Understanding the Grammar of the City: Urban Safety and Peacebuilding Practice through a Semiotic Lens

Paper Series of the Technical Working Group on the Confluence of Urban Safety and Peacebuilding Practice

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The relationship between urban safety and peacebuilding practice is both obvious and obscure. It is obvious in the mutual focus of practitioners working within both fields on the problems of crime, violence, and societal conflict in urban centres. It is obscure when it comes to disentangling what is actually distinct about the practical or analytical content of the programming of each approach in dealing with these issues – not least because their similarities often result in a great deal of overlap between their activities ‘on the ground’ in cities across the world. The difference between the two approaches and so the need for any relationship – beyond overlap – is what needs clarification today.

This lack of clarity over the distinction between the two approaches is important because it risks resources being wasted on redundant programming overlap instead of fostering a constructive complementarity that harnesses the expertise of each approach. The politically charged environment in which this debate is carried out only intensifies this risk. Because each approach involves different communities of practice (informed by different academic and expert circles), as well as potentially competing donor and state interests, debates over the nature of the relationship between urban safety and peacebuilding are not just technical but also about political preferences and priorities.

The Technical Working Group on the Confluence of Urban Safety and Peacebuilding Practice – jointly established by the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform, UN-Habitat’s Safer Cities Programme, and the United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG) – has among its two main objectives precisely this issue of clarifying the “overlap and difference” between urban safety and peacebuilding in order to “inform the development of an integrated approach.”
approach” (Geneva Peacebuilding Platform 2015). Developing an integrated approach that leverages the expertise of both is important because today’s urban centres, according to Chinese scholars Kaizhen Cai and Jinguo Wang (2009: 219), face a “complex and urgent situation” that goes beyond “traditional safety problems” including traffic accidents, natural disasters, and incidents of crime, to involve “nontraditional security problems” such as terrorism, pandemics, and eco-environmental safety.

Indeed, the contemporary challenges faced by urban safety and peacebuilding practitioners relate to a complex combination of different types of harms occurring in cities, which are still settings whose conflictual dynamics are relatively poorly understood (see Jütersonke and Krause 2013). The Technical Working Group takes the view that urban safety and peacebuilding have the potential to be mutually complementary in the fight against this complex set of urban challenges. To achieve this, however, we need to clarify their distinct areas of expertise more fully. How can the apparently symbiotic relationship between the public sphere of urban government (urban safety) and the generally more informal processes of conflict prevention, mitigation, and transformation (peacebuilding) be harnessed? To answer this question, we need to better understand the particular expertise of the urban safety approach and how it contrasts with and complements that of peacebuilding. In what follows, we seek to contribute to that task. We do so in five main stages.

First, we define and clarify the concepts of urban safety and peacebuilding in ideal-type and minimalist terms. We ‘parse back’ to the basic roots of the concepts in order to see – in the following sections – how their ‘genealogy’ (i.e. the evolution of their meanings over time) may affect the multiplicity of definitions and understandings that can be gleaned from contemporary practice.

Second, with minimalist definitions in hand, we dissect the productivity of the interface between urban safety and peacebuilding by introducing a semiotic model of their approaches. This model clarifies how each approach – in its minimalist ideal type – takes a different route towards ‘meaning-making’ in urban settings so as to reduce the possibility of crime, violence, and societal conflict. We then construct a heuristic typology of the foci of urban safety and peacebuilding initiatives vis-à-vis their levels of analysis, models of intervention, institutional foci, and the problems they deal with.

Third, from this conceptual base, the paper draws a more practical analogy between the two modes of ‘meaning-making’ outlined before by examining two forms of care that constitute the basis of medical interventions: curative care and palliative care. We argue that peacebuilding, conceived in its minimalist ideal type, seeks to ‘cure’ violence. By contrast, urban safety has usually been concerned with mitigating and reducing harm. And while these divisions have blurred over time as the two approaches have come to confluence, they remain driving forces that tend to be hidden in the shadows of on-going programming discussions.

Fourth, we continue by dealing with this key problem faced by the ‘minimalist’ and ‘ideal-type’ description of the contrasts between the two approaches: namely that they are frequently employed together and often seem to ‘drift’ towards one another. We clarify that both urban safety and peacebuilding initiatives can also be analysed in terms of the level of aggregation (or ‘granularity’) of their interventions, as well as in terms of the level of politicization that their activities are subject to. We discuss several pressures that have forced both approaches to deviate from their ideal-type form, beyond simple programmatic necessity, and chart their resulting confluence schematically.
Fifth, we conclude with a discussion of how our semiotic clarification of the relationship between urban safety and peacebuilding practice can assist us in moving towards a truly integrated approach. This entails highlighting dangers in their confluence as well as opportunities that will enable us to leverage their respective strengths. The conclusion notes how it may be useful to “parse back” to the minimalist and ideal-type forms of urban safety and peacebuilding initiatives in order to see how this genealogy of their origins continues to impact how they are being implemented today, even as the scope of their initiatives has broadened and blurred considerably. Doing so, we suggest, will allow for a better division of labour between the two approaches.

1. Minimalist conceptualizations of urban safety and peacebuilding

Discussing the origins of the term peacebuilding in contemporary practitioner circles, the Technical Working Group describes how, 20 years after Boutros Boutros-Ghali’s *Agenda for Peace* (United Nations 1992),

... the post-conflict framing of peacebuilding has been overtaken by the evolution of violent conflict and the ensuing adaptation of the response. Peacebuilding practice now occurs in a wider variety of contexts ranging from fluid political transitions to regions under increased stress due to climate change, rapid urbanization, or contentious large-scale investments (Geneva Peacebuilding Platform 2015a: 3; emphasis added).

