



# Soft cities, soft selves

## Identity, the city and urban design

Faculty of Architecture  
Delft University of Technology  
Berlageweg 1  
2628 CR Delft  
spacelab@bk.tudelft.nl  
www.spacelab.tudelft.nl

**Stephen Read**  
s.a.read@bk.tudelft.nl

### **Personal and institutional identities, freedom and repression**

Our identities today seem to have become as mobile as our bodies and as fluid and as loosely defined as our cities. Identities seem to have become things we take on and change as easily as we change wardrobes or switch between email accounts. Indeed our identities appear to be going through as profound a phase-change - from the solid and immutable to the fluid and ephemeral - as are our cities. And it seems, in the deafening babble and chatter of individual wills and voices, as ridiculous and as anachronistic to resist this development as does resistance against the tidal movements transforming our cities today.

In fact the question of the modern identity and its contradictions and inevitable anxieties goes beyond questions of technology, speed and temporariness, to how the modern individual is put together. Freedom is a core value of modernity, especially the freedom to fashion one's identity and one's life as one wills. Ultimately we value a sense of belonging, to community, to nation, to family, lower than we value this freedom to be who it is we wish to be. This doesn't however still the urge to belong or leave us without anxiety about the feeling of not belonging. But as Michael Ignatieff points out, belonging is not just a feeling of membership in a particular community, it is also about a sense of understanding the wider world of social relations in which we live and feeling that other people understand us. Feeling at home is a particular kind of cognitive as well as emotional experience; it is a sense that we can give a mental shape to the social world. But the social world is a highly complex place; the divisions of labour and the market-place that so affect us, are global systems which even the experts seem only imperfectly to understand. In the end we fall back on a stock of personal experience whose testimony we trust because it is ours and because it is part of the personal shapes of our own lives.

The role of modernity in the question of identity extends also into the organisational structures of the complex society we inhabit. Ulrich Beck speaks of

copyright:

- 1 This online paper may be cited or briefly quoted in line with the usual academic conventions. You may also download it for your own personal use. This paper must not be published elsewhere (e.g. mailing lists, bulletin boards etc.) without the author's explicit permission. But please note that
- if you copy this paper you must include this copyright note.
  - this paper must not be used for commercial purposes or gain in any way.

the business of holding together multiple identity-fragments dis-articulated by contemporary social and institutional roles and divisions. A modern rationalised bureaucratic society and culture deals with the parts of us (tax-payer, driver, consumer, voter, patient, passenger), that corresponds to its own logics and divisions, producing in the process an 'institutional individualism'. The forcible fragmentation of the self is carried out by a de-personalised social bureaucracy, and the business of re-integration is left to ourselves, a task that involves, it seems, management rather than wisdom, insight or well-roundedness.

### **Real lives, real worlds**

A way of approaching the problem might be to consider identity to be a form of knowledge - a knowledge of the self. Then we could consider different ways that the idea of knowledge is conceived. Probably most familiar to us is the idea of personal knowledge of the world (and of the self) as being given in a set of mental representations. This is taken as so obvious an idea that it is seldom, in normal practice subjected to any degree of scrutiny, yet it is a view not without its problems. Broadly speaking the 'mentalist' view presupposes divisions between mind and body and between mind and world. Experience in this view is supposed to mediate between mind and the world. Anthropologists have long told us that this view is by no means a universal one among different peoples and cultures. Hallowell for example suggests that perceptions and 'internal' representations are not tested against an 'external' experience-independent datum of nature - rather they are at one and the same time produced by and constitutive of the couple of the self and the 'environment' (the world as it appears and is manifest for that self). There is no bi-polar relationship between inner self and outer world, rather an integral construction of self and "an intelligible behavioural environment" that has been constituted for and by the individual, and that bears "an intimate relation to the kind of being he knows himself to be and it is in this behavioural environment that he is motivated to act." (Hallowell)

Now, the above quotation may begin to strike some sort of a chord when we think not of the 'primitive' Ojibwa people, but of the diverse and diversely motivated and acting modern people we encounter in our own worlds. Our own complex and confusing cultural world may generate a more difficult transition to a more individual self and the often ideosyncratic world which adheres to that self, but the multiplicity of viewpoints and 'worlds' around us only serves to underline that self and environment are an indissoluble couple.

