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## The “Aesthetic Turn” as a Bridge between Communicative and Agonist Planning Theories

Exploring the interplay of “consensus” and “dissensus” with a view on its implications for Finnish planning

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the dispute between consensus-oriented communicative planning theorists and dissensus-oriented agonist planning theorists. The paper starts from the observation that a number of advocates of agonism have followed the so-called “aesthetic turn” in political thought. They have emphasised, in particular, the politically progressive potential of the mode of reason that Kant introduced in his aesthetics, a mode that deviates from the Kantian theoretical and practical modes of reason, and one that has generally been marginalised in modern societies. While the proponents of agonism wish to make use of this mode of reason when attempting to challenge hegemonic projects and give voice to marginalised groups in society, Habermas has been generally taken to be one of those philosophers who marginalize the aesthetic mode of reason. Yet, also Habermas has found inspiration from Kant’s aesthetics, including the notions of consensus and *sensus communis*. Hence, the paper revisits Kantian aesthetics to search for a common ground between Habermasian and agonist views of politics and planning. It ends up arguing that the notions of consensus and dissensus do not stand for mutually exclusive orientations in planning, but both of these orientations have their places in planning systems and practices. The paper takes a look at some recent case studies that have charted potential places for productive agonist confrontations in the British development control based planning system. Having done so, the paper ends with some suggestions as to where would be the appropriate places for respective approaches in the context of Finnish planning.

**Keywords:** agonism, communicative planning, consensus, dissensus, Habermas

### Introduction

In the recent planning-theoretical discourse, the debate between advocates of consensus-oriented communicative planning and advocates of confrontation-oriented agonist planning has been intense. The communicative planning theory that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s was originally largely based on Jürgen Habermas’s philosophy (see especially Forester 1989; 1993; Healey 1992; 1997; Innes 1996; Sager 1994). Agonist planning theories, the aim of which has been to challenge communicative planning theory and to make more room for “agonist dissensus” in planning, have found their inspiration from the work of political

theorists such as Chantal Mouffe (see Hillier 2002a; 2002b; Pløger 2004; Purcell 2009; McClymont 2011; Allmendinger and Haughton 2012) and Jacques Rancière (see Dikeç 2005; Swyngedouw 2009; Allmendinger and Haughton 2012; Metzger et al. 2014). Some of the theorists of agonism have also gone back to Hannah Arendt (Hillier 2002b; 2003; Gunder 2003; Dikeç 2013), who was among the first modern theorists to introduce the Greek concept of *agon* to political thought.

Theoretical differences between the proponents of communicative and agonist planning theories boil down to differences in axiological views, differences that have their bearings also on the political theories of the respective parties. In this paper, my focus is on one particular difference: the Habermasian theory of politics highlights the role of moral norms, which can be discussed, according to Habermas, within a horizon of rationally motivated consensus (Habermas 1984; 1996). In Habermas's political theory, there is also a place for "ethical" questions concerning the "good life", questions that do not hold such a prospect of consensus or universal agreement, but remain relative to a certain particular cultural context (Habermas 1996). However, Habermas differentiates these questions strictly from moral questions and lumps them together with aesthetic questions, which are bound (just as ethical questions are) to their particular contexts (Warnke 1995). Moral questions, then, seem to enjoy a position of privilege in Habermas's political philosophy (Habermas 1996). The proponents of agonist political philosophy, by contrast, often follow the so-called aesthetic turn in political thought (see Kompridis 2014), prioritizing aesthetic-ethical points of view and highlighting deep and irreconcilable differences in our views concerning the good and the valuable. For them, consensus always entails exclusion (Mouffe 2013; see also Hillier 2003; Purcell 2009). The pursuit of consensus therefore violates the plurality that characterizes cotemporary societies and affirms the existing hegemonic orders in society (Mouffe 2013). Hence, agonists argue that instead of searching for consensus, we should celebrate dissensus and its potential in confronting hegemonic projects in cities and societies.

What then is specifically aesthetic in the aesthetic turn of political thought or planning theory? As it may have already become clear, the aesthetic turn does not only (or perhaps even primarily) mean that we should direct our attention to the political relevance of art and other aesthetic objects or to artistic and aesthetic aspects of the built environment. Rather, the aesthetic turn refers more generally to the increasing popularity of such theoretical ideas concerning reason, experience, meaning and political agency that draw on the tradition of philosophical aesthetics (Kompridis 2014, xvi). Quite often, the followers of the aesthetic turn have based their political theories on ideas derived from Immanuel Kant's aesthetics, formulated in Kant's third Critique (Kompridis 2014; see also Cascardi 1999), that is, *Critique of Judgement* (Kant 1952, referred hereafter as CJ). Those modes of rationality that Kant handled under the titles of theoretical reason and practical reason in his first and second Critiques have arguably been highly influential in the process of modernisation in western societies. However, at the same time, as the theorists of the aesthetic turn maintain, the aesthetic, "residual" modes of reason that Kant gives an account of in his third Critique have been marginalised in our public practices of reasoning (cf. Cascardi 1999). Theorists of agonist politics – and agonist planning – often turn to these modes of reason when they wish to give a voice to marginalised groups in society and to challenge hegemonic projects and discourses in cities and societies.

The main theoretical research question in this paper concerns the nature of the aesthetic turn in planning theory. The question is, more precisely, whether this turn should be seen only as a division line between Habermasian and agonist approaches, or could it be portrayed as an intersection from where continuities and interplays between these two approaches are to be found. Although Habermas's political theory has been generally regarded as quite hostile – or at

best indifferent – to the themes related to aesthetics (see, e.g., Dahlberg 2005, 116, n. 22), Habermas has interestingly also indicated Kant's aesthetics, including the notions of aesthetic *sensus communis* and consensus, at least an indirect source of inspiration for his theory of rationally motivated consensus (Cascardi 1999, 13; see also Habermas 1980, 130–131). This being the case, my paper sets out to investigate the agonist notion of dissensus, on one hand, and the Habermasian notion of consensus, on the other hand, against the background of Kantian aesthetics. My conclusion in this paper is that rather than underline the differences between consensus-oriented and dissensus-oriented approaches in planning and politics, it would be worthwhile to chart potential realms for a fruitful interplay between these two approaches.

