Article

Beyond Distribution: Critique of Spatial Justice Theories—Case Study of Shanghai's 15-Minute City

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Abstract: The concept of the 15-minute city is increasingly being adopted globally as a pathway towards the vision of a just city. However, this distributive justice-based discourse is also used to justify and depoliticize radical planning interventions, particularly relocation, which profoundly impact the lifeworlds of affected individuals. Despite improved accessibility and the reallocation of resources, relocatees' perceived injustice persists. This study aims to address a critical question: How does relocation planning impact the lifeworlds of affected communities, and how does this contribute to the sense of injustice experienced by relocatees? The theoretical framework we used critically examines spatial justice theories, emphasizing their inherent "logic of equation", which reduces people's complex lived experiences and subjective realities to measurable data and numbers, thereby disrupting individuals' lifeworlds. Empirically, this study conducted a case study of a relocation project in Shanghai's inner city, utilizing mind mapping to visualize the spatial perceptions and activities of 15 residents before and after relocation, complemented by interviews with these residents and two planning officials. While the planners' evaluations indicate improved built environments post relocation, the findings reveal significant disruptions to the residents' socio-spatial networks, particularly among the elderly. These disruptions diminished their capacity and willingness to engage with the new space, fostering a persistent sense of injustice. This study concludes that addressing planning disruptions requires policies that go beyond material redistribution to restore and reshape people's lifeworlds.

Keywords: relocation; lifeworld; distributive justice; environmental justice; community life-circle

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1. Introduction

The discussion on the just city is compelling in the field of planning and geography. Starting from Harvey's [1] seminal work on city and social justice, justice has become a prevailing subject among urban theorists such as Fainstein [2], Soja [3], Campbell [4], and Smith [5], and several justice schools in planning can be identified [6]. Against the discursive ideas about the just city and derivative theories and policies that are obviously value-laden [7], Moroni [8] distinguishes between the concept and various conceptions of justice. The concept of justice refers to the unitary idea of justice that is "what would be justifiable to anyone on ignoring individual positions", while the conceptions of justice are the various ways for the concept to be specified in the differentiated contexts where individuals retain different duties and rights [8]. Environmental justice scholars have made great

efforts to extend and widen the conceptions of justice, which are often concluded to have four dimensions: distribution, recognition, procedure, and capability [9,10]. While these growing conceptions are mostly derived from critiques against distributional justice, many either harbor the distributional conceptions of justice at their core or retain distributional elements [11–13]. Therefore, distributional equity, often complemented by additional conceptions, keeps its overarching position in urban policy and planning practice.

While environmental justice is rarely used by Chinese planners, its four dimensions, particularly distribution, have become great concerns in urban planning practice. Since 2016, Shanghai has been promoting the planning of the "15-minute community life-circle", which is to enhance the accessibility and the equity of life services among the entire city. In the practice of the community life-circle, various initiatives supporting participatory planning have been identified, and the characteristics of the local population, as well as community demands for amenities, are emphasized in the guidance [14]. Also, many new techniques based on big data modeling and GIS evaluation have been applied to help approach the just distribution of these amenities [15]. In this context, the long-lasting discussion on urban relocation that used to be a prominent planning justice topic seems to have been dissolved into a broader discussion about the improvement of the built environment [16].

However, many theories have argued that space is produced and reproduced by myriad social relations [3,17,18]. Hence, what relocation and other planning initiatives affect is not only the community life-circle planned by the others but a person's lifeworld, the "normally unnoticed, automatic unfolding of everyday life" that represents the wholeness of people–world immersion and entwinement [19]. The lifeworld is an important constituent of one's subjectivity and the expression of who one is. When it is curtailed, and relegated into a sameness, that process represents a kind of limiting or solidification of the self.

Relocation is undoubtedly one of the most impactful planning interventions on individuals' lifeworlds, as it fundamentally transforms the built environment, human activities, and their interactions. However, as previously noted, policies addressing the impacts of relocation planning often focus on material redistribution without engaging with the lifeworld itself. Under the discourse of distributive justice, exemplified by concepts like the 15-minute community life-circle, a seemingly just relocation planning mechanism appears to be taking shape, effectively justifying and depoliticizing this planning measure at the practical level. Nonetheless, instances of perceived injustice among residents persist, even within planning practices that achieve "justice" in distributive terms. Therefore, this study argues that the research question, "How does relocation planning influence the lifeworld of affected communities, and how does this contribute to the sense of injustice experienced by relocatees?" is crucial to address.

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, conducting a case study on a relocation project in Shanghai's inner city. Using mind mapping, it materializes and visualizes changes in 15 residents' intangible spatial perceptions and capabilities before and after relocation. In-depth interviews with these residents, as well as two planning officials, explore the underlying causes of these changes. The findings reveal that, although the built environment, particularly the accessibility of public services, improved according to external evaluations by the planners, the relocation disrupted the socio-spatial networks of the residents, especially the elderly individuals. This disruption to their lifeworlds ultimately diminished their willingness and ability to engage with the space, leading to a sense of injustice. Such disruptions to the lifeworld cannot be fully addressed through material redistribution alone, suggesting that future policies must prioritize the restoration and reshaping of residents' lifeworlds.