Against the backdrop of such a fluid and complex programming context, the recent *White Paper on Peacebuilding* (Geneva Peacebuilding Platform 2015b) was drafted with the presupposition that generating a one-size-fits-all conceptualization of peacebuilding would be futile if not counter-productive. Instead, it focused on what are thought to be some of the essential characteristics of efforts to build peace, including “the use of dialogue, trust-building, and consensus-seeking processes to resolve or manage conflict through non-violent means” (Ibid.: 6). The *White Paper* acknowledged that, “at the field level, many people simply get on with doing what is needed to build peace and do not worry about definitions” and, in this vein, it tried to avoid “preconceived analytical categories (e.g. a particular definition of peacebuilding),” instead allowing “patterns of consent and disagreement to emerge from the data itself” (Ibid.: 17).

Making sense of peacebuilding in this adaptive manner has proven to be crucial to keeping up with a rapidly changing world. However, it is also one of the principle difficulties obscuring the nature of any productive relationship between urban safety and peacebuilding practice. We want to suggest that clarifying this relationship requires an *ideal-type return to minimalist definitions of peacebuilding and urban safety*. We do not mean to suggest these definitions are in any way preferable to current understandings, or in any way reflect the reality of practice today. Quite the contrary, broader contemporary definitions are the basis of countless productive programming initiatives globally, and are continuously debated and redrawn in both multilateral fora such as the United Nations – reflected in the recent turn to the vocabulary of “sustaining peace” in UN Security Council Resolution 2282 (United Nations 2016) – as well as in community-driven peacebuilding work at the grassroots level. We return to minimalist definitions only in order to appreciate the genealogy (conceptual history) of these broader understandings of urban safety and peacebuilding. We argue that the origin of current approaches in these minimalist definitions continues to affect many of their activities, and appreciating this is important to clarify the relationship between urban safety and peacebuilding practice today.
We begin then by outlining our ideal-type minimalist understandings of urban safety and peacebuilding. The term urban safety is relatively specialized in comparison to that of peacebuilding. We see this in Figure 1, above, which charts the use of these terms between 1970-2005 based on publicly available Google Ngram data of collated printed sources of information (with frequencies relative to one another). The chart reveals the vast rise in the use of peacebuilding terminologies over the 1990s and – by contrast – an almost imperceptibly low use of urban safety as a term of reference across the same period. Reviewing the predominance of peacebuilding in this way is misleading, however. Urban safety programmes are most frequently subsumed within urban planning schemes and UN-Habitat’s Safer Cities Programme itself discusses “enhancing safety through planning, management and governance” (UN-Habitat 2012; emphasis added). Urban safety is thus closely related to the field of urban planning (and other sub-fields therein including urban ecology, urban design, etc.). Indeed, urban planning, plotted now on Figure 2, below, is a practical and disciplinary perspective whose work (for reviews see Levy 2016 and Kostof 1991) long precedes the rise of peacebuilding, despite – today – the two terms now being employed with almost the same degree of frequency.

The very development of the first cities and their planning was, in fact, about the safety they afforded: “the city was a more defensible place than an isolated settlement in the countryside” (Levy 2016: 62). However, as John M. Levy explains, this early virtue of the city has gradually decreased with technological innovations like canons that could breach city walls, nuclear weapons that could destroy whole cities, and terrorists drawing on everyday objects to penetrate and cause harm inside the city itself (Ibid: 62-3). In combination with the more mundane problems of crime and societal conflict, urban planning became increasingly concerned with the ‘security’ or ‘safety’ of the city more generally. A ‘comprehensive’ urban
The planning approach is thus one, Levy suggests, that encompasses *health, safety, and public welfare*. The specifically urban *safety* component of these three elements, he continues, can "manifest itself in numerous" different ways:

It might mean requiring sufficient road width in new subdivisions to ensure that ambulances and fire equipment have adequate access in emergencies. Many communities have flood plain zoning to keep people from building in flood-prone areas. At the neighbourhood level it might mean planning for a street geometry that permits children to walk home to school without crossing a major thoroughfare. In a high-crime area it might mean laying out patterns of buildings and spaces that provide fewer sites where muggings and robberies can be committed unobserved (Ibid: 123-4).

Whereas other aspects of the comprehensive urban planning approach (those relating to health and public welfare) focus more directly on intervening at a human level in the activities of urban dwellers, what is most striking about the urban safety aspect is its focus on *material* structures. It is by altering the material environment that urban safety hopes to reduce the possible hazards of the city and it is important to keep this ideal-type definition of urban safety in mind as our discussion proceeds.

The definition of peacebuilding, for its part, has – as we noted above – varied considerably over time as it was regularly revised and usually *expanded* in scope. Numerous definitions and conceptualizations of peacebuilding now abound (see Barnett et al. 2007; also Chetail and Jütersonke 2014 for an overview of the literature). Building on the work of Tadahsi Iawmi (2016), variations in our understanding of peacebuilding can usefully be categorized with respect to four substantive elements: (a) the primacy of the military; (b) the importance of order and

![Figure 2: Relative frequency of use of peacebuilding and urban planning terminology, 1975-2005](image-url)
stability; (c) engagement with political and democratic processes; and (d) state-building agendas and infrastructure development. According to Iwami, the military and related ‘stabilization’ ambitions play a particularly important role in the American conceptualization of peacebuilding as a tool for fostering democratic transformation (e.g. post-war Afghanistan and Iraq), while the European approach to peacebuilding places a premium on good governance and political reform agendas that do not necessarily depend as heavily on (military) security concerns (and are indeed focused more on interventions on the community level). For the sake of comparison, Russian and Chinese understandings of peacebuilding first appear to be quite similar to the American variant, but are distinctive in the sense they downplay the importance of domestic transformation – the mission civilisatrice (Paris 2002) of so-called ‘liberal peace’ agendas on democratization, good governance and human rights promotion (see e.g. Richmond 2006; Heathershaw 2008; Debiel et al. 2016) that are seen as interference in domestic affairs by some (Stepanova 2004; Lei 2011) and championed by others.