The practical research question in this paper concerns the implications of communicative and agonist planning theories for planning practice. Whereas communicative planning theory has had a considerable impact on planning practices all over the world, agonist planning theory has so far remained quite abstract and distant from practice (see, e.g., Mouat et al. 2013, 164). It has not been clear what kind of planning practices the agonist theory would imply and which kind of planning situations the agonist approaches would suit the best. Recently, some case studies have suggested that agonism could and should challenge consensus-oriented approaches, especially at the level of detailed planning, and more precisely, in concrete disputes concerning case-specific projects (McClymont 2011; Mouat et al. 2013; cf. Pløger 2004). Even if planning projects often start from some kind of shared understanding of the norms and principles that should guide planning, it is not unusual that consensus fall apart when people come up with their differing ideas concerning appropriate ways of concretizing the norms and principles. From the viewpoint of “the aesthetic turn”, it is interesting that at this stage of planning processes the aesthetic dimension of our relation to the environment often comes to the fore.

Katie McClymont (2011) has interestingly discussed case-specific agonist confrontations in the context of British development control, arguing that although planning theorists very seldom give credit to the project-based approach typical in development control, this approach has its merits seen from the agonist point of view: development control typically establishes legitimate arenas for alternative interpretations concerning meanings of places as well as judgments concerning appropriate planning solutions.

Finnish detailed planning, by contrast, is based on holistic and comprehensive plans (see Krokfors 2016). Furthermore, especially after the latest reform of Finnish planning law at the end of the 1990s, Habermasian communicative ideals were introduced to Finnish planning systems, and the consensus-oriented approach was regarded as relevant in particular for detailed planning (see, e.g., Syrjänen 2005). Nonetheless, various case studies have shown that it is difficult to form a lasting consensus on questions concerning meanings and interpretations of particular sites, as well as on ideas concerning their physical design. Recent research has indicated that it is not only the citizen stakeholders who are likely to express their discontent concerning ratified plans at the implementation stage, but also building companies and the architects who work for them would often like to see changes in the plans (Staffans et al. 2015; Krokfors 2016). Developers and building companies can apply for permits to deviate from existing ratified plans, and they are increasingly making use of this possibility (ibid.). Through deviations, the project-oriented approach is making its way into Finnish detailed planning. Nonetheless, this kind of ad hoc project orientation has not so far brought about legitimate arenas of agonist confrontations between different interpretations of sites at this stage of a process.

Given this, my paper ends up asking whether Finnish detailed planning could learn something first from agonist planning theory, and secondly from

*Even if planning projects often start from some kind of shared understanding of the norms and principles that should guide planning, it is not unusual that consensus fall apart when people come up with their differing ideas concerning appropriate ways of concretizing the norms and principles.*

development control based systems in what comes to constructive uses of dissensus and disagreements in planning.

## From consensus-oriented planning to agonist confrontations

Communicative planning theory made its breakthrough in the end of 1980s and early 1990s, after the publication of Jürgen Habermas's *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Habermas 1984; 1987). Drawing from Habermas's idea of "unconstrained, unifying, consensus-bringing force of argumentative speech" (Habermas 1984, 10), theorists such as John Forester (1989; 1993), Patsy Healey (1992; 1997), Judith Innes (1996) and Tore Sager (1994) formed their own versions of communicative planning. In order to make planning more legitimate and more open to the ideas and views of stakeholders, the advocates of communicative planning wished to turn planning processes into processes of inclusive consensus-building.

One of the key ideas of Habermas's theory of communicative action is that the horizon of shared understanding characterizes not only the ways in which we discuss facts, but also our disputes concerning the validity of norms (Habermas 1984). This being the case, he also claims that communication and rational argumentation can form a basis for coordination of our collective action (Habermas 1984; 1987). Communicative planning theorists take urban planning to be one of those forms of action for which Habermas's theory could be relevant (Forester 1989; 1993; Healey 1992; 1997; Innes 1996; Sager 1994). For Habermas (1984), orientation to consensus is something that the speakers must always already presuppose when they engage in rational communication. Consensus is, then, neither an abstract philosophical construct nor an empirical fact that could be observed in our everyday communications – and in fact, Habermas well recognises that in empirical reality, speakers are often not oriented to understanding. Still, his reconstructive theory of necessary presuppositions of communication has the practical implication that if we think that someone is not speaking the truth, following legitimate rules in society or being sincere, we can and most likely will expect that he or she is willing to enter into an argumentative process where his or her claims can be rationally refuted or vindicated (Habermas 1984, 17–18).

Although Habermas's view is largely based on the 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy of language, Kant's influence is also present in his theory. When it comes to vindication of moral norms, Habermas follows Kant's idea that the candidates for norms must be tested from the point of view of their universalizability. Whereas in Kant's theory of practical reason, the idea is that each and every one of us can test the generalizability of a norm by leaning on his or her reason only, Habermas insists that this testing of the generalizability of a norm must be based on open, public and rational discussion with others (Habermas 1987, 93). Given this, Habermas has also been argued to be indebted not only to Kant's practical philosophy but also to Kant's aesthetics (Cascardi 1999, 13, 154). For Kant, aesthetic judgement is a judgement within which we publicly judge something to be beautiful and expect that others will concur with our judgement (CJ, Part 1, § 8, and passim; see also Blaug 1999, 96–97). The peculiarity of aesthetic judgements is, however, that they cannot be validated by arguments. They are grounded on subjective feeling rather than concepts, but in such a way that they raise an expectation of universal assent, a *consensus* (cf. CJ, Part 1, § 22). And yet Kant makes it clear that the universal non-conceptual communicability of feeling in an aesthetic judgement does not mean that this consensus would exist as an empirical fact (CJ, Part 1, § 22).

