the true Capetonian the Grand Parade will always be the greatest square of all … whatever the color of his skin or the balance of his bank account – the Grand Parade reflects all shades and vibrations of his fascinating community. (Picard 1969, p. 164)

The parade associated with the Queen’s birthday, ending at the Grand Parade, often brought classes and ethnic groups together in celebration (Picard 1969); in contrast, the forced removals of African residents from the downtown area in 1901 led to an angry demonstration on the same site (Bickford-Smith 1995). Green Point Common – a popular recreational greenspace at the edge of the city – was used as an equestrian race course until the 1890s and hosted a diverse array of race fans in early years.

Not only white Capetonians showed off their equestrian skills – or fashions – but also their yellow, brown and black fellow citizens. Especially the Colored inhabitants loved the races and everything that was associated with them, such as betting and displaying the latest hairstyles, hats, suits and dresses. (Picard 1969, p. 135)

Legal measures promoting segregation between races enacted in the 1890s, however, quickly ended this type of diverse social contact (Bickford-Smith 1995).

Like Algiers, street spaces often promoted the most consistent daily interaction between ethnic groups. District Six – a working-class neighborhood known for its fine-
grained ethnic heterogeneity – provided a prototypical example of such contact. Built and owned, block-by-block, by landlords engaged in speculative development in the 1840s, the district was a “permeable grid of streets lined with predominantly terraced housing, one or two stories high. There was little formal public open space and the streets became the major social and recreational spaces in the area” (Marks and Bezzoli 2000, p. 272) (Figure 7). By 1912, District Six was firmly working-class and residents were “drawn from all over the world” (Marks and Bezzoli 2000, p. 268). Diverse social contact was the norm: street directories showed that people from different ethnic backgrounds often lived side by side, either by block or by individual houses (McCormick 2002); churches, mosques and synagogues, with attached community halls and schools, often shared property boundaries (Marks and Bezzoli 2000); and cinemas in the neighborhoods, each catering to a different economic subset, were reported to be highly ethnically mixed (Marks and Bezzoli 2000). Diverse contact extended to street spaces in downtown Cape Town as well, especially during public parades. The annual ‘slave carnival’, in which ex-slave descendents celebrated their independence by taking to the streets in song and special dress, indicates “how many Black Capetonians celebrated a shared heritage of bondage that cut across religious divides” (Bickford-Smith 1995, p. 187). While the category of ‘black’ residents already subsumed many different group identities, audiences of the slave carnival included members of all Cape Town groups (McCormick 2002).

Rapoport (1997) argues that urban open spaces, such as parks, can often serve as ‘neutral ground’ for mixing between residents of different neighborhoods. The histories of Algiers and Cape Town indicate that central plaza spaces served this function, providing a certain symbolism of neutrality (when not appropriated for political events) that allowed peaceful contact. One visitor to nineteenth-century Algiers used the same terminology to describe the Place du Gouvernement, viewing it as a neutral ground respected by all (Clancy-Smith 2009, p. 50). The Grand Parade seems to have served a similar

Figure 7. Ceremony in informal open space, District Six, Cape Town. Source: Photograph by Clarence Coulson; presented in Hallett and McKenzie (2007), p. 31.
function before segregation practices increasingly polarized the city (Picard 1969). Yet both cities witnessed growing strains of racism in the Victorian era, and the socio-political symbolism and use of these spaces, as well as the construction of group identities, changed accordingly.

The production of group and neighborhood identities in Algiers and Cape Town
On the eve of French occupation many ethnic groups coexisted in Algiers. The distinctions between these groups were reproduced daily through residential clustering as well as the semiotics of culturally encoded dress, language and custom projected in street and institutional spaces. French control did not immediately upend these social classifications – although the superior legal category of ‘European’ was introduced shortly after colonization and dress laws were abolished, many groups continued their way of life. Yet, over time European racism took its toll, especially on ethnicities produced through Ottoman control (such as Kulughlis, offspring of Turkish soldiers and local women). The legal definition of European, at first incidental to life, slowly became ingrained in society and produced a logical opposite – ‘indigene’ or ‘indigenous’ – that subsumed the variety of ethnic groups under one racist category (Clancy-Smith 2009). Thus “indigene evolved into a legal, as well as socio-cultural, category signifying and enshrining dispossession, inequality, lack of civilization – indeed, lack of humanity – and encompassed Arabs, Kabyles, Moors, and… Kulughlis” (Clancy-Smith 2009, p. 37). The French, wittingly or not, had produced a cultural binary that – as ethnic construction theory predicts – was eventually embraced by the former mosaic of ethnic groups, transforming their identities in the process.