In this paper, however, we deliberately try to steer clear of this – ideologically and bureaucratically motivated – terminological minefield. Instead, we propose to return to the more minimal intellectual genesis of the field. Arguably, that genesis lies in the work of Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung (1976) who programmatically outlined three approaches to peace: the dissociative approach (in which interventions aim to avoid being directly involved in conflicts, as is most prominent in peacekeeping missions), the conflict resolution approach (in which ‘root causes’ of conflicts are tackled), and the associative approach (where interventions are embedded and actively involved in conflict dynamics). It was perhaps a combination of Galtung’s second and third approaches that came to first dominate contemporary peacebuilding practice, and which was popularized by Boutros Boutros-Ghali’s now famous 1992 Agenda for Peace as: “action to identify and support structures, which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict” (United Nations 1992). Of course, as highlighted by work of the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform and as earlier mentioned, the peacebuilding debate has moved forward considerably in the intervening years. This paper does not, moreover, propose to legitimate what some might critically label as a “standard UN” definition of peacebuilding. What we are interested in, however, is in drawing out some of the essential elements of a minimalist understanding of peacebuilding, derived by returning to the early agendas and debates of the nineteen nineties, and which will be used hereafter in contrast with urban safety approaches so as to make the nature of the relationship and (the possibility of) the confluence of the two less obscure.

Before moving to that discussion of the relationship between urban safety and peacebuilding, however, we must now note one central point: there is, in fact, no necessary relationship between the two approaches. That is, urban safety programmes do and should exist in the absence of peacebuilding schemes in many states that do not suffer from high levels of crime, violence, and societal conflict. Urban safety schemes exist in Switzerland, peacebuilding schemes do not. Indeed, comprehensive urban safety measures will be necessary in any city, and at any stage of a country’s urbanization. Of course, the particular interest of the Technical Working Group is in their interconnection when both are perceived to be necessary (or at least complementary) for a variety of reasons. But in order to appreciate the potential merits of thinking about the interface between urban safety and peacebuilding, it is important, we will see, to keep in mind that urban safety schemes were designed for and are still most commonly used in cities whose contexts are quite distinct from those more usually focused on in peacebuilding practice.
2. Meaning-making in the city: A semiotic clarification

We will now schematize an *ideal-type* relationship between the *minimalist* understandings of urban safety and peacebuilding sketched out above. We do so by drawing on the tools of semiotics. Semiotics is an academic approach to studying everyday ‘meaning-making’ processes (for a basic introduction see Sebok 2001). Put most simply, semiotics demonstrates how the meaning of one ‘sign’ (say, the word *safety*) is only meaningful in relation to other words (say, the word *violence*). It therefore studies how words or other signs are ordered in sequence with each other at different levels. As a field of research, semiotics has usually been preoccupied with studying the use of language by human beings, but also extends to a broader understanding of ‘signs’ as involving both written or spoken language, visual languages, and material objects that transmit or communicate meaning. It is thus possible to draw a distinction between classic semiotics and a more contemporary ‘material-semiotics’ that integrates the material side of the world into systems of meaning-making, as opposed to seeing the world as contained solely within the minds of human beings (on *material-semiotics* see, particularly, Law 2009).

Take the example of a stop sign on a road. It has a textual element – the written word STOP, usually in block capitals – but also a visual element including the block capitals themselves, the sign being frequently painted red, and its other qualities as a material object (its particular shape, height, visibility, etc.). All these aspects affect how a driver perceives the sign (how easily they see it, notice it, pay attention to it) and so work to ‘make meaning’ in the interaction between the driver and the road. Indeed, just such meaning-making activities are central to a very basic type of urban safety programme involving these very road signs. UN-Habitat, for example, notes how one effect of urbanization is an increase in road traffic accidents, and that such accidents

... result from a combination of structural, physical and behavioural factors... While the exposure of road users to traffic accidents is shaped by physical aspects of the road environment, individual behaviour, awareness of safety regulations and travel habits also determine vulnerability to traffic accident risks. In addition, the safety and design features of vehicles shape the likelihood of being involved in a traffic accident, as well as the severity of the impact (UN-Habitat 2007: 221).

Consider, moreover, this full example of a

4 A.M. [car] crash that was classified by police as caused by a drowsy driver. Yes, if the driver in question did not drive past his or her ‘bedtime’ (driver factor) the crash would not have occurred. However, the crash could have also been prevented by a drowsy-driver detection system (a vehicular factor), a road-departure warning system (a vehicular factor), or an effective rumble strip that alerts the driver if leaving the lane (environmental factor) (Sivak and Tsimhoni 2008: 456).

In these examples we find at least *two* broad ways in which to prevent people from coming to harm: two ways to make them ‘safe’. The first one involves focusing on the behaviour of human beings themselves who may cause a situation to become unsafe because of their actions – when driving, for instance, they may be fatigued, intoxicated, or otherwise incapacitated. In order to stop that from happening it is necessary to alter the motivations or consciousness of people. This can be achieved through various means, but most usually it involves a combination
of educating people about safe behaviours such that these safe practices become habitual, and enforcing these acceptable behaviours through legal sanctions and punishments that deter deviation from them (e.g. making it illegal to drive intoxicated). In doing so, it is hoped that the ‘root causes’ of the harmful action can be dealt with.

The second way to increase safety involves dealing with the ‘urban fabric’ of a setting, which can be defined as “the social and physical differentiation of urban space and its related social processes” or, as the architect Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris expands:

Urban fabric is composed of the material and physical aspects of the built environment in cities – the buildings, streets and alleyways, sidewalks, open spaces, and other micro-environments that represent the settings of everyday life. The urban fabric is the container of social activity; its layout and design can encourage or discourage certain types of behaviour (Loukaitou-Sideris in Ceccato 2012: 6; emphasis added).

