

Mats Franzén

University of Uppsala
mats.franzen@ibf.uu.se

I

Segregation is about separation, the keeping apart of people and activities. This implies space since it is difficult to understand things being kept apart as not having to do with their separate-ness and thus also a distance between them. Moreover, if people and activities are of different kinds, space can be supposed to be implicated in not only their reproduction, but also and more importantly, in their constitution. If so, social categories and social activities are also spatial phenomena.

In other words, segregation is a socio-spatial phenomenon. To understand segregation demands us to see how social differences and spatial differences come together. The tricky thing here is that we have to do with an internal, but variable relationship. This means that social differences cannot be reduced to spatial differences; neither is it possible to make the inverted reduction. The relationship is not a one-to-one one. The relationship is, yet, an internal one. This means that the variation between the social and the spatial pole of the relationship cannot be understood in causal terms. One of them cannot be explained by the other any way round.

My point is now that understanding segregation is precisely about understanding this coming together. We may still need to distinguish the spatial and the social in analytic terms, to come to terms with the internal variations between them. However, coming to our conclusions, we must bring them together, synthesising them. We may approach segregation analytically from either end. We may start either by tracing social differences in space, or by interrogating a set of spatial units making up a city or part of a city about their social composition; in the end we must, nevertheless, reach a conclusion on segregation with a reasonable balance between, that is synthesis of, the social and the spatial.

II

As already pointed out, people as well as activities may be segregated. Be it in terms of class, race, age, or whatsoever, most segregation research, however, is about residential segregation. Thus, we learn about how different social categories are distributed in residential space. Within parenthesis, it must be noted here however that gender differences are usually not being investigated in terms of their eventual uneven residential distribution.

Here, I want to make the point that this entails an unhappy limitation to segregation research. Urban segregation is about more than just residential segregation; housing makes up just a part of the city. Moreover, urban life often is a mobile life, not narrowly taking place just inside the home and its immediate vicinity. In practice, the life in the city for most of us takes place in different locations, differing from the home both in space (and time) and kind of activity. And it means moving between these different locations too. Consequently, to look at urban segregation demands us to ask the question if there is any segregation pattern in the urban lives people live, that is, if living at a certain address goes hand in hand with working, shopping and amusing oneself in determined locations. In short, if life in the city is being lived in parallel social worlds or not.

Though we are lacking systematic research into a question like this one, much evidence point in the direction of its empirical relevance. For example, the flagship stores of up market shopping is not located where you find HM in the city; neither do you find the established museums where you find the more popular amusement places. Shopping and amusements are segregated activities too, which also hold for many working places. Also public transports can be segregated in the same way if they bind together activities used by the same social category along, e.g., (part of) a public transportation line. If they do so, then the segregation pattern in question is more solid and easier to reproduce. Private transport also sustains such reproduction, of course. But public transport is often a marvellous thing to bring social differences together, making them visible, normally, however, in non-interactive ways.

Thus, to expect systematic variations along, for example, class lines in the use of different urban activities is no bold suggestion. The question is rather how systematic such variations are. Or to put it from the spatial point of view, and in a more general, and positive, mood: where in the city are the lines of segregation getting blurred?

Spaces where segregation is getting blurred are interesting because here more or less closed worlds may open up in the face of each other. What is going to happen in such spaces, or situations, is however an open question, very much depending on the stakes in the social differences sustained by segregation. Conflicts may unfold in such spaces, but there is no necessity in such an outcome. First, when different worlds meet, they may come to terms with each other in creative and productive ways. Second, even if conflicts unfold, conflicts may eventually bind the different parts together. In other words, such spaces may have integrative functions socially.

III

Thus, for me, there is an obvious answer to the question about what is spatial in social segregation: being a socio-spatial phenomenon segregation is about social differences in and through space. Yet, one important qualifier here is that these social differences have to be vertical and thus related to questions of power.

As obvious and simple this answer might be, it is not really a satisfactory one. One reason for this is that we have to recognise the internal but variable relation between the social and the spatial in all socio-spatial phenomena. Another reason is that the lines of segregation may be more blurred in certain spaces than other. In consequence, I think it almost impossible to literally map the urban segregation of a specific city in a comprehensive way. Indeed, I think we need to understand urban segregation as a never ending, on-going, dynamic process, where barriers are being raised, bridged and evaporated along different social lines.

I also think that space-syntax analysis can give us important clues here to an understanding of this dynamic. The merit of space syntax very much lies in delineating how spatial segregation and spatial integration come together in, or help to constitute, an urban configuration, as a city. Moreover, the pattern thus delineated is something very different from any segregation index brought up in conventional segregation research; it gives a comprehensive view of the specific pattern of spatial integration and segregation in the city in question. Thus we see, for example, which spaces are the best integrated ones, e.g. the most central, or accessible, ones, and which spaces are the most far away ones, and which spaces are in between. Obviously, this has important implications for understanding, e.g., where barriers and bridges may be found in the urban landscape.

The social implications of a specific urban configuration are, however, far from clear. This is so since space-syntax analysis does not take into consideration the social use of the spaces constituted by the built up area neither in terms of different social activities, nor in terms of different social categories. Here we need much more systematic research to really understand how the physical, and the social, city come together. As I have already pointed at, the social cannot be reduced to the spatial, or vice versa, because the relationship between them varies. We need systematic research into this variation to answer questions like what is spatial in social segregation.