In turn, this binary became encoded in Algiers’ residential space. The difference between the lower town (Marine Quarter area) and upper town (Casbah) was somewhat architecturally and socially apparent in the Ottoman era (Celik 1997), but European efforts to redevelop the Marine Quarter under Western planning doctrine sharpened the physical difference between upper and lower towns and provided a physical basis for the racial binary growing in the minds of both colonizer and colonized (Celik 2009) (Figure 8). By the time that grassroots political movements aimed at Algerian and Muslim independence arose in the 1930s, this colonial labeling was firmly self-appropriated by the native community. The Casbah district became synonymous with this new ethnic identity, and ultimately served as the physical home, symbolically and practically, of the independence movement (Carlier 2009). Thus the colonially constructed ethnic binary translated into a new, nationalist group identity associated with, and dependent upon delineated neighborhood spaces for its continued reproduction.

Although hard to prove, this binary seems to have colored the nature of diverse social contact as well. French colonial accounts of Algiers’ social makeup often focused upon the experience of diversity, but it was phrased in terms of encountering the nameless ‘exotic’ (Celik 1997). In turn, the politicized residents of the Casbah, “while averse to ethnic fusion, for reasons of colonial prejudice or religious proscription…were sensitive to cultural cross-breeding accomplished by direct or indirect contact with a ‘creole’ world re-created daily with the Europeans in a shared and disputed space” (Carlier 2009, p. 79). Contact with Europeans was not precluded by colonial dominance, but modern knowledge gained by contact was irreversibly shaded by the racial binary and used to strengthen native identity – a distinction culminating in conflict during the Algerian War of Independence.

Like Algiers, Cape Town’s history prior to the mid-nineteenth century was characterized by a high level of social heterogeneity subsequently influenced by colonial racial constructions. Yet unlike Algiers’ binary racial formulation, a complex array of social,
economic and political circumstances produced a multiplicity of racial groups in Cape Town – a key development as the country headed towards the apartheid era.

The top-down imposition of racial categories, so common in nineteenth-century colonial cities, was relatively muted in Cape Town until the end of the 1870s. Despite some institutional segregation dating to the 1838 abolition of slavery (Bickford-Smith 1995), ethnic constructions in this era reflected grassroots generation more related to class than primordial visions of race. For example, the existing social divide between English and Dutch settlers prevented the construction of a unified white ethnicity up until the end of the 1870s (Bickford-Smith 1995). Some residents with mixed ‘colored’ backgrounds were still readily accepted as ‘white’, due to the possession of wealth, education or European-like features, and the European bourgeois “did not emphasize White ethnic solidarity across potential class divides” (Bickford-Smith 1995, p. 9). The independent construction of the ‘Malay’ Muslim ethnicity provides another example. This group identity emerged throughout the nineteenth century amongst ex-slaves because “conversion to Islam aided the process of giving slaves or their descendents psychological ‘self-ownership’” (Bickford-Smith 1995, p. 35). Although many slaves were originally Muslim, with lineage in Southeast Asia, the Malay ethnicity welcomed converts of all shades and biological backgrounds, and the group was well-known for this physical diversity. The group cohered though a mixture of class, religious and socio-spatial identification: social institutions surrounding religious practice often bridged different occupational groups (like artisans, small traders and laborers) (Ross 1992); shared dress, in a unique Islamic style, “made the
Malays particularly visible to others” in public space and acted as an “external signifier” (Bickford-Smith 1995, p. 35); and the Malay Quarter, a neighborhood dominated by Malay residents, helped tie group identity to the socio-spatial rhythm of everyday life.

Vivian Bickford-Smith (1995) turns to instrumentalist ethnic theory to link structural economic change to the construction of racial categories in Cape Town after 1875. A period of economic boom, related to the discovery of gold and diamonds in the South African interior, may have encouraged racism because the possibility of social mobility by lower, non-white classes was threatening to the European bourgeois. A cohesive white ethnicity, stretching across European ethnicities regardless of social class, was increasingly emphasized by a ruling class nervous about their economic and social position. The political dominance of English politicians from the early 1880s helped cement English as “the language of commerce and public life” (p. 85), and many Dutch families became essentially Anglicized in this period. The Afrikaans language had been firmly adopted by working-class whites and blacks by this time, and “the very divide, along class lines, of Dutch and Afrikaans speakers probably helped to weaken Afrikaner ethnicity” in comparison to English (Bickford-Smith 1995, pp. 61–62).

