Abstract

According to International Federation of Housing and Planning the majority of the population of the planet will be urban in 2007. That definition of the urban, however, is based on zombie categories, to speak as Ulrich Beck. Urbanization and urban areas as we normally understand them are concepts of 'the first modernity'. Nowadays, in 'the second modernity', we have instead to ask: where in the city do you really find urbanity? A large part of what statistically is called urban areas lack urban quality and visible urban life. In the space syntax community urbanity is basically understood as co-presence of people in streets and squares and movement economy. About 18 years ago, Bill Hiller gave a definition of urbanity as 'the virtual community'. Since then more aspects have been added to the understanding of the urban within the space syntax community.

The field of Urban Design considers a large range of urban and design issues, still only partly related to space syntax. The Urban design field adds more complexity to the question of urbanity but is basically normative and non-coherent from a theoretical point of view. Henri Lefebvre and Richard Sennett take on some more fundamental issues with their focus on the importance of difference, but the implications for design is far from clear. This paper tries shortly to overview the above and then tries to add to the notion of urbanity in two ways: First by proposing a three level model for co-presence, second by proposing a fourfold table of some empirically observable urbanity including not only aspects related to co-presence of people but also some aspects concerning human relations to artefacts.

Introduction

This year the congress of the International Federation of Housing and Planning will take place on the background of a statistical claim that 50% of the planet's human population now lives in cities. On the one hand this tells about a turning point in human history. On the other hand you immediately have to start to question the concepts of the city and the urban, which is the foundation of these statistics. The 2006 Biennale 'Cities - Architecture and Society' in Venice e.g. documented large differences of densities in cities. While in Scandinavia, from a statistical point of view, you can live in an 'urban
area’ even at densities as low as a few hundred people per square kilometre, the Biennale showed many cities with sub areas of over 30,000 people per square kilometre.

The current Danish discussion on cities in urban research and among urban planners and architects show a wide variety in what we understand as urban: from a narrow view on the cores of the cities and what is happening there to very large intertwined and still expanding regions defined in different ways according to purpose and mode of communication. Then, of course, there are many other aspects of the city and the urban than the simple question ‘what is an urban area’. Taken together, there does not seem to be a common notion of ‘city’ and ‘urban’. This often implies that as soon as we start to talk about the city and the urban, we start to talk about something else.

When you look into fields like urban geography, urban sociology and urban cultural studies from the point of view of urban planners, urban designers and architects you most often lack concrete relations to space, even in studies about ‘spatiality’, and many studies stop their questioning before they reach ground level. An example for this could be Soja’s notions on development of regions. We need regional concepts like Soja’s to understand the contemporary urban, but we also need other perspectives closer to individual human action and experience in cities and their relation to concrete spatial settings and structures.

The general notions we have about the city and the urban are inherited from pre-modern times, with the addition of urbanisation and suburbanisation related to industrialisation and increased mobility. We are now, according to Beck, increasingly living in a ‘second modernity’, characterised by globalisation, individualisation, risk, indeterminacy and a multiplication of modernities. Our notions of the city and the urban were troublesome already in the ‘first modernity’. In the ‘second modernity’ we need new notions or a thorough reinterpretation of the old ones.

This study first examines the notion of ‘urbanity’ to see if it could be useful for the above mentioned purpose as it is less broad than the notion of 'the urban', and it contains within it the questions of how people relate to each other in an 'urban' environment. Since, it is still a broad notion, as well as to some degree connoted to long-time dystopian and anti-urban perspectives on cities in the 'first modernity', the paper argues that we need a new or renewed common notion, where different perspectives on space, city life and design can meet and crossbreed.

‘Urbanity’ in Space Syntax

Space syntax contains theories on space, people and development of cities, which have revolutionised the way we look at cities and thus in an exploration of the notion of urbanity, they have to be included. The notion of urbanity is not used much within the space syntax community, which could be due to its being too vague and too complex. An electronic search on ‘urbanity’ through all digitally available papers from the first five Space Syntax Symposia indicated that only 10 papers include the word ‘urbanity’.

