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Wrestling with Context

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“You can’t compare Marseille with Johannesburg !?”

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  B nit-Gbaffou 2020. Informal Barbecue in Parc de Corbi re, Estaque, Marseille

How do planners know, learn and teach about what to do in the face of unexpected, different, unknown contexts? How do they use the various experiences they have been exposed to, or have been participating in: what has been called their “mental repertoires” of planning situations?

These questions, raised by Neema Kudva and John Forester for this [Interface](#), resonated with my current interrogations about the circulation of planning ideas and practices from one context to another in teaching as well as in engaged research practice. An Associate Professor in Planning, I have indeed just moved from Johannesburg to Marseille.

In Johannesburg, I have taught at Wits School of Architecture and Planning from 2008 to 2018, fortunate to live and take part in “the Johannesburg moment” (Burawoy & Von Holdt 2012) – the post-apartheid time which opened a window of possibility and change in the city. There, I became interested in researching and teaching practices aiming at changing the city “from within”: activism in City Hall (Clavel 2010) and institutional activism (Abers 2019). Since 2018, I have lectured in Aix Marseille School of Geography, Planning and the Environment. I aim here to reflect upon how being exposed to two different contexts has generated echoes, comparisons, and bridges in planning reflection and practice around ‘institutional activism’.

The comparative thinking process I want to reflect upon is not this rational *modus operandi* - starting from a general research question and analysing how diverse contextualised ‘answers’ talk to it. The echoes, analogies, metaphors, practical and theoretical bridges coming to mind are far messier – and if scientific approaches build a distance from the obvious, a creative part also thrives in these unexpected mental bridges.

We begin with a minute, everyday planning object: informal barbecuing in a park, and the planning (non) responses generated in Marseille.

Forbidden barbecuing practices in a park in Marseille

With my planning and geography students, I began a research-action exploring the informal practice of barbecuing in a public park next to the beach, in northern Marseille. Barbecuing, we learned, was a popular practice where low-income families from the Northern housing projects gathered on weekends. Belonging to multiple co-existing ethnic groups (Turks and Kurdish, Kabyls and Arabs, West Africans and Comorians) – these large family gatherings, with generational and gender mixes, celebrated birthdays or family events in huge meals braaied over a fire, using portable barbecue stands or fashioning them with stones, pine twigs and dry grasses found in the park.

The park’s beautiful pines provide shade as it overlooks the sea and the city, often with a gentle, refreshing breeze. When one wants to escape the dense housing projects, one hour away, this is the only public beach in the North of Marseille.

Barbecuing here had a long local history in this neighbourhood marked by a strong working-class culture. But barbecues were getting more numerous in the small park (10 to 30 barbecue groups on 2,1 hectares: Geneste 2022). Their informal nature left signs of fire and food throughout the park, prompting park officials to place multiple ugly black garbage bags every meter or less, to harangue users to remove their garbage.

Barbecues are actually forbidden, for the park sits in the “red zone” of fire hazard mapping. Regularly, surrounding residents, City and police officials complain about these “illegal practices” that nothing seems able to stop.

Johannesburg, echo 1

I inevitably recall Johannesburg – and White suburbanites’ complaining about township residents gathering in parks with their ‘*braai*’ (barbecues), as loud music came from their *kombi* (mini bus) hired for transport from Soweto 30 km away. One Black female student at Wits University explained this simply, “Well, you go to a park, it is far away, it is a big thing: a family outing. And you’re not going to come all this way and eat a cold sandwich: there is a whole party coming. Plus, in townships of course, you do not have large houses with gardens where you can socialise.”

Something is familiar then, in the large, joyful and braaing gatherings in Marseille. Distances are shorter than in sprawling Johannesburg, but the Marseille urban fabric is so fragmented by highways and industrial zones that it takes an hour or more to reach the park and beach from the housing projects.

Marseille 2 – Framing the analysis adopting a Johannesburg lens

I prepared students to present their research on park uses to municipal and police officials. Our analysis had been inspired by my experience of the regulation of street trading in Johannesburg. When social practices considered legitimate are made illegal, I suggested, not only might the restrictions fail (those practices occur anyway), but they have regressive effects for all parties. Keeping most street trading illegal in Johannesburg contributed to corrupt practices amongst police and City officials (racketeering traders), to trader organisations’ clientelistic and violent practices, and to disorderly street congestion, dirt and decay.