The reason for the fact that aesthetic judgements cannot be proved by arguments is that in an aesthetic judgement, we judge things as particulars in their

particularity. We are not interested in whether they meet the criteria of a certain universal category of objects or in whether they serve some definable purposes or moral ends (CJ, Part 1, §§ 1–6). In an aesthetic judgement, the human “faculties” operate in a way that differs from other types of judgements. When we approach an object with an interest in acquiring knowledge of it, the faculty of imagination produces a representation of the object, and the faculty of understanding subsumes the representation under a concept. However, in the case of aesthetic judgement, we have only the free play of understanding and imagination, a spontaneous harmony between the two faculties (CJ, Part 1, § 6). There are no pre-given universals or concepts under which the particular could be subsumed; there is only a feeling of harmony and freedom. For Kant, aesthetic judgements are therefore not determinant judgements, but reflective judgements, where the universal is derived from the particular (see, e.g., Blaug 1999, 96–97).

In discussing the way in which aesthetic judgments raise an expectation of universal assent, Kant introduces his complex and convoluted notion of *sensus communis*. It is the “common sense” that we need to presuppose in order to make aesthetic judgments at all (CJ, Part 1, §§ 20–21). Aesthetic judgements are then described as “examples of the judgement of common sense”, judgements that have “exemplary validity” (CJ, Part 1, § 22).

Let us now return to Habermas, who has been argued to have turned Kant’s *sensus communis aestheticus* into *sensus communis logicus*, as he has found the prospect of consensus from the realm of argumentative speech. He has been often criticised because of this move (Cornell 1999, 131; Cascardi 1999, 13), a move that also the advocates of agonism strongly oppose (see, e.g., Mouffe 2013; Hillier 2003; Purcell 2009). Although not all agonists are straightforwardly against the idea of consensus, they are against Habermas’s prioritization of argumentative speech in the formation of consensus. Yet many agonists include in the canon of agonist political philosophers such a consensus-oriented philosopher as Hannah Arendt, to whom Habermas has also made references when developing his theory of the role of public, deliberative processes in collective action-coordination (see especially Habermas 1980; 1996).

Arendt (1992) introduced Kant’s idea of *sensus communis aestheticus* to the realm of political thought already in the 1970s in her *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*. Yet it still remains questionable whether Kant himself would have approved of the use of reflective judgements and *sensus communis* in the realm of political thought. As the proponents of agonist politics and planning often note, Arendt’s point of departure was the Greek notion of *agon*, and the idea of public space as “space in which one competes for recognition, precedence, and acclaim” (Benhabib 1992, 78; see also Hillier 2003, 41). However, she also relied on the “associational” or consensual view of public space, a space that appears when “men act together in concert” (Benhabib 1992, 78). Although individuals can take initiatives and begin something new on their own in the public space, they can, according to Arendt (1998), complete their initiatives and have power only when acting together with others. Although Habermas (1983) finds much to criticise in Arendt’s conception of the public space or public sphere, his theory of deliberative democracy owes much to Arendt’s ideas of discursing and acting together in the public sphere (see Habermas 1980; 1996).

For Arendt (1992, 42–43), Kantian aesthetic judgements provide a model for political judgements because they involve an impartial and disinterested way of judging and are based on “enlarged thinking”, a way of thinking that takes into account the perspectives of other people and tests judgements “in contact with other people’s thinking”. Hence, Arendt’s Kantian-inspired political judgements are simultaneously particular, context-bound judgements, and inclusive of an aspect of generalizability. Here, Arendt adverts to Kantian *sensus communis*, which she – following Kant – describes not only as a precondition of comparing

our judgements with other people's possible judgements but also as a precondition for communication (ibid., 70–71). In Arendt's theory, *sensus communis* is translated into a community sense, a sense "that fits us into a community" (ibid.).

Contemporary agonists have credited Arendt with defining the terrain of politically relevant communication far more broadly than Habermas (Mouffe 2007, 4; 2013, 11). For Arendt, political communication does not primarily consist of argumentative speech, but consensus can be sought also by means of the aesthetic or rhetoric modes of communication, of persuasion and impressing others (Arendt 1992). Yet, for Chantal Mouffe (2007, 4) – one of the leading contemporary theorists of agonist politics – Arendt's ideas of agonist persuasion are not yet sufficient to make her a proper agonist. As Mouffe argues, Arendt's enlarged thinking is, even with its respect for the plurality of perspectives, "agonism without antagonism" (Mouffe 2007, 4; 2013, 10). Mouffe's agonist pluralism, by contrast, sets out from the hypothesis that antagonism is ineradicable in the domain of the political (see, e.g., Mouffe 2013, xii, 2).

Mouffe (2013) criticises all forms of liberal political theory for negating the antagonistic dimension of the political. The Habermasian presupposition concerning the possibility of universal rational consensus is her main target of criticism, whereas Arendt is partly relieved from this criticism as she does not rely on purely cognitive methods in the handling of moral problems (Mouffe, 2013, 3; cf. Habermas 1983). As Mouffe (2013, 4) argues, liberal political theorists, in their trust in rationality, are incapable of explaining why passions cannot be rationally controlled and why there is violence in contemporary societies. Instead of categorizing passions as a phenomenon belonging to the "archaic past", as Habermas seems to do, a theory of democratic politics should, by Mouffe's (2013) account, encounter the passions and put them in the service of vibrant democratic culture. It is true that Habermas has often condemned the use of passionate, aesthetic-affective modes of communication in the political realm (see, e.g., Dahlberg 2005, 116, n. 22). However, it has also been noted that Habermas's ideals of rational communication do not straightforwardly exclude aesthetic-affective modes of speech. For instance, Habermas's ideas concerning reflexivity can well be taken to also include "aesthetic reflexivity", a notion with which Scott Lash (1993) has referred to as hermeneutic self-interpretation (Dahlberg 2005, 116–117; cf. Mattila 2016b). These kinds of self-interpretations can contribute positively to moral and political discourses carried out in the public sphere (Johnson 2006, 163). Habermas's theory, furthermore, welcomes passions and desires into public discourses as long as they are expressed and vindicated in an understanding-oriented manner, and not used as a method of manipulative persuasion that bypasses the force of reason (Baynes 1994, 317; see also Dahlberg 2005).