One of the best-known arguments as to why we are strangers to ourselves, involves the insensitivity of the space and time of the (industrial) workplace to the rhythms of social life and bodily experience. Another anthropologist, Tim Ingold, proposes that we need to be careful about the way we see the alienating effect of work-place and work-clock. Though the logic of capitalist production will create in principle a division between the domains of work and

social life, in reality the division runs up against the inevitability of people's mutual involvement in the concrete settings of practical activity. "The very instruments - above all the industrial machine and the clock - that in theory serve to disengage the time and work of production from the current of social life, are in practise reappropriated by their operators in the process of production, not of commodities for the market, but of their own personal and social identities." (Ingold)

This is in rather the same spirit as the critique made by de Certeau of Foucault's views on disciplining and punishing. According to Foucault, forces of socialisation are inflicted on the individual by an impersonal authority consisting of a capitalist organisation of space and time. We are all imprisoned within spaces and times of social control, from which we can only escape by carving for ourselves limited pockets of freedom (heterotopias) hidden from the eye of this faceless policeman. De Certeau however points to the way that people, in the practice of their everyday lives, escape the repression imposed by this pervasive 'scheme of things'. Concentrating on human creativity and action he points to the way that everyday practices continually open opportunities for escape and for 'transgression'. For de Certeau therefore, like Ingold, the spaces of freedom, of individual creativity, ingenuity and originality, are to be found everywhere, in our engagement with a highly contingent world, and even under the very nose of the powers of repression.

### **Designing for multiple identities, multiple worlds**

This perspective of lived experience, grounded in the world, of the person coping with the conditions of a repressive faceless authority, or of the machine or of clock-time, and of their resistance thereby to the alienating effects of the conditions of modern life, is I think the key to understanding the position of our profession at this time. What is interesting to us is less the theories of cultural tendencies, more the conditions of the real-world places we make and their potentials for engaging the identity-formative and social environment-formative (and social-knowledge-formative) experience. We deal in the worlds that people inhabit, and through their inhabitation understand themselves and the wider social world around themselves.

If our identities are never (and have never been) fixed and complete, but are in a continual process of construction in a continual engagement with the real world, then what is bounden on us is to take a position with regard to the sort of social environments we need to engage identities, and to examine very closely how our professional practices are implicated in reproducing what is repressive or dull, and restricting of the identity-construction process. The passionate attack by Richard Sennett in *The uses of disorder* on the way new urban forms stifle the personality and foster a paranoid aversion to strangers or outsiders, fits into this context. Central to the nature of this social place we should be promoting and making, and the experience it engenders, should be, in my view, a rich and varied social copresence and encounter, with the

opportunity for surprise, contradiction and personal development, as well as for spontaneity, delight and creativity.

What do we do about this in practical terms? What is it that we as urban designers can contribute to the making of rich and varied social environments which reflect the complexity and richness of our broader society. These must inevitably be environments of a certain level of confrontation and contradiction as well as delight and creativity. The first thing I think we can do is take care of our own spatial discipline, and not imagine that all the answers come from the realms of sociology, cultural studies, anthropology, geography or whatever. The non-spatial (and macro-spatial) disciplines should be our partners, but our business is to contribute a distinctively (even technically) spatial perspective to the collaboration. Unfortunately real spatial knowledge and serious research in our field is in general absent, though there are conspicuous exceptions.

What is obvious, is that not all urban contexts are equally effective in supporting and sustaining vital, rich and varied social environments. This is most usually put down to factors of historical layering, collective memory and so on, the implication being that without the dimension of historical time we might as well pack up and go home. What this view forgets is that certain inner-city areas that have the kinds of qualities we are looking for, and that we still look to as models of urban diversity, health and vibrancy, are in no substantial way historical, except in the exact patternings of their streets and squares and the ways they are connected into a wider context - and that by my reckoning is spatial in the most simple and obvious way. The people who live in these places do not occupy them the way the inhabitants of the past occupied them; the lives that go on in these places are modern lives, the everyday cultures as far removed from what existed there a hundred years ago, sometimes even twenty years ago, as it is possible to get. In fact the most telling social characteristic of many of these areas is precisely not an historical social continuity, but rather a tendency for serial appropriation by diverse cultures, age-groups and life-styles. This is not to suggest that there are no inner-city areas in decline, or even that there are no forces tending to work against the viability of inner-city areas, or that these areas are ever likely again to grow organically. What I want to suggest is that it is in our power, if we understand the spatial dimensions involved, to make these types of environment, and perhaps just as importantly, to sustain them when we have them.

But in order to do this we are going to have to learn to deal with the city as an environment rather than as an object. And this means learning to deal with it from the perspectives of multiple viewpoints because 'environment' in this ecological view is always relative to a viewpoint. We are going to have to learn to deal with social space, and that means relational space; the space of relations between people and people and people and things. We are going to have to learn to deal with space-time rather than with space because that

is the dimension in which relations are made. We are going to have to learn how specific networks in cities become appropriated by particular experiences in space-time, and how particular experiences may be acted out in the proximity of multiple other particular experiences in a vital, viable, modern public space. And because we are designers, we are going to have to find (or re-discover or invent) geometric correlates of all this; network patterns and combinations of network patterns that facilitate and enable multiple stories lived in mutually copresent relation with each other.

### **Beyond bounding orders to enabling social spaces in layered network dynamics**

I would propose that far too little is known of the 'construction' in use of specific urban contexts - and the way complex overlaying configurations of places and connections support (or otherwise) the various activities and processes, with their particular scales and dynamics, that play themselves out there. As designers we need an urban ordering framework, and I would propose that a view of urban activity that sees the urban as consisting of multiple webs of relations, mediated through networks, in layers of scale; tying locations, people and things into extended networks; conveying multiple flows of people, goods, finance, information, can offer a conceptual framework designed to seek enabling social connections and integrations rather than controlling boundaries and divisions.