The ‘vehicular’ or ‘environmental’ factors that can prevent traffic accidents – road-departure warning systems, effective rumble strips, etc. – are part of the urban fabric that ‘contains’ social activity. By altering these elements of a social activity like driving, one may be able to hold the original causes of danger constant (fatigue, intoxication, illness, etc.) and yet still mitigate the potential for harm. It is thus, for example, that the terminology of urban safety often employs more neutral terms like ‘hazard’ as opposed to ‘threat’ or ‘danger’ (Ibid.). The principle here is that the urban fabric might contain hazards that can be reordered so as to reduce the potential for harm, irrespective of deliberate human behaviour. And it is for this reason that the comprehensive urban planning approach focuses to such a degree, as we discussed in the preceding section, on the materiality of urban safety planning in cities.

In the terms of semiotics, the two types of harm reduction mentioned here can be seen as altering either the ‘paradigms’ or the ‘syntagms’ of the city (Sebok 2001). A paradigm is a particular ‘sign’ (word, image, or person) that can be ‘replaced’ with another in a mutually exclusive (contrastive) fashion. A syntagm, by contrast, relates to the ‘order’, ‘structure’, or ‘syntax’ in which these paradigms are arranged. Famously, Roland Barthes (2013) describes ‘paradigms’ and ‘syntagms’ in terms of clothing. Paradigms are things like jackets, shirts or blouses that we wear one-at-a-time; they are basic units of which different types cannot be worn simultaneously. By contrast, syntagms refer to the ‘order’ or ‘assembly’ of clothing to alter the meaning of these basic parts. For example, a shirt which is neither tucked in to the trousers nor ironed is a syntagmatic element of clothing and makes a different kind of meaning (to the wearer and the observer) to a shirt that is tucked in and well ironed.

For our purposes, the first type of harm reduction described above, which focuses on removing an original cause from a situation entirely, can be seen as paradigmatic in its approach. If people can be persuaded not to be violent or to commit crimes – whether that occurs through education, socio-economic betterment, or any other means – then the whole paradigm of the city shifts. Here, meaning is made in the city by altering the very identity of the actors. People become ‘better’ at being ‘safer’.

The second type of harm mitigation is syntagmatic: it does not alter the original cause of harm but alters its ‘syntax.’ The basic elements of the situation are allowed to remain the same, with people sometimes doing things that increase the risk posed to themselves and others. What is changed, however, is the ‘order’ with which the individual interacts with the urban fabric. The
‘social container’ (for their action) is modified so as to alter the meanings of being in the city in one way or another. And these reorderings are hoped to reduce the hazards of the urban fabric of the city.

For semiotics, then, paradigms and syntagms are the basic units of the organization of reality and its meaning. They refer to the concepts and grammar of the human worlds. What we want to suggest throughout this paper is that it might be fruitful to think similarly about different ‘grammars of the city’ – different ways of making meaning in the city – that are more or less conducive to the emergence of crime, violence, and societal conflict. Indeed, paradigmatic changes to the grammar of the city are, we propose, akin to those that minimalist peacebuilding interventions generally seek to carry out, while syntagmatic changes are more aligned with what urban safety activities focus on. This becomes clearer if we typologically analyse the distinctive foci of the two approaches, as in Table 1, below.

Table 1: Ideal-type contrasts between urban safety and peacebuilding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Minimalist Understandings of Urban Safety</th>
<th>Possible Points of Confluence</th>
<th>Minimalist Understandings of Peacebuilding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level of Analysis</strong></td>
<td>Micro</td>
<td>Meso</td>
<td>Macro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The everyday interactions of people with the urban fabric around them in the city.</td>
<td>A holistic view of people’s interactions with the city – materially and ideationally.</td>
<td>The overall ‘structure’ of peoples interactions with the city, usually ideationally.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nature of Problem</strong></td>
<td>Hazards</td>
<td>Risk</td>
<td>Threats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-intentional consequents of human interaction with the urban fabric.</td>
<td>A more-or-less intentional harm caused by the interaction of persons and the urban fabric.</td>
<td>A normally intentional risk of harm being caused by persons in the city.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unit of Institutional Focus</strong></td>
<td>Street</td>
<td>City</td>
<td>State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The situational contours within which human interaction occurs in public space.</td>
<td>Representational governance and a right to the city at the municipal or communal level.</td>
<td>National government seeking to achieve sustainable peace (frequently from the local level up).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unit of Intervention</strong></td>
<td>Urban Fabric</td>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>Urban Dwellers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A focus on the materiality of the urban fabric of the city and its impact on persons.</td>
<td>A focus on both ideas and materiality and their dual-role in a city’s grammar.</td>
<td>A focus on the ideas of city dwellers and their role in their interactions in the city.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Temporal Form of Intervention</strong></td>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>Iterative Practice</td>
<td>Linear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>There is no start or stop; urban safety works constantly in the background</td>
<td>Constant measures necessary to reach the goal of ‘peace’ in an iterative learning process.</td>
<td>‘Peace’ can be achieved at time Y if we take measures at time X.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Semiotic Form of Intervention</strong></td>
<td>∆ Syntagmatic ∆</td>
<td>∆ Grey Zone ∆</td>
<td>∆ Paradigmatic ∆</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Again, we stress the caveat that Table 1 is depicting minimalist ideal-type understandings of urban safety and peacebuilding. Its second and fourth columns should not be construed as representing the entire spectrum of peacebuilding or urban safety practices being carried out today – nor do they seek to describe the ‘theories of change’ followed by actual programming. Generally speaking, however, ideal-type urban safety programming focuses on ‘hazards’ posed by the urban fabric at a very ‘micro’ level of analysis. The focus is on the ordering of interpersonal interactions in the public sphere, between people and roads, buildings, rivers, streets, lighting systems, surveillance technologies, and so on. And there is rarely a ‘top-down’ means – in its ideal-type understanding – by which to achieve this. Streets are taken one at a time and are, microscopically, reordered ‘syntagmatically.’