Whether Mouffe's accusations are justified or not, she herself assumes the task of emphasising the role of passions in political communication in her model of agonist politics or "agonist pluralism", as she calls it. In so doing, her intention is to turn "antagonisms" in society to "agonism" (Mouffe 2013, 7). Whereas antagonisms are about "struggles between enemies", agonism is about "struggles between adversaries" (ibid.). "Adversary", in turn, is for Mouffe an opponent, someone "with whom one shares a common allegiance to the democratic principles of 'liberty and equality for all', while disagreeing about their interpretation" (ibid.).

In her model of agonist pluralism, Mouffe (2007, 3; 2013, 92) dedicates a special place for artistic practices in urban space, practices which have the potential to confront and unsettle dominant hegemonies, though without a horizon of a final resolution. According to her, artistic activism cannot directly change existing orders, but it can give "a voice for all those who are silenced within the framework

of the existing hegemony” (Mouffe 2007, 5; see also 2013, 99). This voicing is possible due to the ability of artistic practices to grasp “the role that affect plays in the process of identification” as well as “the role of passionate attachments in the constitution of political identities” (Mouffe 2013, 96). Art and aesthetics thus take us to those dimensions of the political that lie beyond reason and rational arguments.

| Agonist theory  | Habermasian theory  |
|---|---|
| Focus on ethics/aesthetics (questions concerning the good life) | Main focus on morality (questions concerning justice)         |
| Emphasis on dissensus/disagreement, or “conflictual consensus”  | Orientation towards consensus                                 |
| Emphasis on aesthetic-affective modes of communication          | Emphasis on rational and argumentative modes of communication |

**Table 1. The main characteristics of agonist and Habermasian theories.**

Mouffe of course also acknowledges the fact that artistic and aesthetic activities do not always appear as counter-hegemonic activities, but they can also serve neo-liberal planning and economic interests. That this might increasingly be the case is a fear that Mouffe shares with the first-generation critical theorists Horkheimer and Adorno, who already in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were concerned with the “culture industry” and the ways in which it destroyed the reflective and critical nature of aesthetic reception (see Mouffe 2013, 85–86).

To defend the critical potential of artistic practices, Mouffe (2007, 4) – just as many other contemporary theorists of art – turns from the aesthetics of beauty to the Kantian aesthetics of the sublime. Her particular interest is in Jean-François Lyotard’s (1988) interpretation of the sublime, an interpretation reflected in Lyotard’s version of dissensus, “the differend”. Sublime, for Kant, refers to a crisis encountered by the faculty of imagination when it fails to represent something of a sheer magnitude or immensity, or something that lacks form or finality (CJ, Part 1, §§ 25–26). Instead of the pleasurable free play of faculties, the sublime involves an element of pain. This results from the incommensurability of the faculties, or disagreement between them, as Lyotard would put it. Nonetheless, in the case of the sublime, there is also a moment of pleasure involved. This moment is due to human reason and its ideas, which bring about the ability to comprehend things that cannot be represented (CJ, Part 1, § 26), or alternatively, to a recognition of our supremacy over nature “even in its immeasurability” (CJ, Part 1, § 28). Whereas the Kantian aesthetics of the beautiful is connected to the notion of *sensus communis*, Lyotard (1985, 15) finds it important to note that this does not seem to be the case with the sublime.

Proceeding from the Kantian notion of the sublime, Lyotard (1988) discusses different dimensions of the differend. To start with, this notion is central in his portrayal of the agonist nature of communication. The differend refers to incommensurabilities and collisions between different kinds of language games (Lyotard 1988, xi). In Lyotard’s Wittgenstein-inspired idea of differentiated and isolated language games, there is no place for universal principles that could govern such disputes where incommensurable language games collide (Lyotard 1988; see also Pløger 2004). Lyotard (1988), therefore, turns to Kantian reflective



judgment to find ways to regulate these kinds of disputes in a manner that does justice to the plurality of language games. However, Lyotard's (1988, xi) concern also is that, in practice, disputes are typically solved in terms of some specific language game only. For him, then, the differend also refers to "the wrong" that is suffered by those who do not share that language game. The sublime has an indispensable role in these kinds of disputes, as it can sensitize us to abysses and silences around our efforts to represent what cannot be represented (Lyotard 1994). The function of the differend, then, is also to refer indirectly to the voice belonging to those sufferings that are silenced in society (ibid.).

Lyotard maintains that art – in this case avant-garde art – can have critical potential in society, as long as it witnesses the collisions between faculties and aims at representing what cannot be represented (see, e.g., Lyotard 1985). Chantal Mouffe (2007) follows this Lyotardian view, relating the critical potential of artistic activities in urban space to the notion of the differend. She does not seem to be interested in the harmony typical of the beautiful, but rather insists that "critical art is art that foments dissensus, that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate" (Mouffe 2007, 4). Mouffe also gives various examples of artistic activism that has successfully brought about ruptures in current neo-liberal urban realities.

But what if people living under neo-liberal urban conditions would need harmony more than ruptures? Do not global capitalism and neo-liberalization already bring enough sublime ruptures into contemporary urban experience (cf. Jameson 2003)? The question remains whether agonist politics could also make room for such aesthetic and artistic activities that would not only take the form of reactive protests, but also put forward constructive alternative urban imaginaries in the manner that Arendt (1998) envisioned. Would the constructive and positive elements lead us back to the beauty and harmony that are suspect of affirming existing hegemonic projects (cf. Mouffe 2007, 3–4)?