The view offered here is that the activity of the city is not something which is simplistically and statically bound within 'place', as if space was the box which held it. Activity within public space is itself rather the binding element, coalescing into streams and fluxes of movement, connecting the different parts of the city with each other and defining much of the character and quality of public space in the process. This is a structure which in the traditional fabric articulates without controlling. Urban street-level activity pulses and shifts, it transgresses borders and boundaries but at the same time it connects and binds place with place through its own dynamic. So that what happens in one area is bound by the dynamic to what happens in another.

What this view does is to blur conventional schematic boundaries. Activities spill over what are considered their normal edges and stretch their designated limits. While activity is clearly structured within the multi-layered network spaces, it transgresses bounding orders, making edges fuzzy and indefinite. Meanwhile the ordering factor (in all but the most crudely compartmentalised urban areas) becomes rather the routes and networks which convey the flows. This is not therefore a heterotopic view of urban space, but relates more to the "swarming mass" of de Certeau, that "innumerable collection of singularities [who's] intertwined paths give their shape to spaces. They weave places together. ...They are not localised; it is rather that they spatialise." (de Certeau)

We need to get under the surface of central urban structure, in order to support our intuitive understanding of urban quality and the quality of the urban; how urban space can enable for example high densities of interface, without collapsing into the chaotic and unintelligible; how it includes an ordered colour and contrast with busy and quiet spaces in close proximity to one another and functional differentiations on a 'just around the corner' basis; how it enables a robust functional adaptability, often accommodating multiple particular social and functional organisations overlapped in particular space and place.

Emergent network structure, at multiple overlapping scale levels, configures the surface on which the shape/reality factor of many social entities (high-streets, certain types of urban neighbourhood and community, for example) are written (see Read). This open network structure can articulate, without coercing, patterns of interface in the surface of the city, differentiating volumes and scales of movement and becoming part of the shape - formal, recognisable, legible - of the city as a usable social and functional environment.

#### **An urbanism of proximate identities**

For a large part of the last century, people abandoned the central city for a 'place of their own' on the periphery. Many still do this, but the dream of the 'place of one's own', and the uncluttered territorial identity of the frontier, is wearing thin against the hard realities of the dullness and anomie of that place. That patch might be your own but it bears little resemblance to the dream. The sense of being master of one's own destiny diminishes against the realities of commuter travel, the invasion of the periphery by much that those who chose it sought to leave behind, and the dull routine of a daily round unrelieved by surprise and stimulation of the lives of others overlapped with one's own. The lack of nourishment it offers to the identities of those people hungry for experience; the young - but also increasingly the not so young, and the more affluent, is drawing people back into urban centres.

The problems of our cities are not resolved. The pressures in different parts of the world to provide decent housing and living conditions to multitudes of people caught up in waves of urbanisation and mass migration are more urgent now than they have ever been. At the same time however, the experience of the so-called developed countries has demonstrated that an attention to the quantitative parameters of housing and access, needs to be balanced by an attendant attention to qualitative issues of experience and dwelling. Deep (often invisible in their 'obviousness') assumptions about urban structure and layout need to be hauled out of the mental closet, and examined for the role they play in dividing places and people, and people from the full achievement of their own selves. The current tendency to the reinhabitation of urban centres by groups who's parents in the past made their escape to the suburbs, is symptomatic, I believe, of a general need peo-

ple feel for a more substantial, more engaging and socially and culturally rich environment; an environment which confronts and challenges, provoking consciousness of a social reality wider than that of the suburban dormitory, workplace and mall, and reflects back some of the real texture of the society in which they live, and the lives of diverse others. Our new exploded city landscapes need more places which fulfil these existential needs, and our profession has as its urgent task the construction of theories and practices of urban quality based in an understanding of the urban landscape, not as an all too fixed distribution of housing and facilities, but as multi-layered networks as a framework or support for a rich and adaptable and expressive social space.

## **Bibliography**

- Beck U.** 2001. 'Living your own life in a runaway world: Individualisation, globalisation and politics', in *Archis* 2/2001
- de Certeau M.** 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. University of California Press, Berkley.
- Hallowell A.I.** 1955. *Culture and Experience*. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.
- Harvey D.** 1990. *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Blackwell, Oxford.
- Ignatieff M.** 1996. 'There's no place like home: the politics of belonging', in: Dunant S. and Porter R. (eds) *The Age of Anxiety*. Virago Press, London.
- Ingold T.** 2000. *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. Routledge, London.
- Read S.** 2002. 'Neighbourhood spatial process: notes on public space, thick space, scale and centrality', in: Carmona M. (ed) *Globalisation, Urban Form and Governance* 5. Delft University Press, Delft.
- Sennett R.** 1992. *The Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life*. Norton, New York.