Similarly in Marseille, students found that rendering barbecues illegal did not prevent their practice. Pairs of police officers — facing 50 families, during Eid — did not dare intervene beyond passing by. Only in raids (reinforced by 10 specialised officers), or during Mistral (strong windy) days where barbecuing was actually dangerous, did they threaten to distribute fines.

More importantly, students found that police themselves doubted such prohibitions and that firemen too considered barbecuing there not particularly dangerous (even as any fire in a Mediterranean climate remains a risk), given dominant winds and the layout of the park, buffered from the hills by parking lots, road and viaduct. Firemen confirmed that having ‘informal’ barbecues throughout the park, not in planned areas (away from trees and grasses) did increase risk, “But don’t quote us, hey? It is forbidden after all.”

Marseille 3 – From research debate to attempted action

After their presentation, the park manager congratulated the students. Privately, he thanked us for saying aloud what other city employees had been thinking silently —the existing rule’s absurdity. I offered to help build a case for legalising the barbecuing practice in that park. Recently revamped, the park already showed traces of fire: concrete dustbins used as ashtrays, metal fences deployed as braai

grids. Legalisation would allow light barbecuing in selected, lower-risk areas, provide sand, water and bins for ash, and engage with users to lower fire hazards of *braaing* practices. He enthusiastically agreed.

Looking for Johannesburg-like bureaucratic activism in Marseille

I was thrilled. I had tried to work with ‘activists in City hall ’(Clavel 2010), to continue earlier research in post-apartheid Johannesburg on institutional activism. Here may be one institutional activist, I thought – one wanting to proactively change things, to push a local policy or project to improve, even slightly, the lives of working-class park users — whose transgressive practices had prompted other municipal agents or community leaders to express derogatory comments: ‘This is savage behavior’, ‘You should see how dirty these people leave this place.’

So, the municipal park official, a student and I began building a case for legalising barbecues in the park. We conducted interviews with City firefighters; we excavated the zoning document mapping fire hazards and discovered it did not need revision, barbecue stands being “light infrastructure”. We engaged park users to better understand their needs. Surveying the site, we identified lower-risk areas, considering technical solutions (including electric barbecues) and estimating costs. We interviewed neighbourhood associations, visited other parks with barbecue stands in near-by cities, in Mediterranean contexts where fire is a real issue. One nearby city had legalised this practice, its champion coming from Reunion Island (in the Indian Ocean), where barbecuing in public spaces is common practice. He recognized it was needed in Provence too — that it would serve the city’s housing project. So he made it happen, similarly bridging contexts: another institutional activist!

Planning for braaing in Johannesburg – what makes integrating popular practice possible

This leads me back to barbecues in Johannesburg parks, and how they were planned for. The municipal park agency’s dominant discourse held, ‘it is crucial to overcome the legacy of apartheid, to fight the ‘green divide’ where townships are dusty and deprived of parks, trees or gardens, contrasting with the ‘leafy suburbs’.

There, barbecuing practices by Black families coming from southern townships to the northern suburban parks caused uproar in local “Friends of the Park” associations. Beyond suburbanites’ racial fears of being dispossessed of ‘their’ park, there were also classic conflicting uses, including environmental harms, fumes and noise preventing birdwatching, etc. But in post-apartheid Johannesburg, fighting environmental injustice was paramount – Blacks were no longer to be treated as a minority. The park agency recognized a ‘right to braai ’for people deprived of individual gardens — so barbecue stands were placed in targeted areas to limit environmental damage and allow them to complement more traditional park uses. As importantly, both access and environmental education became objects of public policy: the Friends of the Park were required to organise educational tours for township schools, or to set up twinning partnerships with lower-resourced parks.

Marginalising popular practices in Marseille: ‘It’s the context, stupid!’

In Marseille, the mostly Arab, low-income families barbecuing in the park were given no such consideration. Their residential and social marginalisation was also a political one: their leisure and social practices were hardly given legitimacy, consideration or priority in public debates.

Our studies confirmed that individual actors saw the absurdity of forbidding barbecuing: it was inefficient and unenforceable; it was more dangerous if unplanned and illegalised; it was a legitimate popular practice ('leave them be, we've been there too!'). But nobody would take responsibility for managing the barbecue sites, even for supporting their legalisation. Responsibility would lie with the municipal service overseeing the park. Alas! Our park official and the park agency director were not congenial, and the director declared, 'This is out of the question'. End of the story. Almost.