Within space syntax the understanding of the city is developed from the notion of the ‘city as an object’, specifically as a spatial object, and not from the notion of ‘urbanity’. The papers found on ‘urbanity’ in the five symposia are mainly related to spatial integration, intelligibility and co-presence. Co-presence in freely accessible space can also be seen in the perspective of Hillier's (1989) fourfold transformations of community, especially ‘the virtual community’ of strangers (not to be
confused with the 'virtual community' on the Internet). From these starting points further aspects have been added like higher permeability in central parts, effects of the placement and number of doors, effects of the number of building plots along lines in the grid, etc. It has also been possible to demonstrate city dynamics at work, which starting from co-presence and integration leads to an increasing differentiation of the city (Hillier, 2002). Through space syntax it is also possible to show some of the 'lack of urbanity' in modern urban development in the 20th century, like islands of deeply segregated spaces.

**On 'Urbanity' in the Field of Urban Design**

When looking for the 'most urban' in urban design, the notions of density, mixed use, and increasingly the notion of pedestrianisation came up. However, one can argue that there is not a real theory, on either the 'urban' at large, or 'urbanity', in what is generally considered as the field of urban design. The field is often dominated by concerns related to typologies at different scales, aesthetics and style, and relations between form and function that are based on normative processes rather than research. There is also a considerable focus on elements in public space like trees, paving and street furniture. When there are actual studies of people, activities and use, it is often done one single space at a time, and although interesting data is delivered, the interpretation stays local and rather incomplete. Often the perspective of interest is also limited to aspects that can be handled in such a way as to promote a 'friction-free' environment and enjoyment.

Part of the interest of urban design, which should not be forgotten, has to do with visual richness and complexity in the environment, not only one space at a time, but also as experienced through movement, e.g. 'serial vision'. Of the urban design centres of the world, the Joint Centre for Urban Design (JCUD) at Oxford Brooks might have the most integrated approach, as spelled out in 'Responsive Environments'. Bentley (1999) is looking at aspects like variety, accessibility, legibility, robustness, identity, cleanliness, biotic support and aesthetic richness. JCUD is also interested in space syntax, which is not yet as common in the urban design field as it deserves. Overall, we still know too little about many of these aspects and especially how to relate them.

**'Urbanity' with Difference**

Sennett has a view on urbanity, which is the contrary of friction-free. For ethical and democratic reasons, Sennett wants to stimulate urban behaviour through difference. At a lecture in the School of Architecture in Copenhagen in 1994 he said:

> What I think of as urbanity is precisely making use of the density and differences in the city so that people find a more balanced sense of identification on the one hand with others who are like themselves but also a willingness to take risks with what is unlike, unknown.... It is this kind of experiences that make people find out something about themselves that they didn't know before. That's what urbanity is at its best....To me, how to privilege the notion of difference that is what urbanity is all about.

The social and physical settings that Sennett see as settings of and for "urbanity" can shortly be characterised with words like 'difference', 'diversity', 'density', 'strangers', 'mixture of people', 'complexity', 'unlikeness' and 'impersonality'. They have also to do with 'discovery' through 'dissonance', 'decentering', 'dislocation', and 'displacement'. As Sennett sees it, through difference, you will experience dissonance, which will force you out of your habitual ways of looking at the world.
While Sennett mainly seems to be interested in urbanity as a setting for human comprehension of social complexity and the development of empathy, Lefebvre’s concern with an urbanity of difference also, and to a larger degree, relates to the possibilities of action both through self-expression and more collectively. Co-presence in the streets is supplemented with the importance of works, like the meaning of ‘works’ in ‘works of art’ (in French ‘œuvre’), which has to do with creative, personal expressions and contributions. For Lefebvre, urbanity is about: encounter (meeting), life and play (for its own purpose), difference (including strangers), works (of “art”), possibilities and unpredictability, interchange, and the use of all senses. But the city must also contain the necessary opposition: recognition, stability, and possibility of withdrawal. Lefebvre’s urbanity, as well as Sennett’s, is about urban liberty and complexity in a much developed capitalist society full of contradictions, oppositions and conflict. A developed notion of urbanity will have to include these difficult notions, but neither Lefebvre, nor Sennett, develop their ideas to a point where they can be used directly for empirical studies and even less as direct design guidance.