2. Spatial Justice and Planning

2.1. Planning and Distributive Justice

In planning, the discussion on spatial justice often coincides with the issue of distributive justice. Indeed, these two concepts are often used as synonymous expressions in planning [20–22]. As a result, the equal distribution of public services and amenities is centered at many planning practices that claim to be in support of social and spatial justice. The concept of the community life-circle, for instance, plans to provide the residents of each community with equal access to basic service functions and activity spaces within a 15-minute walking distance.

This focus of planning on equal distribution derives from Rawls's celebrated distributive justice narrative. Regardless of the long-lasting disputes about its definition and scope (for example, [23–28]), the leitmotif of distributive justice in planning debates is often egalitarian, top-down, and primarily focused on the distributional equality of either tangible or intangible things (e.g., rights, opportunities, economic goods) [3,10,29–32]. However, it is worth emphasizing that Rawls himself did not advocate sticking to rigid, outcome-based fairness [33]. In fact, distributive justice theory closely connects "equality" to "liberty" [6]. This argument is reflected in Rawls's two principles of distributive justice:

> First Principle: each person has an equal claim to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic rights and liberties, in which the scheme is compatible with the same scheme for all; in this scheme, the equal political liberties, and only those liberties, are to be guaranteed their fair value.
>
> Second Principle: Social and economic inequalities are to satisfy two conditions. First, they are to be attached to positions and offices open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity; second, they are to be of the greatest benefit to the least-advantaged members of society ([33]: pp. 5–6).

2.2. Reviewing Critiques of Distributive Justice in the Spatial and Environmental Justice Literature

Many deficiencies of the distributive justice approach have been raised in the spatial and environmental justice literature. The literature adds further conceptions of justice, such as recognition, procedure, and capability, to distribution, thereby forming a more complete understanding of a just society.

Recognitive justice theories critique the asocial and aspatial characteristics of distributive justice frameworks. These theories argue that a just society must be founded on mutual and equal recognition among all its members [34,35]. In Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, the principle of justice is derived from a hypothetical scenario—the "original position". Within it, individuals are placed behind the "veil of ignorance", where they lack the knowledge of their personal characteristics, social status, and socio-historical circumstances. Rawls' reason is that, under these conditions, rational individuals would naturally select the principles of distributive justice. This approach has been critiqued by recognitive justice scholars, including Young [36] and Fraser [37], for abstracting the socio-cultural realities that underpin injustice. These critics argue that real-world uneven distribution is rooted in systemic social issues such as cultural degradation and various discriminations. For example, Young argues that focusing solely on the distribution of resources would overlook structural injustice like the social marginalization caused by historical power imbalances [36]. Thus, the recognitive justice literature suggests that, beyond material equality, planning and institutional processes should be socially and spatially situated, considering the underlying processes of valuing and recognizing [10,36].

Critiques rooted in questions of procedural justice take aim at the outcome-oriented feature of distributive justice. Scholars like Nozick [38], who ontologically argues justice as

the product of fair processes, emphasize the primacy of procedures. At the same time, many discussions on procedural justice advocate for balancing procedural fairness with equitable outcomes through promoting wide and substantial democratic participation. In the context of planning, procedural justice is often represented by the communicative school theorists, such as Healey [39] and Forester [40]. Their theories are grounded in the Habermasian philosophy of communicative rationality, which stresses the importance of participation and mutual understanding in achieving inclusive processes and just outcomes.

In contrast to the procedural justice approach, the literature on capability justice focuses more on the realistic consideration of the ultimate results of distribution, rather than its process. The capability school of thought is reflected in Fainstein's [2] work within the realm of planning, which supports Rawls's justice narrative but suggests that distributive justice ignores the structural inequality of power [6]. Based on the capabilities approach developed by Sen [41] and Nussbaum [42], capability justice theorists aim to complement distributive justice by including capabilities in an evaluation of justness. In a planning context, core capabilities are those that refer to the opportunity and the capacity of each individual to control their political and material environment [7]. A metaphor of Aristotle ([43]: p. 7) is often quoted for illustrating capability justice: "wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking; for it is merely useful and for the sake of something else". While in the distributive justice narrative, the distributed person is in an ideational position to passively receive "wealth", the capability justice highlights the capacity of the distributed person to transfer the "wealth" into "functionings", the desired end-state of that person [42]. Hence, the scope of capability justice includes not only distribution itself but also individual agencies and the final outcomes that the distribution brings for individuals [44].