By contrast, minimalist ideal-type peacebuilding programmes are usually more ‘macro’ in the means of their implementation. While it is more than possible to distinguish between a ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ approach to peace- (and state-)building (see e.g. Wennmann 2010), wherein the former is more closely associated with state-led action and the latter with ‘grassroots’ engagement with specific target groups, both approaches are arguably ‘holistic’ in their efforts of going either up or down – they seek to eventually deal with the phenomena of crime, violence, and societal conflict at a systemic or structural level.

In short, we suggest that minimalist peacebuilding programming deals with the paradigmatic elements of the grammar of the city, while urban safety deals with the syntagmatic aspect of the grammar of the city. However, as we have already noted, this ideal-type distinction between the two is not necessarily lived in practice. In fact, the third (middle) column of Table 1 demonstrates how these ideal-type minimalist conceptualizations of urban safety and peacebuilding have come to a confluent overlap. The aim of this exercise is to begin to ask how, based on their minimalist definitions and through the lens of semiotics, we might be able to understand and improve their current relationship so as to move towards a more fully integrated approach.

3. The medicine of peacebuilding and urban safety

Let us now speak more directly to the ‘real-world’ focus of urban safety and peacebuilding practice. Consider one of the organizations participating in the Technical Working Group: the Cure Violence initiative. Implemented in more than fifty sites across the world, Cure Violence has developed a unique approach to reducing violence in the city. The programme has focused, in particular, on gang-related or (organized) criminal violence, predominantly in the United States and Latin America.

The approach has three core stages. The first seeks to “detect and interrupt the transmission of violence” which – practically – involves having trained ‘violence interrupters’ identify and mediate potential conflicts in a community by preventing retaliations: “whenever a shooting happens, trained workers immediately work in the community and at the hospital to cool down emotions and prevent retaliations – working with the victims, friends and family of the victim, and anyone else connected with the event” (Cure Violence 2016). The goal here is to prevent immediate retaliation, and then to mediate a conflict in order to prevent it resulting in further harm.

The second stage of the programme then attempts to identify ‘high risk’ individuals and change their behaviour by introducing them to ‘culturally-appropriate’ outreach workers who can deal
with their individual needs or motivations for being engaged in violence. The third stage of the programme is related to the second one and involves “mobilizing the community to change norms.” Here, community leaders and residents are engaged to “convey the message that violence should not be viewed as normal.” At a broader (macro) level, then, it is hoped that these norms of violence can be changed and that, combined with the second stage, this will feed down into individual behaviours.

Interestingly, *Cure Violence* explicitly treats violence like an infectious disease. This provides us with a useful metaphor moving us away from the technical terminology of semiotics (the distinction between paradigms and syntagms) discussed above, without losing its ability to clarify the overlaps and differences between urban safety and peacebuilding practice. The first stage of the model proposed by *Cure Violence* – ‘interrupting’ the spread of violence – does not, in fact, intend to ‘cure’ violence. It intends, quite the contrary, to stop harm escalating after it has already started (i.e. to stop a second person being shot). The approach can thus be considered in medical terms as a form of palliative care. Palliative care relieves the symptoms of illness or, in this case, of urban crime, violence, and societal conflict. The goal of urban safety is similarly to improve quality of life for all those living in the city, without necessarily (but, see below) working to ‘cure’ the underlying problems that are causing these harms.

This palliative model of care, therefore, is central to urban safety schemes that work to ‘interrupt’ violence in the vein described by *Cure Violence*. By altering the syntagmatic ordering of the city – the situation of violence – it is hoped that the propensity for further or additional harm will reduce. By contrast, the third stage of the *Cure Violence* approach that seeks to “mobilize the community to change norms” can be seen as a form of curative care. Curative care seeks to tackle underlying causes of harm, whatever they may be. This model of care aligns with the ideal-type modality of intervention that is described in minimalist peacebuilding schemes, and in particular the conflict resolution and associative approaches we mentioned when defining the minimalist conceptualization of peacebuilding earlier. The aim is to address ‘root causes’ of violence and conflict, while embedding peacebuilding interventions within ‘local’ or ‘indigenous’ structures and capacities that are identified as crucial mechanisms for effective conflict mitigation. This, it is hoped, will lead to a paradigmatic shift away from crime, violence, and societal conflict in the city. The goal, indeed, is to cure violence.

Put in these terms, the distinction between urban safety and peacebuilding practice is relatively clear. More than this, it suggests the importance of clarifying the division of labour between the two approaches. Consider Johan Galtung’s work *Peace by Peaceful Means*, which contains many references and comparisons to medical science, including the following:

> There is nothing wrong with schools of medicine, in the plural; the problem is when only one school is available. Insiders and outsiders alike are entitled to a choice. The field can benefit from diversity only as long as it is interactive in general, and dialogical in particular, with a view to mutual enrichment and in some cases to a synthesis (Galtung 1996: 15; emphasis added).

Ideally speaking, urban safety and peacebuilding would act as these different schools of medicine, the palliative and the curative, and mutually reinforce each other. But why, then, the general obscurity?
To answer that question we need to – again – recognize the fact that groups like *Cure Violence* are drawing on *both* the palliative care methods of urban safety and *and* the curative methods of peacebuilding (in their ideal types) so as to create a hybrid form of ‘peacebuilding in the city’ that blurs the lines of the two approaches. *Cure Violence*, and many other groups, are arguably working in column three of Table 1 above – constituting a ‘grey zone’ that reflects the complexities of contemporary programming contexts. The Technical Working Group has discussed at length the challenges posed by urbanization in terms of levels of crime, violence, and societal conflict. It has also recognized that, despite these ‘alarm bells’, surprisingly little is known about the ways in which cities, their institutions and neighbourhoods are able to cope and adapt in the face of massive capacity deficits – beyond a general awareness that high rates of interpersonal and collective forms of violence in cities are linked to the structural dynamics of urban agglomeration and the competing interests of (and power relations between) societal groups (see Jütersonke et al. 2007; Jütersonke and Krause 2013 for further references). Seeking to find new intervention modalities to meet these challenges, the urban safety and peacebuilding communities have, we suggest, moved away from the minimalist conceptualizations outlined in columns two and four of the table.