Before trying to answer this question, I will briefly introduce still one more agonist interpretation of the aesthetic dimensions of the political, and the political dimensions of the aesthetic. It is the interpretation given by Jacques Rancière, who has been, alongside Mouffe, one of the most important sources of inspiration for agonist planning theory (see, e.g., Dikeç 2005; Swyngedouw 2009; Allmendinger and Haughton 2012; McClymont 2011; Metzger et al. 2014). Rancière's agonism is founded on the differentiation between "politics" and "police", where "police" refers to the "symbolic constitution of the social" and to "a certain way of dividing up the sensible" (Rancière 2010, 36; see also McClymont 2011, 244; Metzger et al. 2014, 11). It differentiates between what can be seen or heard and what cannot – or what can be voiced and by whom and what cannot (Rancière 2010, 36, see also Metzger et al. 2014, 11). Politics, then, always works against the police and its symbolic constitutions (Rancière 2010, 36). Here the concept of dissensus enters into the picture. Rancière's "dissensus" does not refer to conflicts of opinions or interests, but to the demonstration of "the gap in the sensible" (ibid., 38).

For Rancière (2014, 263), the connection between aesthetics and politics is unavoidable, since both are about the distribution of the sensible. Not surprisingly, Rancière finds it necessary to revisit Kant to analyse the nature of this distribution. Rancière (2014), unlike Lyotard, does not start from the Kantian sublime, but from the judgement of beauty, though he interprets beauty itself to contain elements of the sublime. Rancière is highly critical of Lyotard's use of the Kantian sublime and of Lyotard's theory of art that seems to deny the emancipatory potential of art altogether, leaving art with a role to "testify to a disaster" (Rancière 2005, 22; see also 2012, 198). Rancière does not directly shun the concept of beauty, nor does he hold the aesthetics of the beautiful to be suspect of affirming existing hegemonies. To start with, this is because in the

Kantian judgement of beauty, we can find “a distribution of the sensible that escapes the hierarchical relationship between a high faculty and low faculty” (Rancière 2014, 264). Going further back in history to Plato, he discusses how the hierarchy of the faculties has been reflected in social hierarchies, and more precisely how the sensation, represented by the lower classes in society, has been subjected to intelligence, represented by the ruling class (*ibid.*, 264–265). According to him, in a Kantian aesthetic judgement, this distribution is both revealed and neutralized, resulting in “dissensus” (*ibid.*, 265). Neutralization of the opposition between faculties does not mean pacification, but “a more radical way of seeing the conflict” (*ibid.*).

Thus it can be concluded that Rancière’s agonism does not imply that only disruptive, avant-gardist artistic activities would have progressive and emancipatory potential in urban space. In fact, also Chantal Mouffe (2013, 104) has recently revised her view of artistic strategies related to the sublime. She now sees these kinds of strategies as requiring “a total break with the existing state of affairs”, a requirement that leads in turn to an impasse for critical art in practice (*ibid.*). However, both Rancière’s and Mouffe’s projects of agonist aesthetics leave us with the question as to what agonism would mean in practice. Especially the implications that Rancière’s metapolitical project might have for everyday politics are difficult to envision, let alone its bearings for planning practice.

As the aesthetic dimension is strongly present in both Mouffe’s and Rancière’s agonist theories, one might expect that urban planning – a discipline that is related in many respects to our aesthetic encounters with the environment – could have a function in putting agonism into practice. It could make us “see things in a different way” and “perceive new possibilities” (Mouffe 2013, 97). Furthermore, it could perhaps even facilitate revealing “the gap in the sensible” and challenging the existing ways of “dividing up the sensible”. Has agonist planning theory, then, been able to concretize these theoretical endeavours of agonist (meta)politics?

### **Putting agonist planning theory into practice**

Agonist planning theory has so far mainly focused on unseating and disposing of communicative, consensus-oriented planning, a form of planning that advocates of agonism regard as the prevailing, hegemonic planning paradigm (Purcell 2009; Gunder 2010). Relatively little effort has been made in developing such constructive agonist models of planning that could replace consensus-oriented planning (Mouat et al. 2013, 164). The objective of agonist planning theory has been to challenge the theoretical foundation of Habermas’s philosophical project (Hillier 2002a; 2002b; 2003; Gunder 2010), and even more importantly, to question the applications of Habermasian thought in planning theory, applications that have been more or less truthful to Habermas’s original ideas (see Purcell 2009).

Habermas’s philosophical project – especially the presupposition of universal consensus – has been challenged, for instance, by Wittgensteinian ideas of incommensurable language games and the necessity of “frictions” in communication (Hillier 2003; Purcell 2009). Practical criticisms have addressed the ways in which consensus-oriented planning is often turned against Habermasian ideals of free and unconstrained argumentation (Purcell 2008; 2009; Gunder 2010). When the objective of reaching a consensus is prioritized – an objective that is not empirically attainable even in Habermas’s view – the ideal of inclusive communication has often been rejected, and only selected interest groups have gotten the possibility to negotiate the rules guiding urban planning and development (see Purcell 2008; 2009; McClymont 2011). In this way, according to the agonists, consensus-oriented planning serves increasingly often

neo-liberal agendas and hegemonic projects in urban space (Purcell 2008; 2009; see also Gunder 2010).

The proponents of agonist planning are typically concerned with the fact that within contemporary planning systems, conflicts are typically seen in terms of harmful antagonism, not in terms of productive agonism (Pløger 2003). Planning systems tend to favour rational and legal forms of conflict resolution instead of providing legitimate arenas of open confrontation between incommensurable visions of the good and the valuable (Pløger 2003; McClymont 2011). The question arises, then, as to where these arenas could be. Surely disagreement and dissensus cannot be objectives throughout the field of planning, since we cannot have planning without some decisions (Hillier 2003) or without any relatively stable arenas for agreeing and disagreeing (March 2012; Mouat et al. 2013).

