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Published in:
Fennia : International Journal of Geography

DOI:
[10.11143/fennia.121457](https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.121457)

Published: 23/12/2022

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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Please cite the original version:
Hewidy, H. (2022). The hidden city of immigrants in Helsinki's urban leftovers – the homogenization of the city and the lost diversity. *Fennia : International Journal of Geography*, 200(1), 86-90.
<https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.121457>

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Reflections: *Lectio praecursoria*

The hidden city of immigrants in Helsinki's urban leftovers – the homogenization of the city and the lost diversity

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Cities acknowledge the diversity of their population and consider the multicultural component a richness of their socio-cultural assets. Immigrants contribute to the reshaping of urban space in many European cities through their amenities. Such amenities, be they secular or spiritual, are a clear spatialization of multiculturalism. Ethnic retail is an emerging phenomenon in Helsinki, and it has increasingly replaced declining independent mainstream retail. Often, clusters of immigrant amenities are formed around Muslim prayer rooms activating a mosque-bazaar alliance that enjoys a dynamic footfall. Such a setting takes place spontaneously and typically at abandoned spaces, called in this dissertation urban leftovers. The leftovers are located in, or nearby, the neighbourhoods with a relative overrepresentation of immigrant population. However, these neighbourhoods are exposed to urban renewal steered by anti-segregation policy, thus facing the threat of erasure.

This dissertation examines the capacity of urban planning to plan for diversity. It further studies the characteristics that ethnic retail requires to survive and emerge. The paradigm of The Right to the City is deployed to interpret the response of urban planning to multiculturalism. The findings are numerous. First, immigrant amenities prove their capability to play a role in place making and act as catalysts for public life recovery. Second, in doing so the created places not only fulfil the socio-cultural needs of immigrants, but they also attract mainstream clientele. Third, spontaneity, improvisation and authenticity are the main characteristics empowering the emergence of ethnic retail. However, the findings also show a failure of urban planning to reflect multiculturalism in the growth of the city. Often, the retail premises used by immigrants are demolished. Furthermore, conventional planning as well as alternative planning methods, such as scenario planning and urban planning competitions, have failed to reflect immigrants in the development.

The main constraint preventing planning from being multicultural is the absence of a political interest and, accordingly, a clear vision to deal with the spatialization of multiculturalism. On the contrary, the clear vision of the city is its anti-segregation policy, which is by nature a homogenizing mechanism. Thus, the dissertation concludes that immigrants' Right to the City has been ignored.

Keywords: multiculturalism, immigrant amenities, right to the city, urban planning, urban renewal

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Honoured custos, honoured opponent and honoured audience on site and online:

Historically, many cities have witnessed multiculturalism and hosted a population with diverse interests. European cities are currently witnessing a growth of cultural diversity reshaping their urban spaces. Immigrants with various religious and cultural backgrounds transform the cityscape with their secular and spiritual amenities. The transformation of the urban space gives the multicultural manifestation its spatial dimension; thus, it poses challenges on the planning system as stated by Sandercock (2000, 13–14):

[...] why we might think of difference as a problem in the managing of cities, or rather, in what ways cities of difference pose a challenge to planning systems, policies and practices.

Before opening the discussion further about this dissertation topic, let me first explain my motivations to study planning and multiculturalism in Helsinki.

As an immigrant myself, I could easily observe the transformation of urban spaces in the city of Helsinki through the amenities I frequent. I do visit Muslims prayer rooms, oriental grocery stores and authentic restaurants. My initial impression as a user was that these amenities were hidden in places abandoned by mainstream retail called in this dissertation urban leftovers (Hewidy 2022a).

However, what struck me was the rapid clustering of these amenities creating urban hubs. In fact, I became highly motivated to look closer at such a phenomenon and decided to serve as a researcher after being a user and an observer.

I am well-equipped with both cultural understanding and language and I assume that I enjoy a considerable margin of trust in the immigrant community. In addition, this dissertation is the natural continuation of what I have started already in my master's thesis titled "The Big Issue – The Religious Dimensions in Muslims' Housing within Helsinki Metropolitan Area". Today I am presenting another Big Issue; immigrant and urban space.

Upon starting my research, I was driven by several paradoxes related to the studied phenomenon. Compared to other cities in Europe, Helsinki is new to immigration. However, Finland has witnessed a growth of immigrant population from 50,000 in 1991 to 450,000 in 2020. Thus, today we live in a different Helsinki where 17% of its population is of an immigrant background. However, immigrants are less represented in the labour market and the unemployment rate in a few ethnicities exceeds 60%. Therefore, many of the ethnic groups find an alternative in self-employment and clusters of ethnic retail have become an obvious urban transformation in Helsinki. These clusters were formed at old strip malls left vacant because of the decline of mainstream independent retail which has been replaced by chain stores and retail oligopoly. Surrounded by these paradoxes, and troubled by the concerns about what is multicultural planning – I found myself asking: how can planning in a multicultural community consider immigrants and their spatial needs? This dissertation raises awareness on the issue of multicultural planning.