Working-class residents, sometimes united across ethnic divides in demonstrations and strikes against employers in the 1880s (Bickford-Smith 1995, p. 9), increasingly became incorporated into newly delineated racial groupings in the 1890s. The division of labor became progressively more aligned with ethnic categories with the importation of Bantu African labor by Cape Town industrialists. Residentially segregated in barracks by employers, these immigrants often competed with native Capetonians for jobs in the same harbor and downtown spaces (and often accepted lower wages). This led to significant social conflicts between African and native black workers, preventing the construction of a unified ‘black’ identity and encouraging native Capetonians to self-define themselves as ‘colored’ or ‘Cape Boys’ and to separate all Africans under the moniker ‘Mozambiquan’.

Laws passed by the white-dominated city council in the 1890s which legally delineated between African and colored residents in liquor sales and other areas helped codify these newly created ethnicities. Furthermore, the Malay community increasingly aligned themselves socially and politically with the ‘colored’ (mainly black Christian) community, fearing the types of discriminatory laws aimed at African immigrants – a trend culminating in the 1902 formation of the African Political Organization allying black Christians and Muslims (Bickford-Smith 1995, p. 186). “In the process the...Malay ethnicity was subsumed within a broader colored ethnicity, just as Afrikaner and English ethnicities could be subsumed by White ethnicity” (Bickford-Smith 1995, p. 196). This tactic was seemingly successful, as African immigrants (but not coloreds) were forcibly removed from downtown Cape Town in 1901 and relegated to a peripheral, undeveloped area. In turn, this removal – the first in a series – helped produce another identity constructed in segregated neighborhood space. “In forcing Africans into either the docks location or Ndabeni the government was helping to create communities...The experience of forced removal...undoubtedly enhanced African ethnicity” (Bickford-Smith 1995, pp. 205–207).

These newly cemented group identities clearly influenced the tenor of cultural exchange in diverse urban space. Growing racial prejudice in the European bourgeois, which blamed the Malay community for outbreaks of disease, took its toll. As Bickford-Smith (1995, p. 75) relays from a source, “It was not an uncommon thing for a Malay woman, on meeting a European in the street, to throw out her hand...as one did to me once ... and say, ‘There, take the smallpox’.” Yet in District Six, heterogeneous social contact remained the norm, clearly strengthened by the growing class-based divides of the Victorian era and consequent political alliances between ethnicities sharing lower
class status (Figure 9). McCormick (2002, p. 45), studying District Six in the mid-twentieth century, noted that tolerance for others slowly arose from sharing urban space: “over a period of 150 years a way of living had evolved which accommodated the interests and needs of diverse subgroups without homogenizing them”. This inter-ethnic solidarity may have been predicated less upon ideals of social tolerance and more upon shared class identification, a powerful group identity progressively associated with the Afrikaans language and with the neighborhood itself. For example, McCormick (2002, p. 47) notes that one of the biggest sources of community discord was “behavior that indicated middle-class social aspirations”.

**Political adversity, identity and neighborhood: comparing the Casbah to District Six**

While separated by an entire continent and radically different in many ways, Algiers’ Casbah and Cape Town’s District Six neighborhoods were both confronted with adversity and
proposed destruction by dominant classes in the twentieth century. The differing responses and outcomes in each place help illuminate some of the intricate connections between urban form, ethnic/class construction and the socio-political stability of neighborhoods.

Although the Casbah is relatively famous as an urban neighborhood, it is important to recognize how the place was ‘produced’ under colonial dominance. Before colonization, the district was divided up into hawma—a neighborhood concept, tacitly supported under Ottoman rule, related to both a geographic community space and a local social network (Grangaud 2009). French colonial authorities, ignorant of these homegrown social boundaries and concerned with establishing private property rights and Western legal control, instituted formal districts and a street name and numbering system at odds with the informally defined hawma. As Grangaud (2009, p. 191) notes, these actions “disavowed other ways of practicing space—physically, socially, and politically”—thus destroying the hawma as an institution. Simultaneously, the flight of Ottoman residents added to the decline, as many immigrants after 1839 began to occupy housing in the Casbah district without knowledge of the pre-existing neighborhood structure (Clancy-Smith 2009). Thus, the seeds were planted for the ‘Casbah’ to emerge as a larger neighborhood identity tied to twentieth century ethnic and nationalist sentiment.

French planning interventions, by increasing the physical dichotomy between the Marine Quarter and the upper town, encoded a growing racial binary that Algerian residents seized upon to promote community identity and solidarity in conjunction with Islamic and nationalist sentiments. The constant threat of ‘renovation’ of the Casbah area—colonial authorities had for years hailed plans to clear much of the district in the name of urban renewal (Celik 1997)—may have helped reinforce this convergence of identities. The Casbah in the 1930s is thus viewed as “the birthplace of civil society” for native Algerians (Carlier 2009, p. 79), and served as the primary physical and ideological battleground during the 1954–62 Algerian War of Independence. While the complicated, maze-like urban form undoubtedly aided the successful fight against the French military, the movement’s strength derived as much from a solidarity born from the overlap between religious, nationalist, ethnic and neighborhood identity.