‘Field realities’ in cities have thus brought together both researchers and practitioners from the urban safety and peacebuilding communities by simple necessity. Nonetheless, we would argue that keeping in mind the minimalist intellectual and programmatic origins of these two approaches is important as their basic inclinations are often still found in the broad approaches of many organizations. Appreciating these distinctions will help us foster a relationship that avoids redundant overlap and harnesses the power of the two approaches into better integrated programming.

4. Aggregation, politicization, and the confluence of urban safety and peacebuilding practice

Distinguishing between urban safety and peacebuilding measures in terms of their curative or palliative roles is important, but it remains an ideal-type distinction. In reality, the lines are blurred, and this blurring of their roles is increasing as the deliberations of the Technical Working Group are pursued and programming commonalities identified. In order to appreciate why this is so at a conceptual level – and so judge the opportunities and challenges of this confluence – we will now further distinguish between the two approaches in terms of the effects their respective palliative or curative roles play along two additional axes: *aggregation* and *politicization*.

Let us begin with *aggregation*. This refers to the degree to which social or technical practices are either analysed and intervened in on a case-by-case basis, or aggregated together. It is essentially, again, a distinction between ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ levels of analysis and intervention. In other words, to what degree are these approaches ‘granular’ or ‘aggregated’ in their interventions in the city? Ideally speaking, urban safety schemes intervene at a very low level of practical aggregation: roads should be studied individually – by each street corner they entail and each sidewalk that runs alongside them – in order to identify any ‘hazard’ that might be present. Likewise, in the *Cure Violence* approach, ‘interventions’ after a shooting must occur on a street-by-street and family-by-family basis. By contrast, peacebuilding schemes ideally operate at quite a high level of aggregation such that they can holistically deal with ‘root causes’ of conflict. It does not necessarily make sense to, say, direct a peacebuilding scheme in Israel and the Palestinian territories on a street-by-street basis. Instead, it is generally hoped that changing ideas at a broader level of societal aggregation will effect change.
Frequently, however, neither urban safety nor peacebuilding activities achieve these ‘ideal-type’ positions. Urban safety schemes, for one, are often not particularly granular in their practices. This appears to be the case because the granularity of urban safety practice varies in relation to the material wealth of the society in which they are being enacted. Granular urban safety activities are expensive. A truly ‘comprehensive’ urban safety scheme includes not only the focus on aspects of the urban fabric directly related to hazards like crime or violence but also – more broadly – issues relating to public health (e.g. building water or sewage facilities, constructing septic tanks, and the separation of industrial activities from residential areas), ensuring ‘circulation’ in the city (adequate and safe road networks, parking infrastructures, storm hazard planning including evacuation measures, etc.), the provision of public services conducive to health and safety (including parks, recreation areas, and hospitals), environmental protection (reduction of greenhouse emissions, building restrictions in dangerous areas, etc.), and far beyond (Levy 2016: 122-3). Less wealthy states, particularly those situated in the Global South, are unlikely to possess the resources to be able to implement all of these measures at an adequate level of granularity, and this will especially be true in conflict-affected societies.

By contrast, in protracted crises peacebuilding schemes often become ‘stuck’ in their capacity to act at a high level of aggregation that might shift the semiotic ‘paradigm’ of a conflict. Thus many peacebuilding schemes descend in their level of aggregation – by necessity – to dealing less with ‘root causes’ and more and more with the case-by-case activities of urban safety practitioners. In other words, they shift from curative to palliative care giving. Take again the example of the Israel-Palestine conflict and the United Nations Reliefs and Works Agency (UNRWA) and other United Nations agencies that are nominally working towards ‘peace’. Increasingly, those agencies operate as a ‘state within a state’ that provides basic social services including urban safety measures in order to alleviate poverty, crime, and suffering in the increasingly urbanized West Bank or Gaza Strip (see Bocco and Takkenberg 2009). A clear shift, then, from curative to palliative medicine.

Alternatively, civil society organizations in the West Bank have been similarly afflicted. Tariq Dana (2013) argues that Palestinian societal groups have become increasingly depoliticized as hope of negotiating a peace agreement has floundered and external pressures have forced their hands. The result has been a focus on increasingly granular ‘technical’ solutions that alleviate immediate suffering. As opposed to being focused on altering the ‘paradigm’ of the conflict at quite a high level of aggregation (e.g. changing broader international ideas about the conflict and/or societal norms that underlie it on both sides), the groups have shifted to the everyday work of dealing with the urban fabric of the city and reducing harm, rather than building peace per se. Again, we can see in this disaggregation of the approach a clear shift from curative to palliative care in their activities.

In short: the higher the level of aggregation at which urban safety is pushed to, the harder it becomes to distinguish its activities from those of peacebuilding. And, by way of opposition, the lower the level of aggregation to which peacebuilding is pulled down to, the harder it becomes to distinguish its activities from those of urban safety. The two come to merge together, sometimes indistinguishably.

