**Class Reflections for UP 494**

Written by - Arpita Banerjee, for Tuesday Session No. 8 (03-23-2021)

Session Name: *Measuring Place Opportunity*

Reflection Prompts:

*Opportunity Mapping*

Write-Up:

It is interesting to look at opportunity mapping as the new avenue of urban planning visualizations. Opportunity, being a “squishy” term as Dr. Greenlee puts it, is hard to define [ to contain within the bounds of a definition]. Opportunity is a concept in evolution, or as Rittel would have put it , a “wicked” problem. Here I would like to explore some definitions of opportunity as explored in today’s class. Asha said that opportunity is accessibility, to which it was added, that simply accessibility [in terms of infrastructure, employment and even transit] is an incomplete measure of opportunity. A more holistic way to define opportunity would be to include the quality of resources that are accessible – for example – one may have access to a school and continue to lack adequate educational opportunities owing to the quality of classrooms and study materials, absence of electricity or qualification of teachers who teach there. Similarly, one can have access to jobs which involve uncomfortable working conditions, occupational hazards, etc. can be detrimental to the possibility of opportunity despite the provision of infrastructure.

Opportunity depends upon how it is interpreted. If opportunity is relevant to a particular social category, how do they perceive it? Are they aware of its existence and do they take active part in interpreting the opportunity as a solution to their problems? This draws us to the important direction of opportunity costs – what do individuals and communities risk of losing on taking advantage of an opportunity? Research has demonstrated that providing perceived opportunities is not enough, but it is important to examine its pertinence to the intersectional characteristics that define opportunities.

Many a times, opportunity mapping does not involve participatory measures because of which there is a differential interpretation of community. For example, there are examples of opportunity maps which include race or racial segregation as indicators of inopportunity. In Powell’s examples legal arguments play into the argument of what constitutes opportunity leading to several distortions of its true nature.

In our class opportunity is interpreted at scales of the individual and their communities – the dissemination of opportunities through connections and linkages within a community. Opportunities could also be understood as harbors of intergenerational wealth, accumulating social capital over time to break historical obstacles to achievement. Therefore, opportunity has an important connection with time – the longevity of an opportunity is relative to time.

Opportunity Maps have certain flaws. The biases of their cartographers and analyzers are intertwined with the visual narrative. Geographies of opportunity are varied and relative, and often only one kind – an economic type of opportunity reduces the true representation of hopes and aspirations of a people. Different maps bear different prioritization of measures, and often surveys hide what focus group discussions could manage to reveal.

As we create opportunity maps, whose opportunities are we even talking about? Stakeholders and their perspectives vary widely. Are we discussing undocumented immigrants? Or the educated urban planners or city hall representatives? How are we catering to the multiplicity of socio-cultural expectations, utilizing the skills people already posses to create their individualized notions of opportunity? One possible method of achieving the above is by creating multiple varieties of opportunity maps for different time frames for the same geography, taking cognizance of the contemporary needs of the people, their aspirations and ideologies.