Overall, it can be found that the leitmotif of the environmental and spatial justice theories in planning, after the Rawlsian distributive narrative, is to adapt a distributive justice that is designed under utopian conditions without socio-power relations to real-world circumstances in which socio-power relations are prominent [45]. Recognitive and procedural justice enriches the pragmatic considerations on how to reach equity through distribution, and capability justice has deepened the thoughts on the end-state of distribution and on the subjectivity and agency of humans. However, the universal and transcendent concept of justice that distributive justice pursues has not been challenged by these conceptions of justice. For example, it is difficult to imagine someone advocating for the greater recognition of disadvantaged groups in the planning process without acknowledging the importance of a fair distribution of material benefits. As Schlosberg [10] suggests, environmental justice does not "replace" distributive justice but rather complements it. Hence, regardless of their critiques against distributive justice, these conceptions retain elements of distribution in their theoretical structures [11].

2.3. Problematization: The "Logic of Equation" and Its Impact on the Lifeworld

Despite the wide range of conceptions of justice and relevant academic theories, as discussed, the principles of distributive justice remain central and are often used alongside other approaches, rather than being replaced. This article contributes to the ongoing discussion of spatial justice by revisiting the principles of distributive justice itself. By doing so, we aim to highlight the potential area of injustices that are overlooked in the current discussions of spatial and environmental justice.

In addition to the equity of one's basic rights (First Principle), Rawls's Second Principle of justice emphasizes socio-economic fairness but implies a particular form of unidirectionality. The Second Principle suggests economic inequalities can be justified only if they improve the situation of the least-well-off members of society. It can be found that Rawls's "fairness" does not request the elimination of differences between different groups or set a

standard for a tolerable wealth gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged groups. Instead, the principle focuses on the "absolute improvement" of the well-being of the least-advantaged groups, who should be the primary beneficiaries of distribution. This is distinct from the idea of "relative improvement", where progress is measured through inter-group comparisons.

This is where this study wishes to problematize distributive justice. To clarify, this study does not intend to challenge Rawls's principles themselves, but rather to critique their operationalization in planning practice, specifically the potential risks of creating other forms of injustice. As noted, the fulfilment of distributive justice theoretically requires the "absolute improvement" of the well-being of the least advantaged people. This, in turn, necessitates an evaluation of this improvement—a comparison of the least-advantaged people's condition before and after distributive interventions. The issue here is twofold: How do we measure such absolute improvement? Who is responsible for making these comparisons? These questions raise concerns about the potential emergence of currently under-recognized forms of injustice. The necessity for an evaluation practice matters a lot. The following paragraphs will formalize these arguments.

Human subjectivity is complex, and, to some extent, such complexity itself does not fit neatly into the common action of evaluation and comparison. Heidegger suggests that human subjectivity—our sense of self—is not something separate from the world around us. Instead, it is constantly shaped by, and interacts with, the environment in which it is situated [29]. Building on this, Soja [3] argues that our experiences are influenced not only by our social and historical backgrounds but also by the spaces we inhabit. These factors together form what many phenomenologists call the lifeworld—the pre-reflective world as we experience it in our daily lives. Originally raised by Husserl [46] and later elaborated by Habermas [47], the concept of the lifeworld refers to the everyday lived experience of individuals, encompassing their social, cultural, and personal worlds. It represents the taken-for-granted background of norms, values, practices, and meanings that shape how people interpret and interact with the world or, in other words, their human subjectivity. Since human subjectivity is shaped by the lifeworld and cannot be separated from it, changes in the lifeworld can, in turn, influence people's inner experiences.

This interaction could be a potential area where experiential injustice may occur, which we will explore through the underlying "logic of equation" in distributive justice (Figure 1). In short, the logic of equation refers to a way of thinking that tries to simplify the lifeworld by turning it into static, measurable data or numbers. The lifeworld is not just a subjective experience of the environment we inhabit. It also includes both the material and symbolic aspects of the world and is shaped by active social practices in everyday life. As shown in Figure 1, a human's lifeworld (Status A) always keeps changing and flowing.

However, in distributive justice planning, to represent an improvement, in terms of justice, from Status A to Status B that is assumed to be a better-off condition after planning, there must be an assumption that Status A is as static as Status B. We have to set a reference point, Status A′, as the equivalent of Status A first, in order to record and measure the betterment after the planning process (P1) is complete (Figure 1). Further, in process P2, the logic of the equation is applied during the "evaluation" of the planning intervention. In this process, in order to measure the changes of conditions before and after the redistribution, Status B is compared with Status A′ (most often assumed to be the "do nothing" scenario), which is the assumed status of A after a period of time.