The problem of aggregation is complemented by that of politicization. It is important to return to our introductory point that urban safety practices are global in scope. Because they are fundamentally related to problems caused by urbanization across the world – whether in Amsterdam, Beijing or Bangui – and to problems relating to cities whether they are urbanizing
rapidly or not, their approach is necessary everywhere. Urban safety schemes are on-going in London, just as they are in Kinshasa. One important consequence of this is that urban safety schemes are rarely highly politicized, not least because they are often part of a broader agenda focusing on sustainable urban development or the notion of ‘smart cities’ (see e.g. UNECE 2016) – now subsumed under Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which targets “inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable” cities and human settlements (United Nations 2015). Few people complain about road traffic safety measures on principle. Yet we tend to overlook this fact when exploring the relationship between urban safety and peacebuilding, not least because these two approaches are usually only found in combination in places outside rich and developed countries, where political and societal dynamics differ considerably.

Indeed, peacebuilding schemes are – as the name suggests – generally implemented following or during some degree of serious political violence and conflict, and/or extensive (and often organized) criminal violence as found in parts of Central and Latin American (for a discussion see Krause 2009). Our focus when discussing the confluence of urban safety and peacebuilding practice is thus necessarily on states where this has been occurring, and where the governance context is intrinsically politicized. This frequently means that when we do look at self-declared urban safety schemes carried out alongside peacebuilding initiatives, the former are often more politicized than they would be under ‘normal’ circumstances. As a result, they may be involved in programming activities that look similar to a peacebuilding remit (e.g. engagement with community organizations to change ‘ideas’) rather than comprehensive urban planning schemes. But such politicization is not innate to urban safety.

Beyond sheer necessity (the persistence of crime, violence, and societal conflict in rapidly urbanizing settings), the confluence of urban safety and peacebuilding practice occurs because of a mutually reinforcing logic. Indeed, while peacebuilding must be accepted as a political activity in and of itself, its success is premised on the diminishment of its own political status and – eventually – its complete disappearance. Yet the same cannot be said of urban safety measures, which succeed in so much as they remain apolitical and are not pulled into politics but maintain themselves as neutral background factors mitigating the perpetual ‘hazards’ of any urban fabric. It is thus that in Table 1, above, we described the temporality of urban safety as ‘constant’ and that of peacebuilding as ‘linear’ (or at the very least ‘cyclical’). Peacebuilding seeks to take certain measures at time X in order to ‘solve’ a conflict at time Y, at which point its activities will – ideally – no longer be required. Urban safety measures, by contrast, require to be constantly present and active in the urban fabric. There is a paradox here, however. Peacebuilding seeks to become less political by normalizing its programmes and ideas until they are ‘accepted’ and peace is – yes – ‘built’ but, in doing so, it is essentially trying to convert itself into an urban safety approach by moving down into carrying out more granular activities. In the process, however, it simultaneously works to politicize urban safety as an approach. These centripetal forces work alongside simple necessity to paradoxically result in the acceleration of the confluence of urban safety and peacebuilding programmes today.

That confluence is now depicted schematically in Figure 3. It shows how we can chart the confluence between urban safety and peacebuilding along the two axes of aggregation (which correlates with the semiotic distinction between ‘syntagmatic’ or ‘paradigmatic’ forms) and politicization (which correlates with palliative or curative forms of care). The graph will allow us to – roughly – chart the positions of organizations working within these two fields, which is a task we will pursue in subsequent iterations of this paper. The challenge for now, however, is to
reflect on how this confluence between urban safety and peacebuilding practice, which has emerged largely by necessity, might be better formed into a truly ‘integrated’ approach.

5. Towards an integrated approach: Dangers, challenges, and opportunities

The Technical Working Group seeks to identify the contours of an integrated approach on the interface of urban safety and peacebuilding practice. Such an integration is necessary because the ‘confluence’ that has emerged between the two approaches, as we have shown above, is largely a result of external forces including 1) the rise in the phenomena of concern to both urban planners and peacebuilders, 2) a lack of wealth and/or material resources to carry out
very granular urban safety practices in the Global South, and 3) a mutually reinforcing logic between urban safety and peacebuilding vis-à-vis their ‘neutral’ or ‘political’ status that drives them to convergence. While this ‘shotgun wedding’ of the two approaches has taught us much about their complementarity, we need to move towards a more systematic integration of their respective strengths and weaknesses in order to avoid several dangers that we now conclude by identifying.

The politicization of urban safety schemes seems likely to increase the fragmentation of city space into ‘safe’ gated communities and ‘violent’ peripheries (see e.g. Landman 2012; Rodgers 2002; Caldeira 1996). That is: in situations of real or perceived ‘threat’ or ‘danger’, the traditional focus of urban safety approaches on the relatively neutral term ‘hazards’ may be ignored, and its powerful means of intervening in the urban fabric of society utilized to divide cities through what Tunde Agbola (1997) has termed a new “architecture of fear.” Indeed, take the example of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict again. The decades-long ‘stall’ in its peace process has seen peacebuilding efforts shift more and more towards traditional urban safety schemes on both the Israeli and Palestinian sides. This has resulted in the manipulation of the urban fabric of the cities and their environs so as to ‘separate’ the two sides through punitive means (walls, checkpoints, etc.) that prevent economic development, political expression, and freedom of movement. The Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD), which has campaigned against successive Israeli governments’ manipulation of urban planning law to demolish and reorder urban space, refers to this as the construction of a “matrix of control” able to minutely direct the lives of ordinary people through:

A maze of laws, military orders, planning procedures, limitations on movement, Kafkaesque bureaucracy, settlements and infrastructure – augmented by prolonged and ceaseless low-intensity warfare – that serves to perpetuate the Occupation, to administer it with a minimum of military presence and, ultimately, to conceal it behind massive Israeli ‘facts on the ground’ and a bland façade of ‘proper administration’ (Halper 2009: 32).