Multicultural planning is complex and varies in cities according to the degree of openness towards cultural diversity in the receiving societies. Accordingly, I argue in this dissertation that multicultural planning is not a distinct category of urban planning nor an elective action but rather an essential right to the city.

Ultimately, it is a question of equality and neutrality: the equal right of every citizen to urban space, and whether planning can be culturally neutral.

Ethnic retail is an emerging phenomenon in Helsinki and has rapidly brought many vacant premises into life. Often, clusters of immigrant amenities are formed around Muslim prayer rooms activating a mosque-bazaar alliance that enjoys a dynamic footfall. Such a setting takes place spontaneously and typically at abandoned spaces, the urban leftovers. The leftovers are located in, or nearby, the neighbourhoods with a relative overrepresentation of immigrant population. However, these neighbourhoods are exposed to urban renewal steered by anti-segregation policy, thus facing the threat of erasure. This dissertation studies three clusters two of which are situated at two old strip malls called Puhos and Kontula and the third is in the area of Malmi shopping street.

In 2019–2020, two planning competitions were held in response to the city objectives of forming urban centers through densification. The results of these competitions are steering both clusters

towards displacement. The city is preparing for a full demolition of the Kontula mall and a partial demolition of the Puhos mall. In 2019, the City of Helsinki commissioned a consultant to draw a vision based on scenario planning for the futures of the Malmi area.

In this dissertation, I focus on the role played by these clusters as place makers and catalysts for public street life recovery. I further study the main characteristics such clusters enjoy, which are called in this dissertation 'operative tactics'. Finally, I examine the capacity of the planning system to integrate such multicultural manifestation in the city master plan, both competitions and the scenario planning process.

The research material in this dissertation was collected through semi-structured interviews with planners, consultants, architects, and immigrants running businesses in the studied areas. In addition, field observation and document analysis were also used to collect further research material.

For the overall findings, the results showed that the clusters of immigrant amenities have spontaneously enabled a bottom-up place making process and converted abandoned spaces into liveable places full of meanings (Hewidy & Lilius 2022a). Such clusters contributed to the recovery of public street life (Hewidy & Lilius 2022b). The signs of the place making were clear in empowering a warm place for cultural visibility and attachment. These hubs have not only been satisfying the shopping needs of immigrants but have also become third places for many immigrants to linger enjoying a safe socializing environment.

Furthermore, the research showed that in addition to enjoying the uniqueness of goods, trades and services, these clusters also have unique characteristics. Such characteristics include improvisation, informality, spontaneity and commodification of ethnocultural diversity. Thus, it was not difficult to observe that these hubs created distinctive places and succeeded to resist both retail oligopoly and urban homogenization.

The results further showed that the municipal planning has ignored the potential of immigrant amenities in creating a diverse cityscape and equally overlooked its role in the livelihood of immigrant community. The city master plan showed a lack of intention for preserving the immigrant amenity clusters. On the contrary, there was an obvious intention to employ anti-segregation policy, which is simply a gentrification process aiming to change the socioeconomic profile of the renewed area. Such ignorance has been extended from the city master plan to the idea competitions organized in Itäkeskus and Kontula areas.

Interestingly, a few competing teams in both competitions suggested alternative solutions potentially preserving the diverse atmosphere of both strip malls, but the city requested changing them. In fact, the various shortcomings found were merely the symptoms of the lack of any political will to support spatial diversity or to preserve these clusters. The results of the competitions were rather directing towards the unmaking of the place making.

An example of such shortcoming is reflected in the following quote from a jury member in the Itäkeskus competition:

Between the jurors there was a discussion. We asked ourselves whom to consult about things relevant to multiculturalism. How we can enrol immigrants in the jury process. We could not find a solution. It was not taken as a specific expert dimension in the jury process, like traffic [...] In the jury process multiculturalism did not play any role. (Hewidy 2022a, 46)

Although the scenario planning of Malmi area was a positive sign from the city towards openness, the process also suffered from a few shortcomings. For example, the participation of ethnic retail entrepreneurs was very weak as there was no systematic participation process involving them. Furthermore, there was no balance between the possible futures and the desired futures which is an essential setting of scenario planning. The logical result of such shortcomings is that the implementation stage can be misleading due to ignoring the cross-sectoral coordination.