In quest for institutional activism in Marseille – Take 2

As I had studied City activists in Johannesburg, they override, look for side avenues, leak information to civil society (Bénit-Gbaffou, forthcoming), work as 'guerrillas in the bureaucracy' (Needleman & Needleman 1974). So, I asked the park manager, who I had befriended: "Why don't you go and see... your manager's boss?". But this would be jumping hierarchy and lead to severe sanctions. "Do you have colleagues you can talk to, in other units or departments?" He was not allowed to contact them. "What if you contact neighbourhood associations, who can approach councillors more directly? Or use me, an academic? Or the media?" He would have none of it. His link to the associations was slender, he did not trust their discretion, he feared being accused of betraying confidentiality. Of course I respected that.

But this provoked further thinking. Was Marseille's bureaucracy more hierarchised than Johannesburg's? Probably. In Johannesburg, party-belonging (in the African National Congress) throughout the administration created parallel networks and loyalties. This opened alternative avenues for getting things done: what following the administrative line might not achieve, following party hierarchies still might. This politicisation of bureaucracy became legitimate, post-apartheid, to transform the state apparatus itself to serve the whole population, and recent anti-apartheid struggles kept these networks alive.

More broadly, my question of 'institutional activism' seemed misplaced in Marseille. Institutional activism exists, but it is hardly seen as such by officials. In South Africa, officials were proud to be framed as 'institutional activists'. Some welcomed the term, as if their entering state institutions betrayed their political and social commitments: continuing activism through institutional means reconciled them with their aspirations and self-representation.

In France, officials with whom I spoke never viewed their practice in these terms, far from it: 'I do my job, that is all'. These officials valued their 'neutrality', their 'blindness to difference', the universal treatment they give to all — as state servants in the Weberian sense. To admit that one proactively pursues a cause would be threatening that essential virtue. This contextual difference makes research on this topic in France challenging, but also exciting.

On the other hand, 'public service' might motivate some to act, resist or feign to misunderstand directions that they believe are not just, discriminatory or having regressive social effects. 'Public

service' remains a meaningful notion in France, despite its transformations in neoliberalising times. But this is now only a hypothesis — produced by the difference that context makes, questioning the possibilities of progressive urban policies and practices.

Nevertheless, informal barbecues continue unabated in Marseille. The newly elected district mayor, of North African origin, dislikes informality and will not budge on this issue; the park manager has moved to another department where he feels more comfortable.

Comparative reflections: Repertoires of stories identify common issues and specify contextual, empirical and theoretical differences

What are the potentials of such comparative thinking, linking what one could consider irretrievably different urban contexts — even some call Marseille 'the most African city in France' ?

The Marseille case triggered echoes in my repertoire of Johannesburg stories, where barbecuing practices brought together three dynamics: conflicting uses over scarce and prized public spaces in segregated cities; popular informal practices raising concerns for environmental harm; and prejudice against 'others' whose visible practices prompted anxiety and anger from local communities. The most interesting contrast involved the politically dominant framing of environmental justice in post-apartheid Johannesburg, where a 'right to braai' could be envisaged — along with accompanying measures to mitigate conflict and construct mutual engagement. These outcomes were reached neither through deliberation nor consensus: the various groups were too divided and confrontational. The municipality's measures responded not to explicit claims by popular groups but to their informal practices (Bayat 1997) — and only then could mitigation and mediation measures follow.

So, context is not a starting point: the issue at hand, as framed by different actors and groups, explicitly or not, provides the starting point. As I often tell my students, context is not 'everything you might know about the site' — it is actually defined during the process of specifying the issue at stake. 'Is it relevant that Marseille is 2600 years old? No? Then we don't need to know that...'. Defining 'the context' is being selective about elements that matter to the issue at stake, and why — even if, of course, this identification occurs in circular, iterative and sometimes unexpected ways.

In Marseille, no community pressed claims; opportunities to raise issues in the public arena were limited; barbecuing was usually handled by *laissez-faire*, along with occasional repression, complaint and stigmatisation. The process needed to start with proactive municipal intervention — setting up a principle of justice and then mitigating its local impacts. But such municipal intervention is complex (Krumholz and Clavel 1994), involving intense advocacy work "behind the scenes" (Bénit-Gbaffou forthcoming), within the institution and around it. It fell short this time, reminding me what I learnt in Johannesburg: how lengthy and difficult activism remains (within institutions and on the street, however differently). But we might keep the cause, the argument, the planning ideas in our mental repertoires, for when the political opportunity to make it happen arises. For planners' positions may be not only marginal, but also strategic (Needlemans, 1974): situated between policy circles, operational services, and civil society's claims, planners are possibly better placed than any other activist to make things happen.

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