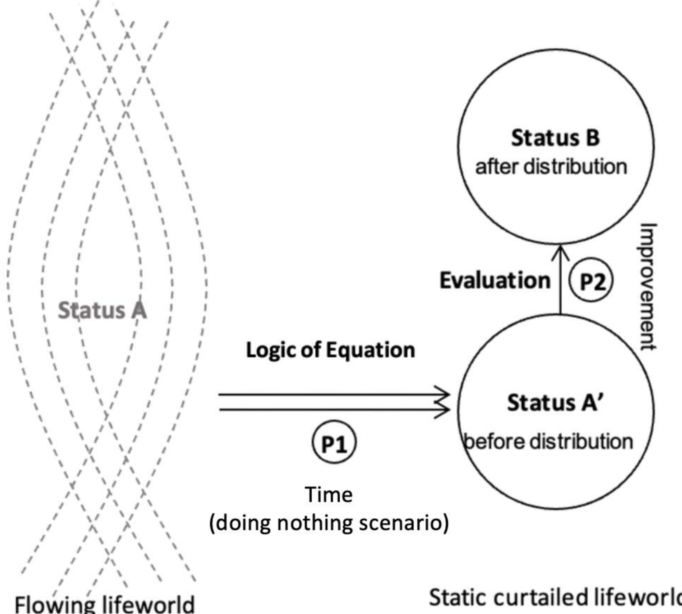

Figure 1. Logic of equation in distributive justice planning.

In critical studies, Status A′ and B are seen as the result of certain groups imposing their norms and criteria on others [18,48]. The evaluation of the recipients' improvement, carried out by specific institutions, often uses valuation criteria that may not align with the lived experiences of those receiving the benefits. These criteria are shaped by the interaction of institutions, social norms, and ideologies, and the outcomes typically reflect the interests of socially dominant groups [49]. The heteronomy of the evaluation is further amplified in technocratic and centralized planning systems, where the decisions regarding the distribution of resources can become disconnected from the actual needs of disadvantaged groups, potentially turning into a tool of deprivation. For instance, planners, through evaluation, often assume that reallocating material resources, such as providing larger apartments or nearby parks, automatically improves the residents' quality of life. Many studies on justice issues in China's relocation processes have highlighted this problem (see, for example, [50–54]).

When applied to the relocation of people, regardless how rationally this equivalence of A and A′ is made, A′ is inevitably a static "snapshot" that fails to capture the dynamic and complex nature of the lifeworld. This static representation of human subjectivity has been challenged by many theorists with postmodernist influences, such as Foucault [55], Lacan [56], and Deleuze [57]. The evaluation process itself reinforces this static view of the self, making it harder to understand how redistribution affects the lifeworld and the nuanced changes in people's experiences.

Overall, this section has theoretically explained how the operationalization of distributive justice principles can lead to an often-overlooked form of injustice by disrupting people's lifeworlds. The next chapter will empirically explore the occurrence of this form of injustice and examine how it could manifest.

3. Methodology

To investigate how the logic of equation inherent in distributive justice impacts individuals' lifeworlds and contributes to the perceptions of injustice, this study conducts a case study of a relocation project in Yangpu District, an inner-city area of Shanghai. In 2014, Shanghai introduced the "15-Minute Community Life Circle", an urban planning initiative aimed at creating vibrant, accessible, and sustainable neighborhoods. This concept

emphasizes ensuring that residents can meet most of their daily needs—such as shopping, education, healthcare, leisure, and cultural activities—within a 15-minute walk or bike ride from their homes [58]. It is fundamentally designed to promote spatial justice through the equitable distribution of basic services [54].

The studied relocation project was completed in 2016, as a demonstrative project under this 15-minute city concept. Approximately 106 households were relocated from the Jiangpu Neighborhood, an old bungalow neighborhood in Yangpu, to Neighborhood S, a large, gated high-rise residential compound less than 4 kilometers away, designated for the displaced residents. According to interviews, the planners believed that, according to the official "Planning Guidance of 15-Minute Community Life Circle" and relevant district government planning codes, the built environment had been improved after the relocation in terms of the accessibility to mainstream public services, such as education, recreation, and transportation. The new residential compound even offered higher-level transportation facilities, such as access to an underground station, a sports stadium, and a larger park. Hence, this case provided an opportunity to assess whether the distributional equity could effectively mitigate the impacts of relocation on the lifeworlds of those displaced. The research procedures are revealed in the following diagram (Figure 2).

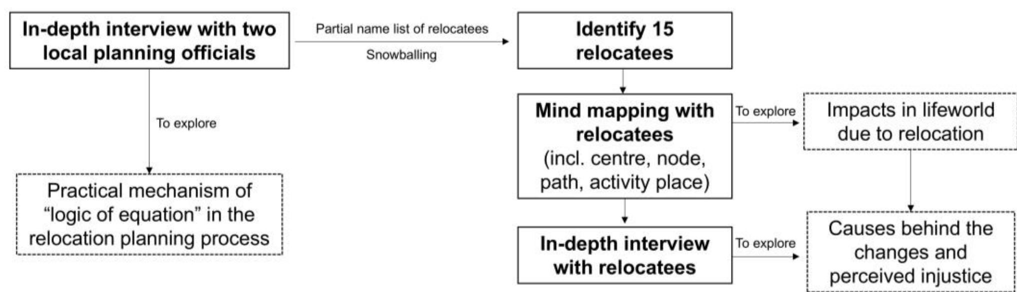

Figure 2. Research procedure.