Some recent case studies have explicitly (McClymont 2011; Mouat et al. 2013) or implicitly (Pløger 2003) suggested that arenas for agonist confrontations could and should be located especially at the level of detailed planning, where abstract norms are concretized and where planning system encounters everyday knowledge and values of people. Communicative planning has often been criticised for its process orientation and negligence of those “substantive” questions that relate to the ways in which we treat urban space – or rather, urban places that are meaningful for urban dwellers (Mouat et al. 2013). One of the objectives of the advocates of agonist planning, then, is to respond to this criticism by devoting more attention to the questions concerning urban spaces or places (ibid.).

Although the proponents of agonist planning have not explicitly taken up the theme of aesthetics, it is interesting – and not coincidental, I would argue – that they focus on conflicts in detailed planning and concrete projects where often at issue is our aesthetic encounters with the environment. It is not untypical that the view of the environment as an object of aesthetic appreciation and interpretation collides with approaches that view the environment as a vehicle for capital accumulation. Katie McClymont (2011, 244) especially praises Mouffe’s agonism for recognizing the fact that agonist struggles are meaningful “in their specificity”, but despite their specificity they can have broader implications for the development of democratic political culture.

While most of the case studies dealing with agonism end up criticising existing planning systems and practices (see, e.g., Pløger 2004; Mouat et al. 2013), McClymont’s (2011) study stands out because it provides an example of a planning system that has some progressive elements, at least judging from the perspective of agonist theory. This is the development control based system, a system that is used especially in the UK. Development control is exercised by “case-by-case consideration of proposals, not in the first instance by a plan and regulations”, as Philip Booth (2007, 138) describes it. Development control, being based on a project-oriented approach, leaves much power to private developers, but also to planning officials who have a considerable amount of discretionary power (see, e.g., Booth 1996). Correspondingly, as critics of development control have claimed, it does not empower citizen stakeholders and encourage their engagement in planning (McClymont 2011). Also McClymont (2011, 241–242) admits that while participatory practices have been increasingly utilized in strategic planning and in the processes of drawing up of development plans in the UK, development control – the process of applying for and granting planning permissions – is still largely regarded as a bureaucratic and technical process that needs to be assessed and developed mainly in terms of efficiency. Nonetheless, she argues that although development control does not advance values typical to consensus-oriented participation, it leaves room for agonist

confrontations and case-specific debates over the concretization of planning objectives.

McClymont (2011) argues that while development control gives developers opportunities to introduce relatively concrete and detailed project plans to be evaluated by local governments, planning officials and citizen stakeholders, it also gives the citizen stakeholders a legitimate arena for opposing plans and imagining sufficiently concrete alternatives to the plans. Again she refers to Chantal Mouffe, who emphasises that vibrant political cultures cannot exist without concrete alternatives (ibid., 244). Although Mouffe probably does not mean anything as concrete as the future of a certain site, McClymont maintains that at issue are not only disputes over alternative planning and design solutions, but differences in our views of the good life. As she contends, in traditional communicative and consensus-oriented planning, site-specific opposition to development plans is often condemned as NIMBYism and as a pursuit for self-interest, whereas the “right” kind of participation – from the perspective of communicative planning – would be oriented towards the public interest (ibid., 243) or “generalizable interests”, to put it in Habermasian terms.

McClymont (2011) analyses the ways in which site-specific disputes point to broader differences in the views of the “good life” by turning her attention to planning discourses, and more precisely, to the terminological choices that different kinds of actors make. As she indicates, terminologies carry with them connotations related to value systems and ways of life. For her, the collisions between value systems and ways of life in planning disputes do not yet suggest an impasse in communication. Quite the contrary, the collisions – after having been voiced – can change the perceived framing of the planning problem and open up alternative views (cf. Mouat et al. 2013).

From the aesthetic point of view, and also from the point of view of Nordic planning systems, it could be argued that the specificity of development control is that it enables and perhaps also encourages quite daring development proposals, ones that might even represent sublime ruptures in the everyday environments and everyday experiences. Plans (even though they also exist in development control based systems) do not harmonize the styles and forms of the development proposals in the same way as they do in the Nordic planning systems. Even though I would not be willing to argue that the logic of development control produces a better quality built environment when compared to the Nordic systems, I would argue that it invokes passionate responses from the public and therefore might first sensitize us to the ways in which we treat urban space in general, and second, vitalize planning discourses.

Yet it seems to be clear that in development control based systems, like probably in all contemporary planning systems, the traditional rational and legal forms of conflict resolution are the prevailing mode of reconciling disputes. Case studies of agonist confrontations in the context of development control (McClymont 2011; Mouat et. al 2013) make it clear that the views concerning appropriate planning solutions and the good life typically need to be ultimately expressed in rational and juridical languages. Those who apply for planning permits and sketch planning proposals can also utilize expressive means of architectural design in addition to arguments. But could those who oppose the proposals have alternative spaces for artistic, aesthetic and other “residual” modes of expression, spaces that both Mouffe’s and Rancière’s agonist theories call for?

## Lessons to learn for Finnish detailed planning

Nordic political systems can be generally characterized as consensus-oriented rather than adversarial, and the consensual nature of politics is reflected in Nordic planning systems and practices. In Finland, the planning law that guides planning practice was renewed at the end of the 1990s when communicative planning theory had made its breakthrough, both internationally and in Finland. Given the timing of the renewal, it is not surprising that the Land Use and Building Act (132/1999), which came into force in the year 2000, has been argued to be very Habermasian in spirit (Häkli 2002; see also Syrjänen 2005). Nonetheless, as some planning theorists have noted, we ought to bear in mind that Habermas is mainly interested in communicative and deliberative practices in the very broad and abstract context of writing constitutions and law-making in general (Campbell, 2006; Campbell and Marshall, 2006). In contrast with Habermas's broad-scaled thinking, the Finnish legislature directed the pressure on consensus-seeking especially at the level of detailed planning (see, e.g., Syrjänen 2005). Judging from case studies proceeding from the agonist perspective, this is a context where consensus is particularly difficult to achieve and where we can expect agonist conflicts between different world views and ideas concerning the good and the valuable to arise. It is often easier to agree on abstract norms than on their particular concretizations.