The sad fate of District Six—demolished in the 1960s and 1970s by the apartheid government—could be explained, to some extent, by a lack of similar overlap between identities. Although the neighborhood emerged as a highly diverse mosaic of cultures in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the density, regular urban form and class-based orientation of the neighborhood helped the establishment of a distinct District Six identity (Marks and Bezzoli 2000, McCormick 2002). Natural physical boundaries—with the port and ocean on one side and the steep slopes of Table Mountain on the other—influenced this identity, but as indicated before, shared class and Afrikaner language probably represented the most important cohesive factors.

Yet a convergence between race, nationalism and urban form, as seen in Algiers, may have been necessary to overcome government domination. Although a District Six identity did arise in the minds of some residents—one of shared heterogeneity rooted in multi-generational residence in the neighborhood (McCormick 2002)—this identity was perhaps too ephemeral to promote successful resistance. One former resident of the district argued that the 1966 Group Areas act “first crystallized the geographical and social identity of District Six for many of its residents”, too late to block the political tide (McCormick 2002, p. 47). Adversity and proposed destruction generated substantial protests from District Six residents, but it was not strong enough—bulldozers began destroying buildings in 1968, and over 20 years 30,000 residents were removed (Marks and Bezzoli 2000).
In retrospect, it is clearly difficult to pinpoint the factors contributing to these diverging neighborhood fates. Did the enclosed, convoluted alleys of the Casbah physically generate more successful resistance than the open, gridded streets of District Six – much the way that Parisian neighborhoods, prior to Haussmann’s reforms, used the complexity of the streetscape to combat state interventions? Did the pre-existing history of urbanism in Algiers, pre-dating colonialism, add a durable authenticity to ethnicity unmatched by the European formation of Cape Town? Or did the evolution of a multiplicity of racial groups in Cape Town allow for a ‘divide and conquer’ strategy unwittingly prevented by the construction of a racial binary in Algiers? Although these questions cannot be definitively answered, they do indicate that the production of social and spatial group identities are intertwined in urban histories, and that these patterns can have significant influences on the social and physical evolution of urbanism.

Lessons for future urban neighborhoods

The comparison between these historical case studies, grounded in the belief that there are durable aspects to urbanism relevant to all urban settings, is intended to inform efforts to design neighborhoods with fine-grained income and racial diversity. Although short-term policies aimed at place diversity can be theoretically justified, this paper hopes to remind urbanists that the subjective, contextual nature of ethnic and income diversity will probably prevent the realization of a utopian cosmopolis by definition. In fact, contemporary efforts to measure racial integration (Ellen 1998, Smith 1998) may be paradoxical from a long-term perspective, given that group differences must be socially renegotiated on a consistent basis. This viewpoint thus generates a few observations that bear on modern planning practices.

First, given the fluid nature of ‘diversity’ in social and spatial contexts, the New Urbanist focus on neighborhood or block-level heterogeneity may create environments in which new group identities emerge through repeated contact, eventually leading to new types of place-based homogeneity. This suggests that planning for ethnic and income diversity indirectly, simply by providing a diversity of forms in the built environment (Talen 2008) and ensuring the full residential mobility of all population groups, may be more successful than policies directly aimed at integration. Promoting diversity might also involve advocating for homogeneous territorial groupings at certain sub-neighborhood scales, since differences can be reproduced, and protected, through group inhabitations of place (Young 1990).

Second, the normative ideal of neighborhoods supporting both income and ethnic heterogeneity, as expressed in the CNU Charter, may be unrealistic over longer periods of time. The Casbah coalesced around an ethnic, religious and nationalist identity infused with the inferior economic position of most colonized residents, while District Six’s fragile collective identity was predicated upon working-class solidarity. The histories of these neighborhoods indicate that New Urbanists may need to focus on either ethnic or class diversity if trying to create truly enduring diversity.

Ultimately, it is important to recognize that the causal connections between urban neighborhood form, identity construction, and diverse social contact are limited. The structural, political and economic contexts in nineteenth-century Algiers and Cape Town were the main drivers of identity construction, and these forces would have produced unique identities regardless of the visceral, neighborhood-based experiences of urban residents. Although physical neighborhood form is not the primary determinant of identities and group outcomes, these case studies indicate that it can provide a window into the
workings of such processes and play a key role in perpetuating and shaping social changes already in progress. Planning is limited in its ability to influence the machinations of urban social life, but it still remains a powerful tool for influencing the evolution and societal effects of urban diversity.

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