It seems clear, however, that urbanity has to do with an elementary social and cultural playing field related to public space, including strangers and chance. In this paper, urbanity is defined shortly as a rich information field between humans and between humans and artefacts in a freely accessible space where the new and unexpected can happen in ever new combinations and in growing complexity. Urbanity also has to do with difference and the unique. In developing a more qualified contemporary notion of urbanity, space syntax has to be included as well.

Urbanity as Co-presence at Three Different Levels

Concerning some aspects of urbanity related to the space syntax notion of co-presence, I have proposed, that there might be three important thresholds, where quantity also ‘quality’ change. The first threshold is related to the basic level of change from morals to ethics. According to Bauman, morals concern the relations of two people. As soon as a third person enters, we have to do with ethics instead. Combined with the largest visible social distance (Gehl 1987) we might then say, that three people visible in public space within 100 meters is the lowest level of urbanity as co-presence. A large part of suburbia in affluent countries is below that level.

The second threshold is related to visual experience turning into a rather continuous flow of different stimuli. This seems to start to happen at the average level of about 15 new ‘images’ per minute, or roughly at 1000 persons/hour, if you consider co-presence. This coincides with Whyte’s lowest level of co-presence to get the feeling of being in a central place. The third level is related to crowding and the change of behaviour related to crowding. If, in public space, you consider crowding to begin, when you on average can touch other bodies stretching out your arms, then crowding begins when there is only about 3 square meters per person. According to Whyte, and contrary to much ‘first modernity’ writing on the urban, many people in cities seem to like some crowding.

Adding more Complexity.....

Just to count people moving and staying in public space is not enough to evaluate urbanity, although it is a necessary beginning. If urbanity has importance, then it could be interesting to break up the concept of urbanity into further aspects that can be studied empirically also. From the different notions on urbanity mentioned above, and from the learning’s of my research, it is possible to construct the following table
that tries to list some aspects of urbanity, which would practically be close enough to develop some measurable criteria. Out of the two types of relations-human / human (i.e. based on co-presence) and human / artefact- and two major kind of qualities of urbanity- human information richness on the one hand and possibilities for the 'new' or 'different' on the other -four fields of observations can be generated. Table 1 presents these four fields.

Table 1: Aspects of empirically observable urbanity (the lists can be extended)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Human/human relations (related to co-presence)</th>
<th>Human/artefact relation (human/'oeuvre'; human/'works' (as with Lefebvre)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information rich, complex, unique</td>
<td>Buildings, builders and architects /100 meters, ornamentation, numbers of doors, interesting shop windows, art in public space, personalised environment, front gardens, benches, fountains, a manmade place with an identity of its own</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New, unexpected, unplanned, open to initiatives</td>
<td>The proportion of strangers, the occurrence of chance meetings, people stopping and talking in the middle of the flow, people 'hanging out', individuals or groups 'taking over' some spaces temporarily, special events (festivals, etc.), political demonstrations, children playing in spaces not designated for them, using public space for fitness purposes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human/human relations (related to co-presence)</td>
<td>Human/artefact relation (human/'oeuvre'; human/'works' (as with Lefebvre)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of people walking, biking and staying, all kinds of people, people that are different, people showing off to others, people performing in public, people in pairs and groups, people talking to each other, people spending time in the context of others, people working outdoors / in public space</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buildings, builders and architects /100 meters, ornamentation, numbers of doors, interesting shop windows, art in public space, personalised environment, front gardens, benches, fountains, a manmade place with an identity of its own</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References


Jacobs, A.B., 1993, Great Streets, the MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.


Lefebvre, H., 2003, The Urban Revolution, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.