Still, the rationale of the legislature was solid: people typically are not interested in participating in planning on a broad scale, but they often get interested in planning when development takes place in their everyday environment. One of the central points of departure for the legislature was that urban development should no longer be primarily based on greenfield development, but on defragmentation and building cities inward (Syrjänen 2005). When development happens in places that are already inhabited, there is a risk of conflicts. The legislature wished to prevent conflicts and thus facilitate defragmentation by introducing early-stage participation in the Finnish planning system (*ibid.*). Hence, the spirit of the Land Use and Building Act (132/1999) is notably consensus-oriented.

The Finnish planning system – and especially detailed planning – differs considerably from development control. Finnish detailed planning does not officially recognize the project-based approach, but plans are comprehensive and regulate the development to an elaborate degree (see, e.g., Krokfors 2016, 205–206). Detailed plans are zoning plans, plans that stipulate where development can take place, what can be built and how much can be built. Furthermore, especially in big cities, detailed plans often determine the main lines of architectural design (*ibid.*). Detailed plans are legally binding, and they form the basis for the process of discretionary granting of building permits.

If plans were based on a broad-based consensus in reality, the minute regulations of detailed plans would not be a problem. However, many detailed planning projects are conflictual in practice. Furthermore, even though detailed plans regulate even the architectural designs, it seems that implementation of a plan is not in practice merely a technical process where developers and construction companies realise the plan (*cf.* Krokfors, 2016, 206). Recent studies have suggested that developers and construction companies are often dissatisfied with plans especially in big cities (Staffans et al. 2015; Krokfors 2016). Sometimes the reason for dissatisfaction is that it is costly to comply with all the regulations concerning architectural quality. At other times, the reason is that designers and architects want to come up with more creative interpretations of the site in question (Krokfors 2016). Whatever the reason for the discontent, it typically results in amendments to the plan. Developers and building companies can also apply for a permit to deviate from the plan; and in the case of minor deviations, municipal building control officials have the discretionary power to

decide on deviations. A recent case study showed that in Helsinki in the year 2008, about 90% of all building permits included some kind of minor deviation from the ratified plan (Krokkfors 2016, 206; see also Staffans et al. 2015, 18). This means that in Helsinki, deviations have been predominant in planning.

Deviations have provided one way through which the project-based approach or development control approach has entered into the Finnish planning system. This is disquieting, given that deviations are typical for those cities where plans are most comprehensive and restrictive, and where planning is seen to be strongly in the public control (cf. Staffans et al. 2015, 18). Even though deviations fall into the category of minor zoning relief, typically affecting bulk, shape and design details rather than land use, for citizens the issues related to the aesthetic character of the development and its relation to the site in question are often important.

For the topic at hand, it is interesting that discretionary deviations are not planning instruments that would include arenas for agonist confrontations, alternative visions, and productive disputes. Although deviations can – and they often do – create disputes or conflicts, the disputes “are left to the citizens themselves”, to borrow the words of John Pløger (2004, 79), who has studied the lack of arenas for agonist confrontations in the Danish planning system. As Pløger argues, Danish planning – much like Finnish planning – proceeds from the presupposition of consensus-orientation, thus preventing disputes from “unfolding and becoming important for planning politics” (ibid.).

| Development control based systems                       | The Finnish plan-led system                              |
|---|--|
| Project-based approach                                  | Comprehensive approach                                   |
| Discretionary approach (plans and other considerations) | Plan-based steering                                      |
| Proposals may be daring and provoke debates             | Detailed plans harmonize the style and form of proposals |
| Confrontations are often to be expected                 | Consensual mode of working is emphasised                 |

**Table 2. The main characteristics of development control based planning systems and the Finnish plan-led system.**

How could Finnish detailed planning be developed, then, to better meet the agonist planning ideals and make room for productive disputes? Moreover, could the handling of disputes even go beyond the argumentative resolution of disputes and facilitate new urban imaginaries through a residual, aesthetic means of expression? As already mentioned, in Finnish planning, urban design and urban planning are intertwined. Therefore, architectural modes of expression and aesthetically oriented place-interpretation have traditionally had a central function in Finnish detailed planning. Hence, the languages of economy and law do not dominate Finnish planning discourse. However, stakeholders seldom have the possibility to engage in architect planners' interpretations of places and their design work. One could argue that usually there is very little need for citizens to get involved in design issues, given that the Finnish comprehensive planning

system does not offer the possibility for developers to come up with controversial propositions. In this way, the Finnish system differs considerably from development control based systems. But from the agonist perspective, one could also argue that designating to a single profession the process of interpreting the nature and meaning of our relation to places might drain our political and planning cultures in the long run.

I will end my analysis by following the thought of Peter Munthe-Kaas (2015), who argues – drawing on case studies from Denmark – that co-design based interventions in urban space provide one promising example of turning agonist planning ideals into practice. Perhaps it could be worthwhile also for Finnish planning to open up the design dimension of planning for aesthetic and artistic modes of dealing with collisions between different ways of life. Finland has so far been culturally a relatively homogeneous country, and architect-planners' abilities in interpreting and shaping our living environment have not often been questioned by the public. The future will probably be different. Even if the public would not question the abilities of architect-planners to concretize our norms and values, the developers will probably do so (cf. Staffans et al. 2015; Krokfors 2016). If developers manage to introduce the project-based approach to the Finnish planning system, agonist – or even antagonist – confrontations are to be expected. It might be worthwhile to establish legitimate arenas for such confrontations.