In other words, the politicization of urban safety approaches to preventing crime, violence, and societal conflict may increase the ‘bunkerisation’ of privileged societal groups at the expense of others. This can be seen in both the creation of ‘gated communities’, the similar ‘matrices of control’ employed by military occupations in Baghdad, Palestine, Southern Turkey, or elsewhere, and, in fact, in the more mundane urban safety schemes implemented in wealthy states. Take a trend towards “hostile [or ‘defensive’] architectures” that include the use of “anti-homeless spikes” – studs that are placed on flat surfaces near doorways to prevent homeless individuals sleeping there – or slanting windowsills that prevent people sitting on them, or benches with arm rests to prevent people lying down (Petty 2016; Kinder 2014). These measures, to some degree, all work to prevent the “right to the city” as it has been traditionally understood (Lefebvre 1996), and can be seen as a direct consequence of the politicization of urban safety through its integration of peacebuilding precepts in contexts where the ‘root causes’ approach of the latter has failed to gain adequate leverage over a ‘fragile’ urban environment. The result is a profoundly ‘anti-political’ form of governance (as analysed so poignantly by Ferguson 1990), something an integrated approach may want to avoid at all costs.

Alongside the challenges related to the politicization of urban safety are those caused by their increasing aggregation. As we noted above, one of the reasons why it has been difficult to distinguish between urban safety and peacebuilding practice in contexts where these are both
implemented, relates to the fact that extensive and materially embedded urban safety approaches are costly and hence not frequently affordable for city municipalities. The result has been a shift to the ‘meso’ level described in Table 1, where municipal governance becomes the entry-point for interventions rather than the ‘urban fabric’ in and of itself. By changing people’s ideas about what it means to generate representative institutions of local government (as opposed to simply paying lip-service to vague notions of urban governance; see also Jütersonke and Kartas 2015) it is hoped that the city will become a safer space. Paradoxically, however, this risks a focus on the ‘duties’ of individuals to the city as opposed to their ‘right’ to live in a safe and secure urban fabric. In other words, it occludes the socio-economic rights of urban dwellers to a problematic extent, rendering them ‘neoliberal’ subjects responsible for their own safety and that of others, without state intervention in the material fabric of the city.

This last point, however, should not be read as a critique of groups like Cure Violence who advocate a focus on individuals. It must be seen, in fact, as a wider critique of peacebuilding and its apolitical stance vis-à-vis the necessity of wealth distribution to developing cities in order to improve their safety. Rather than attempting to reduce its political status, the socio-economic aspect of urban safety is something peacebuilding schemes should perhaps be advocating more explicitly. However, in the present ad-hoc combination of the two approaches, and in light of the politicization of peacebuilding in the context of shifting multilateral peace and security agendas as well as the concomitant interests of donors and host countries alike, this is not something that is likely to occur easily.

With these dangers firmly in mind, then, how might we actually move towards an integrated approach? For opening directions, let us take Kim Dovey’s words that:

One test for a good city lies in the capacity to walk the streets in safety – day or night, rich or poor, male or female, black or white, old or young. But another test lies in the capacity for all its citizens to gain access to the overwhelming vitality, creativity and diversity of urban life. The task is not to choose between, but rather to reconcile, these imperatives. It is one of understanding, managing and engaging with safety and danger in a creative and civilized manner. The struggle against the privatization and tranquilization of public space will be a long one. But the stakes for future generations are high and we will all be judged on the kind of city we bequeath them (Dovey 2000: 13).

The task of an integrated approach to urban safety and peacebuilding requires, these words suggest, a better appreciation of the ‘ideal-type’ roles described for them in this paper. Urban safety is vital in so much as its palliative care approach to the city ensures we can all “walk the streets in safety” despite the continued presence of the hazards that mark any built environment. Those hazards – whether material or social – are, however, part of what constitutes the very “creativity and diversity” of urban life, and the challenge is how to maintain and harness the positive energies associated with urban propinquity in a safe and inclusive manner. From this perspective, peacebuilding schemes should be seen as necessary in their rather more high-political role of dealing with the ‘root causes’ of particularly deleterious forms of crime, violence, and societal conflict. This role should ensure it engages the creative potential of urban politics but, in a truly integrated approach, does not allow that engagement to subsume the vital importance of acknowledging the materiality of the ‘urban fabric’ of safety (and indeed encroach on the resources available to pursue activities related to it). In other words, an engagement with the politics of the city – with changing values, norms, and a willingness to fulfil
one’s ‘duties’ to the city – must be integrated with an understanding that the very design and planning behind visions of urban safety are part of the fundamental right to the city that is being constantly negotiated as the urbanization of the planet continues. In order to assist in the formulation of a ‘smart’ and ‘safe’ city, we therefore require both curative care for its more serious ills, and palliative care for the ailments that are – paradoxically – often the source of its vitality. To achieve this, researchers and practitioners should be careful to recognize the value of an integrated division of labour between urban safety and peacebuilding that respects the distinct foci of their ‘ideal-type’ forms even where those ideal types cannot be fully realized. An integrated approach – to end with semiotics – rests on us working towards crafting a better grammar for the urbanizing city.

References


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About the Technical Working Group

The Technical Working Group on the Confluence of Urban Safety and Peacebuilding Practice brings together focal points on urban safety of cities with peacebuilding, peace mediation and conflict prevention practitioners in order to help craft solutions to the rapidly increasing risk of conflict & insecurity in urban settings. It is co-facilitated by the United Nations Office at Geneva, UN-Habitat’s Safer Cities Programme and the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform. For more information, see: http://www.gpplatform.ch/pb-city.

About the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform

The Geneva Peacebuilding Platform is an inter-agency network that connects the critical mass of peacebuilding actors, resources, and expertise in Geneva and worldwide. Founded in 2008, the Platform has a mandate to facilitate interaction on peacebuilding between different institutions and sectors, and to advance new knowledge and understanding of peacebuilding issues and contexts. It also plays a creative role in building bridges between International Geneva, the United Nations peacebuilding architecture in New York, and peacebuilding activities in the field. The Platform’s network comprises more than 4,000 peacebuilding professionals and over 60 institutions working on peacebuilding directly or indirectly.

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