Finally, interpreting such findings through the lens of the right to the city showed the essential need for transformative actions. The right to the city mandates two essential rights: the right to participation and the right to appropriation. The right to participation is to share any decision contributing to the production of space and the right to appropriation sustains the freedom to occupy and use urban space. The results showed that immigrant community was declined both rights for the sake of the anti-segregation policy.

To conclude, I argue in this dissertation that the major obstacle that prevents planning from recognizing multiculturalism is the high sensitivity towards segregation. Accordingly, the city of Helsinki is losing urban diversity through homogenising urban space, a space that is to be withdrawn from immigrants. This research demonstrates that anti-segregation policy is an assimilative mechanism. The dispersal housing policy, in principle, contradicts with the principles of multicultural manifestation, or at least in the way adopted by the city of Helsinki.

The anti-segregation policy contributes to the erasure of cultural visibility replacing spaces improved by immigrant amenities by placelessness. In such a setting, the use value of immigrants is entirely ignored due to prioritizing exchange value. I agree that the arrival of the new well-off residents may lead to the recovery of the average income in the renewed areas. However, the hidden city of immigrants is erased, their average income will not increase, and their right to the city is declined.

Therefore, I recommend in this dissertation that it is essential to apply an agenda of multicultural planning in parallel with the blind anti-segregation policy in order to reduce its dramatic consequences. I call for an approach of planning that strives towards the preservation of the clusters of immigrant amenities and reduces the impacts of urban regeneration on them.

I further urge improving an effective and inclusive participation process, which was found among the shortcomings. With the lack of effective participation, the practice is not correctly informed of the local knowledge of users. Simply, participation should be considered an informative way of communicating people's interests and needs in spaces under development.

Furthermore, I strongly recommend that architectural competitions dealing with developing super-diverse areas should be tailored for such a task (Hewidy 2022b). This should be reflected in both the formation of the jury and the competition programme in order to integrate the multicultural characteristics of the areas into the potential proposals of the competitions. Furthermore, the city as the landowner needs to reduce the power of shareholding companies when given the right to organise urban competitions, to carefully review the competition programmes and to share the programme draft in advance before calling for the competitions.

Unfortunately, the Finnish research pays less attention to multiculturalism as an urban planning phenomenon of a spatial dimension. Instead, the research unconsciously creates a negative perception of multiculturalism by focusing solely on segregation and relevant housing studies. Consequently, municipal planning adopts the anti-segregation dispersal policy seeking an even socioeconomic distribution. Thus, I strongly argue that there is a need for research defining: 'what is multicultural planning' and informing the practice and urban policies on 'how to deal with immigrants beyond anti-segregation policies'.

Ethnic retail as an emerging phenomenon is a creative solution invented by immigrants to cope with their low representation in the labour market. Therefore, I further call for increasing awareness of the clustering phenomenon of immigrant amenities as a creative action where immigrants are considered a socio-capital asset. This will not be achieved without a thorough understanding, and acknowledgment, of the capacity of ethnic retail to re-shape urban spaces and raise the vitality of their vicinities.

Furthermore, there are many good examples in European cities where immigrant amenities have transformed deprived neighbourhoods and converted them into destinations for tourists and mainstream clientele, not only the co-ethnic groups. These multi-ethnic hubs have become destinations for other visitors seeking authenticity and exoticism. Popular examples of such neighbourhoods are found in Vienna, London, Berlin, Paris, Oslo and Malmö. In Canada, mainstream retail has entered the realm of ethnic retailing and ethnic retailers are expanding their businesses beyond the ethnic boundaries. Thus, the classical understanding of ethnic retail as an enclave business needs to be re-conceptualized. Therefore, the dissertation further encourages the city to study best practices and benchmarks which are usually used as sources of information in urban planning and can lead to mutual learning from other cities. Otherwise, diversity, celebrated in many cities as attractive destination or new market niche, will be simply lost from Helsinki.

I argue then that the anti-segregation policy solves nothing. Immigrants remain poor and the ethnification of poverty continues: the places that they enjoy and that provide livelihood to them are demolished and replaced with other spaces flattering the newcomers. The erasure of these clusters

seems to be intentional in a city fighting against segregation and working heavily through dispersal policy to eliminate, or minimize, the spatial differences.

The findings of this dissertation contribute to immigrant integration and wellbeing through spatial planning. It further calls for treating multicultural planning as an essential right to the city. Hopefully, the research has a societal impact through the empowering of immigrant communities in Helsinki.

Finally, I do admit that the impacts on ethnic retail are formed by several parties not merely urban planning. Such impacts are caused by policymakers, chain stores, shareholding companies, landlords and media. However, I do argue that neglecting immigrants in planning is the logical consequence when a city fears diversity, even when hidden in its leftovers.

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