## Conclusions

This paper began with revisiting one of the common roots of Habermasian consensus-oriented planning theory and agonist dissensus-oriented planning theory: Kant's aesthetics and the notions of aesthetic *sensus communis* and consensus included in it. Whereas Habermas argues that something like *sensus communis* could be revealed in argumentative communication, the agonist theory denies this possibility. Nonetheless, agonists do not dismiss the concept of consensus altogether, but often turn their attention to a nuanced interplay between consensus and dissensus. The nature of consensus, dissensus, and their interplay, has been portrayed in various ways in agonist political theories. Hence, agonist theorists are not only "agonizing over consensus" (Hillier 2003), but also over the nature of dissensus.

So far, it has remained highly unclear what are the implications of agonist theory for planning practice. This is at least partly due to the fact that agonist (meta)political theory is geared towards safeguarding the preconditions of the political. While this is an important task from the perspective of planning as well, planning is also about everyday politics and administrative implementation, about "getting things done" (Hillier 2003; see also Mouat et al. 2013). The most concrete and practice-oriented moments in agonist theories such as Mouffe's agonist pluralism are those where at issue is the politically progressive potential of artistic activism. Hence, through the aesthetic dimension, agonist planning theorists might be able to concretize some of the endeavours of the theorists of agonist politics. However, the question remains whether "the aesthetic" has a function for agonist politics only through questioning and challenging existing hegemonies, or could agonist planning follow for instance Hannah Arendt's agonist political thought and devote a constructive role for the aesthetic in facilitating new initiatives and imaginaries in urban space.

Some recent case studies have shown that agonist approaches have practical relevance for citizen stakeholders who seek ways to express their concerns related to new development occurring in places they deem valuable and worthy of attention. I agree for instance with Katie McClymont (2013), who argues that citizen stakeholders' resistance is not always about selfish NIMBYism, but it can express deeper values related to a certain way of life. However, since there are

often many ways of life and many ideas of good environment co-existing in one place, I would like to argue that the Habermasian approach should not be completely rejected in favour of agonist approaches. Even though it seems clear that rational consensus in the Habermasian meaning of the term is not likely to come true in real planning disputes, I would still argue that in public planning, we should work on the premise that our arguments, judgements and even aesthetic expressions could and should be tested against some kind of prospect of generalizability, even though not always the prospect of universal agreement.

Does the Habermasian approach then contradict the agonist approach, as the recent debates in planning theory seem to suggest? Habermas's own aim is not to force argumentative communication in all areas of life, but he has stressed the plurality of discourses in the public sphere (see Habermas 1996; see also Mattila 2016a). Aesthetic judgements and disputes over differing ideas of the good life are important, just as argumentative discourses concerning norms are. Furthermore, as Habermas (1996) maintains, the interplay of different kinds of discourses is fruitful for the vibrancy of the public sphere. Nonetheless, it is true that Habermas stresses the role of norms that could be at last in principle discussed within a horizon of consensus or universal agreement. This is important for him not so much with a view of everyday life or administrative practices like planning, but especially when at issue are the processes of creating more or less permanent structures in society, structures such as legal norms and institutional frameworks that allocate power in society (Habermas 1996). Though decisions concerning these structures are needed, Habermas maintains, just as agonists do, that these decisions need to be understood as fallible and open to challenge (Habermas 1996; see also 1998, 397). In fact, Chantal Mouffe (2013, 8) also recognizes the need for some kind of weak or "conflictual" consensus "on the institutions that are constitutive of liberal democracy". Patchen Markell (1997, 379) has well comprised and summarised the paradox of agonism, and indeed, also the paradox of the Habermasian consensus-oriented approach: "Agonistic political action depends upon the existence of relatively stable and secure spheres in which it can thrive, but those spheres, to remain properly democratic and political, demand the very sort of contestatory political action which threatens their stability."

One pragmatic way of reconciling the dispute between consensus-oriented and agonist planning would be to suggest roughly that the Habermasian approach is still useful, especially for developing and shaping planning systems (March 2012) and for strategic plan making (Mouat et al. 2013), whereas agonist approaches are useful especially in site-specific disputes (McClymont 2011; Mouat et al. 2013). This, however, is not to say that such disputes between differing world views that emerge in the context of site-specific projects could not – or should not – eventually inform those discourses where at issue are strategic planning questions and abstract norms and principles that guide planning at the system level.

My paper ended with a discussion of recent analyses of potential places for agonist confrontations in planning systems, the analyses coming from the context of British development control. Development control based planning provided an example of a planning system where site-specific agonist confrontations have been argued to be encouraged. However, given that the development control based systems do not generally provide for resources for the production of alternative plans and visions, the question remains as to whether private developers and their plans can really be challenged in this framework. Hence, we are back to the old question concerning the uneven resourcing of different parties or interest groups in planning. This question was raised already in the 1960s, when the U.S.-based planning theorist and practitioner Paul Davidoff (1965) introduced his famous model of advocacy planning, the basic idea of which was to foster an adversarial style of planning and facilitate the emergence of various



alternative plans instead of one single plan. It has been argued that the success of this confrontation-oriented planning style was largely based on the fact that there were funding sources – foundations and government funding – for the production of alternative plans and visions (Heskin 1980, 57). Furthermore, the question remains as to whether development control, as planning systems in general, settles the conflicts between proposals and counter-proposals mainly in the language of rational argumentation without providing arenas for alternative modes of expression of differences in values and world views, modes of expression that both Mouffe and Rancière defend. Hence, existing models of development control would need to be modified in many respects so that they could provide a model for agonist planning practice.

Set against development control, Finnish detailed planning appears as consensus-oriented in spirit, which of course does not mean that conflicts do not occur. Even though consensus orientation has its merits, it is likely that this approach is gradually waning, one reason for this being that developers have been recently working on finding ways to introduce a project-based approach to Finnish planning. This will probably set the table for an increase in the number of conflicts. Also, a more adversarial practice in planning is to be expected because Finland is becoming increasingly multicultural. Pluralist approaches typical to agonism are needed if we want to prevent antagonist conflicts. Still, it ought to be noted that the existence of arenas for agonist confrontations requires that we also pursue consensus in developing planning systems and general strategic frameworks for planning.

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