Previous studies suggest that most people adapt to new environments within one to two years [59–61]. To minimize the influence of this natural adaptation period on residents' spatial activities, this study was conducted in 2018, two years after the relocation. A qualitative research approach was employed, including 17 research objects in total. Interviews with two district government planning officials, who were responsible for the project, clarified the "evaluation" and "equivalence" processes in the planning process and a partial list of the relocated residents. Based on this list and a snowball sampling method, 15 residents were recruited for interviews, comprising eight elderly individuals (over 61 years old), four middle-aged individuals (40–61 years old), and three younger individuals (18–39 years old). Confirmation from the planning officials indicated that this sample generally reflected the demographic composition of the relocated community. In qualitative research, the adequacy of the sample size is not determined by sheer numbers but by the principle of saturation, which means data collection proceeds until no significant new information or themes emerge. By following this principle, the research ensures both depth and representativeness, meeting the requirements of scientific rigor.

This study employed mind mapping and in-depth interviews to explore how the relocation affected the intangible aspects of the residents' lifeworlds. Drawing on Woodcock et al.'s [62] research on residents' spatial perceptions, which is itself based on Lynch's Image of the City theory, the study modeled the residents' spatial perceptions and interactions as mind maps consisting of centers, nodes (important facilities), paths (key roads), and activity places. These mind maps (for examples, see Figures 3 and 4) were used to visualize changes in the residents' intangible spatial perceptions and capabilities before and after

relocation. While this research measured some quantitative changes of the mind maps, such as the area of activity areas and the diversity of nodes, it is only intended to show general socio-spatial changes, with no intent to define statistical values, owing to the vagueness of people's mind maps of the dimensions and changes of their activity areas.

Figure 3. A young interviewee's lifeworld mind map before the relocation.

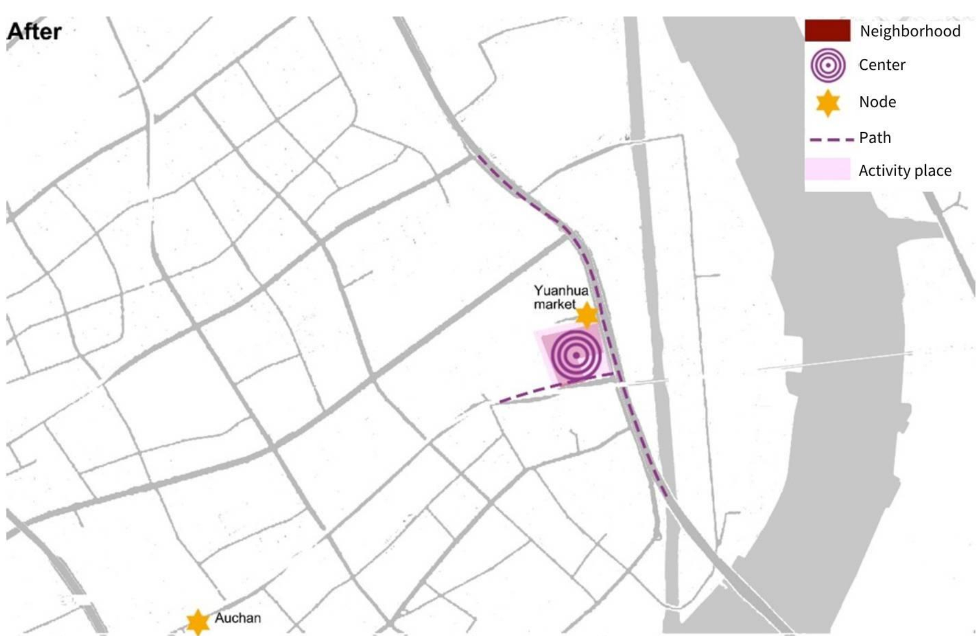

Figure 4. A young interviewee's lifeworld mind map after the relocation.

The in-depth interviews further elucidated the underlying causes and mechanisms of these changes. The interviews, each lasting no less than one hour, provided in-depth insights into the residents' experiences and perspectives, and all the data were collected, stored, and published in an anonymous format to protect the privacy of the respondents.

4. The Logic of the Equation and Injustice: A Case of Relocation Under Community Life-Circle Planning

Like many bungalow neighborhoods in Shanghai, the Jiangpu Block lacked basic living facilities such as toilets and kitchens. During the relocation process, each household was offered a certain amount of monetary compensation and/or an apartment in a high-rise relocation neighborhood. Many residents selected Neighborhood S because it was nearby and could therefore allow continued access to other parts of the city used by the residents.

According to the planning officials, the relocation was claimed to be “a typical equal and just project” in both its procedure and the distributional outcome. At first, as identified from the interviews with the relocatees and officials, the relocation was generally supported by the relocatees, who urgently needed to improve their living environment. Enforced demolishment has been strictly prohibited in Shanghai without permission of the court. The relocatees were allowed to choose monetary compensation, which was based on the guiding market price, as evaluated by the municipal government (around CNY four million per house for the bungalow neighborhood), or in-kind compensation, which came in the form of a new property in the relocation neighborhoods, the location of which varied from downtown areas to suburban areas. Most of the relocatees chose the in-kind compensation. In addition to these legally regulated compensation terms, the entire compensation package included many other subsidies, such as compensation for furniture and decorations, which was used by the district government to incentivize the residents to move out earlier and, thus, to accelerate the pace of the project. As a demonstrative project, the compensation plan of the Jiangpu Block relocation project went through a public hearing that included local residents, officials from the sub-district administration and the district construction management committee, the delegates of Yangpu People’s Congress, and lawyers, and the hearing recorded and discussed the residents’ suggestions on the plan, which was then modified by the district government. The detailed information about the compensation was publicized in the notice board of the bungalow neighborhood. The project was completed within around six months, which was also seen as evidence of the willingness and cooperation of the relocatees by the officials.

Nevertheless, regardless of the rationality and legitimacy of the “equivalence” and “evaluation” processes, the relocation was generally drafted based on the norms of value of the officials and planners, namely, what they thought was “good for the relocatees”. For the relocatees, what they received comprised not only limited choices posed by the government but also choices that had been validated by officials and professionals acting as representatives of society and the truth. Regardless of whether the relocation would improve the relocatees’ living status, it is clear that they, as the distributed, were marginal and passive in the “evaluation process” that determined what is better or not. As a relocatee said, “it is meaningless to judge if the relocation is ‘just or not’, as it is not up to us anyway”.

Second, in the distribution of urban amenities, the relocation neighborhood, as the officials claimed, was designed with “mature and sufficient public service”, the quality of which was “scientifically evaluated by planning professionals”. This claim was based on the fact that the new environment was complied with the sophisticated technical guidance of community life-circle planning and an evaluation that the basic life facilities within the 500 m life-circle catchment were generally the “same before and after the relocation”. Regarding the ageing population structure of the relocation neighborhood and consultation with local residents, some care facilities such as community-level medical care stations were specifically planned to be near the new neighborhood.

However, the case study showed extensive complaints from the relocatees about their post-relocation condition. Through comparing the relocatees’ mind maps of their lifeworlds before and after the displacement, it was found that their lifeworlds had shrunk in both

scale and diversity. The average dimension of the relocatees' activity areas and the number of both paths and nodes decreased by a half (Table 1 and Figure 4).

Table 1. Change of activity place before and after displacement. (The (↑) represents an increase, the (↓) represents a decrease, and the (≈) indicates minimal change).

Interviewee	Age Group	Before/After Ratio of Area of Activity Place	Change	Interviewee	Age Group	Before/After Ratio of Area of Activity Place	Change
A	Middle-aged	1.00	≈	I	Elderly	2.28	↓
B	Elderly	9.14	↓	J	Elderly	1.61	↓
C	Elderly	1.20	↓	K	Young	2.90	↓
D	Elderly	1.45	↓	L	Elderly	1.96	↓
E	Young	2.89	↓	M	Young	3.49	↓
F	Middle-aged	0.86	↑	N	Middle-aged	4.71	↓
G	Elderly	3.95	↓	O	Middle-aged	4.65	↓
H	Elderly	0.99	≈				

Additionally, the diversity of the paths and nodes decreased (Figures 5 and 6). While the authors recognized the potential impacts of walkability and built patterns on people's daily activities before and after the relocation, most of the interviewees applied clear negative values to their new surroundings, and many nodes with the same functions, such as parks, were under-used after the relocation. Also, the difference in the built environment, in principle, was also part of the "evaluation". Furthermore, the interviewees had less individualized paths and nodes, such as to chestnut shops and card-game clubs, after the resettlement, despite the fact that most of these goods and services could be found within the community life-circle boundary.

Figure 5. The accumulation of the nodes and paths of all the interviewees before the relocation. (Stars mean nodes. Dash lines mean paths).

Figure 6. The accumulation of the nodes and paths of all the interviewees after the relocation. (Stars mean nodes. Dash lines mean paths).

The case study showed that this spatial withering of the relocatees' lifeworlds was less related to distribution but was, instead, socially produced. For instance, a relocatee used to go to the district stadium to play badminton. While this stadium was closer to him after the relocation, he ceased to use this facility, owing to the dissolution of the badminton team. As he said: "I used to go to Yangpu Sport Stadium or Yangpu Park for exercise, but now I only exercise in this neighborhood garden [. . .] We used to have an exercise team, so we would sometimes play badminton or work out together at the stadium. Now, there is no such a team, so there is no point to going to there".

The social network of the ageing relocates was particularly disturbed by the relocation. Some of the interviewees said the following:

Interviewee L: "[. . .] We used to have very cohesive community before [. . .] For example, the gate was broken in our neighbourhood before, and we cooperated with the government and successfully funded the rebuilding project together [. . .] I still miss the sense of cohesion before".

Interviewee J: "[. . .] there is no such a (neighbourhood) relationship here. I have been here two years but I can recognize only few residents here".

Interviewee B: "The new neighbourhood committee is irresponsible and lazy [. . .] The activity room of the neighbourhood is in idle".

Interview H: "I even don't know who my neighbours are now. Do you think the neighbourhood relationship is better or not?"

The relocation process caused significant disruptions to social networks, leading to passive spatial deprivation in the lifeworlds of some senior relocatees. A striking example is an elderly woman, though not from the specific relocation project under study, who moved to Neighborhood S in 2012. For almost four years, she had barely left her house because her children were concerned about her safety. As she explained,

> "Because it is hard for me to walk, my daughter is worried about my safety and does not allow me to go out. Since I know few people here, she is afraid that if I fall, no one will help me. I am not allowed to walk inside the neighborhood until they buy a special wheelchair for me. [. . .] Staying at home feels like being in prison".

Her experience is not unique. The interviews revealed that the weakening of social networks after the relocation discouraged many elderly individuals from venturing outside. For instance, Interviewee D shared a similar sentiment:

> "I have no place to go. I should have gone to the neighborhood centre to find some people to talk to or take some exercise there, but nobody is there. I even seldom walk in the neighborhood. Since I had a stroke, I have to ensure someone is around (to help me) in case of an emergency".

These accounts highlight how the erosion of social networks following the relocation has profoundly affected the mobility and the social engagement of the senior residents, leaving many feeling isolated and confined.

Additionally, some planned facilities in the community life-circle were rarely used, or even perceived, by many of the relocatees. For instance, some of the respondents preferred going to a university playground for recreation, rather than the park that is physically nearer to the neighborhood, owing to the restriction of their social networks. Some of the respondent explained as follows:

Interviewee C: "The other residents (those from earlier relocation projects) used to go to the playground for evening exercise. . .and we thus follow them to make some new friends for shopping or chatting".

Interviewee L: "The playground is closer to my neighborhood [. . .] I can meet my friends there, and my family also prefer to going there [. . .] Yes, all my acquaintances now are not much energetic to go that far, so they choose to go to the playground. There are a lot of people there in the evening, so I go to this playground as well to chat and walk together".

Hence, the planners' conception and arrangement of the space could be ruthlessly re-interrupted and reproduced by the relocatees.

In general, the shrinkage and the homogeneity of the relocatees' rebuilt lifeworlds demonstrate a violation of their multi-dimensional subjectivity and show clearly the insufficiency of both distributive justice and environmental justice in even noticing that such a violation has occurred. Having identified the logic of the equation that sits within distributive justice and environmental justice, we can see in this case how the process of planning the relocation equated the relocatees' lifeworlds, lifeworlds that contained dynamic social-spatial interactions, to the money, properties, and basic life services listed in the planning guidance. The claimed equality and improvement of the relocation was then measured through an "evaluation" by the planning professionals, who again applied their evaluation to a static lifeworld. The process was considered a success, yet failed to notice the shrinkage of the lifeworld that had occurred.

It is also worth noting that this case study revealed that this shrinkage of the lifeworld is not inevitable. In the post-relocation rebuilding of their lifeworlds, two of the relocatees showed better performances in scale and diversity. These relocatees had actually increased the diversity of their interactions and expanded the ranges of their daily lives. The identical feature of both these individuals was their higher familiarity with the surroundings of the relocation neighborhood prior to their relocation. One respondent had worked in a nearby enterprise for many years and the other had visited the relocation area many times before the relocation. Though limited in number, these two examples imply that a proactive and intensive people–world social practice could help relocatees structure and resolve the new space into their subjectivity, creating an expanded lifeworld.

5. Discussion

Through its investigation into a relocation project in Shanghai, this study suggests that the logic of the equation of distributive justice can lead to the shrinkage and the homogeneity of relocatees' lifeworlds and, as a result, cause feelings of injustice. In the

relocation, the multi-dimensional human existence experienced by the relocatees at the original location was solidified through the process of "equivalence", which transferred the dynamic people–world/person–environment interactions that constitute the lifeworld into material distributive terms. The "evaluation" that measures the absolute growth of welfare and planning equity in a heteronomous way had no way to reveal this impact. This case study showed that the outcome occurred despite the application of considerable efforts at distributional equity and inclusive participation processes that spatial justice theory suggests should provide for more just outcomes. Enhancing the depth of the participatory and democratic procedures that are intended to eliminate recognitive exclusion or to provide more choices for the people, as environmental justice might suggest, does not solve the problem of the shrinkage of the lifeworld.

The identification of the logic of the equation and its impacts helps us to rediscover why the distributive conception of justice, whether complemented by additional environmental justice approaches or not, does not fundamentally confront the violation of the lifeworld experienced following relocation. Distributive justice holds an incomplete social ontology, where the social arrangements, processes, and norms are presupposed and rendered static, so that the distributive discourse that makes these relations becomes invisible [11,36,45]. Humans' dynamic and flowing subjectivity and the lifeworld that contains one's mutually-constituted spatiality, historicality, and sociality are, thus, solidified, splintered, and dissolved in the pursuit of a distributional equity which, as Soja suggests, is unachievable in the ontologically uneven geography/space [3].

This finding does not dismiss the value of the expanding conceptions of environmental justice, which has no doubt brought planning a critical improvement towards justice. Nor do the authors see the entire school of environmental justice and all justice planning practices as distributive. We do not question the validity and the necessity of all off-site relocation events and are not calling for a radical stop of China's community life-circle practice that has indeed improved the living environment. Rather, by highlighting the logic of the equation in distributive justice that is arguably an important foundation of today's justice planning theory production and relocation practice, this paper wants to sound a cautionary note. The daily planning works associated with relocation inappropriately analyze the lifeworld statically and socio-historic-spatially fragmentedly. Regarding relocation, distributive justice planning, due to its appeasement of imbalanced power structures, would more or less intervene and restructure people's conception (i.e., ideas and imagination) and perception (i.e., material reality) of their lifeworlds. However, the lifeworld, as the everyday representation of human existence that is based on the his/her interactions and the nexus with the world, is both real and imagined, material and ideal, conceived and perceived.

What this paper does call for is the integration of those aforementioned binaries (e.g., real–imagined, perceived–conceived, etc.) into people's lifeworlds. A lifeworld that should be the object of planning practice. It is argued that to counter the hegemonies in the inevitably distribution-based planning practice, we should, as Foucault's celebrated power–knowledge theory inspires [63], equip the relocated individuals with enough spatial "knowledge" for them to produce "power" through spatial praxis. In this case, the question facing China's relocation planning towards the just city should not only be "how to build a 'good' life-cycle for relocatees?" but "how to help relocatees rebuild their lifeworld after relocation?".

Then, how can the planning enable the distributed people to become a source of endogenous knowledge and power and, hence, to be the guardians of their lifeworld? While, as many scholars suggest, in the imbalanced power structure, the conceived space that is composed of the exogenous knowledge (including the "values") can dominate the

lifeworld (see, for example, [3,64,65]), the two exceptional respondents in this case study have shown the possibility and the value for the relocated to guard and (re-)build/produce their lifeworld through endogenous spatial knowledge. The production of this spatial knowledge would be a social practice process (*spatial praxis*), rather than an action of static temporality.

Some theorists have proposed their methodologies to help the distributed to take over the production process of spatial knowledge, such as Soja's activist-led campaigns [3] and Allen's postmodern identity politics against space [64]. In China, the state intervenes in the reconstruction of the relocatees' lifeworlds through Party-building initiatives as part of urban regeneration and rural revitalization efforts [66–69]. However, these interventions primarily align civil society with the state political mandates, rather than prioritizing the restoration of people's lifeworlds [70,71].

Taking a Foucauldian positive view of power, we contend that planning could contribute to the endogenous production of spatial knowledge by extending its intervention beyond the end of relocation. However, differently from the liberalist capabilities approach, we argue for a more active role of planning institutes and local community authorities in guiding and intensifying people's socio-spatial interactions after the relocation through participatory tools such as fieldtrips and regular activities, to make the planning intent, process, and outcomes and the distributional justice enacted the foundation of the relocatees' spatial knowledge. This foundation would then be expected to enhance their capacity to take control over the production of their spatial knowledge and power and, finally, to rebuild their lifeworld.

6. Conclusions

Theoretically, this study reviews the evolution of spatial justice theories, including distributive justice and its critiques, with a particular focus on environmental justice as a representative framework. It highlights the theoretical lineage between this framework and distributive justice, identifying the inherent logic of the equation as a key issue. The logic of the equation refers to a conceptual approach that simplifies complex human experiences and subjective realities into measurable data and metrics. However, it frequently neglects the lived experiences and social relationships that constitute an individual's lifeworld.

Methodologically, this study innovatively integrates mind mapping and in-depth interviews to materialize and visualize changes in residents' socio-spatial activities before and after relocation. This approach helps explore the changes of intangible lifeworlds, shedding light on the mechanisms underlying these transformations.

Empirically, through a case study in Shanghai, this research critically evaluates the impacts of relocation planning within the framework of distributive justice, focusing on its influence on the lifeworld of relocatees. Guided by the 15-minute city concept, the relocation project improved the built environment and enhanced access to public services. However, it simultaneously disrupted the socio-spatial networks of the residents, particularly among the elderly. This disruption underscores the inadequacy of distributive justice, even when accompanied by participatory measures, in addressing the dynamic and subjective nature of the individual lifeworld.

The policy implications of this study are twofold. First, relocation policies must go beyond material redistribution to explicitly incorporate the restoration of the lifeworld as a central objective. This includes supporting relocatees in rebuilding their socio-spatial networks and fostering active engagement with their new environments. Second, planners and policymakers should emphasize participatory processes that empower residents to co-produce spatial knowledge. By incorporating endogenous perspectives into planning practices, such policies can better align interventions with the lived realities of the affected

communities. These approaches would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of spatial justice, ensuring that planning objectives are attuned to the complex and dynamic nature of human subjectivity.

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