

# >> The Form of the City

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### *The substance of 'the urban'*

The presumed 'shift' to 'the urban' as a universal condition, a shift Lefebvre signalled at the end of the 60s,<sup>1</sup> was also a shift, in his analysis, *away* from categories such as the political, the economic, the industrial or the social, understood as sufficient as producers of an urban condition and as frames for explaining the city, and *towards* an analysis which was framed *spatio-temporally* and which submerged these other categories in a radical relationality.<sup>2</sup> Lefebvre was signalling that the instruments of the analysis of the urban were failing, as the urban itself began to assert a forceful autonomy as the agent of its own dynamism and change. The city we knew had begun a relentless and accelerating drift in directions given by attractors set by no human hand and framed within no contemporary explanatory diagram. The human artefact *par excellence* had broken free of the moorings we had constructed for it and was charting its own course; a course that was drawing an ever denser creeping web of urbanisation over the globe's surface, and was changing profoundly the conditions of contemporary life. And this change was being driven apparently all the while by the energies *of* that life – in a "groundless ground of lived/living concatenation, conglomeration and visceral cross-reference".<sup>3</sup>

The urban world seemed suddenly to change in substance; from being a ponderous construction built towards the social end of the overdetermined poles of society and nature,<sup>4</sup> it had become something pulsing, alive, polyrhythmical, contingently eventful, and inexorably spreading and thickening. The 'black box' Lefebvre referred to has turned out in the end to be both more forceful *and* more real, *and* more alien and autonomous, than even he had imagined. It has forced us to reconsider our constructions of a bounded 'social' and revise our presumptions of the constitutions of urban societies and cities. All of a sudden, and concomitantly with massive regularisations and compressions induced at regional and global scales by institutional systematisations, connectivities and mobilities, we were being confronted with the limits of pre-suppositions that had been around so long we had forgotten they were creatures of our own making. The city had become other than unambiguously 'social construction', more than unambiguously 'artefact', product of our civic and technical deliberations and wills – and closer to 'force of nature'. It had become a field of forces and intensities with its own dynamical behaviour; a site of autonomous creation and no longer simply architecture, product of humanly creative action. The urban had "become 'objective', that is creation and creator, meaning and goal."<sup>5</sup>

To approach the urban as 'objective', as 'autonomous creation' and as 'force of nature', is to approach the constitution of the world differently. We have been forced to understand that the city, in its dynamic order, is linked to universals which are more concrete and self-propelling and *real*, less transcendental and differentiated from the material of the world, and less inclined to follow or reflect the orders *we* use to make sense of these things.<sup>6</sup> To approach the urban in this way – as a *genesis* of form in a

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field of 'events'<sup>7</sup> rather than as some representative or reflective form consequent on 'the social', 'the economic' or some other such framing – is to say that we no longer subsume this term within some social or other 'structure' whose levels and connections are guaranteed as if its integration belonged to 'the order of things'. It is to say that the condition of the urban is *of* the world and its material relationality, and working on its own terms, rather than being an issue of either 'structures' or 'representations' – though the urban no doubt, as a dynamic, *carries* representations. But it is also to suggest the possibility that the urban has *always* been of this 'objective' generative order, and that the urban may be less about one way of life, one mode of social organisation over another, and more about the way an urban phenomenon and an urban society emerges everywhere, and everywhere autonomously, out of the ways life intersects with situation in the very 'moment' or 'event' of its becoming. It is to say that a monadology of everyday life could belong to an imbricated *urban* ecology – each 'event' and 'moment' a new 'whole' in an erupting and particular becoming out of an extensive urban space. And the process of 'moments' and their succession becomes in this framing *intrinsically open* as the 'multiplicity' of 'moments' expands inexorably.<sup>8</sup>

'The urban' becomes located therefore in the 'concrete abstraction' of situation in a live and erupting urban surface, rather than with the universals of our categories. We begin to see the possibility of linking the moment of *sociality* directly with material and urban situation and to understand that the urban is fundamental to the constitution, and to an everyday *emergence* of an urban social, in its everyday presences, co-presences and visibilities.

#### ***A produced space-time of the city***

In spite of the volume of words spoken about space and time as a *product* of the processes of the city, it seems still that there is a lack of understanding of the real implications of this notion. The idea of the 'production' of space or of space-time has been used as a slogan or a rallying call against positivistic models of the city and its functioning. But the idea has then been too often, and without further thought, put to work to support another ideological position; that of the primacy of the human subject and his or her direct (though sometimes unwitting) involvement in a production of a *social* space of the city. The perhaps too quick assumption is that the alternative to a positivist, universalising, functional-spatial model will necessarily affirm the human-centred (and rather *socially* positivist and functionalist) predilections of the objectors. The human subject is elevated to primacy as universalising (and active) principle, in place of a functional-spatial process and we are not necessarily closer to understanding a space or space-time produced in or by the city and its processes.

Urban space and time is misunderstood, I argue, precisely because we have not considered *the urban* to be a producer in its own right of its own spaces and times – and the logic of the urban to be its own self-integration as a dynamic and process. This is not to deny the fact of the city's social inhabitation by humans, nor to deny the importance of the perspective of the human subject in defining urban 'matters of concern'<sup>9</sup> – it is simply to say that the perspective of the human is not necessarily privileged in defining 'how things work' – and especially that it is not the only one implicated in integrating the urban world into a form for us. There are large implications for the matter of our being and of our 'being urban' and 'being social' – even for our 'being human' – in this last statement; I take seriously both Latour's re-enrolling of objects (including the object of the city) into our collective of 'objects that judge', of 'beings' with 'agency',<sup>10</sup> and De Landa's insistence that generative bodies (and agency) exist at all scales and consist of all substances.<sup>11</sup>

2 An urban space may, I propose therefore, be implicated in setting up fields of presence and encounter which powerfully *form* our understanding and expectations of

what it means to be a social being in place – and may have integrative and formational effects on everyday, situated sociality. This space may also be a producer of the variety and specificity of urban place – which may become socially formed and variably intelligible by virtue of the fact that it is indexed to this integrative space. These claims cannot all be elaborated and defended in one paper:<sup>12</sup> They are likely in any event to be claims that can only be demonstrated as being plausible, as a foundation for an everyday social reality – for a situated and embodied being ‘before social being’, a social ‘knowledge before knowledge’ – and this demonstration is the subject of on-going research involving the mapping of everyday lives and spatial societies and economies in the Spacelab laboratory. I will attempt here simply to elaborate some of the characteristics of a hybrid urban-social space as well as some of the practical effects of this space and its relevance for urban form and design.

### ***Ostensible versus performative spaces***

If we consider a social – consisting of spaces of everyday sociality, encounter and visibility – to be *produced* within processes of relationality in an urban space, they must first of course be *performed*. We have to, in contrast to an *ostensible* social given by classical social theory, provide a *performative* definition.<sup>13</sup> The classical definition had certain characteristics, according to Strum & Latour<sup>14</sup>: it assumed the possibility in principle of detecting the “typical properties of what holds a society together” and held that these principals are given in an *ostensible social*; it held that social actors are part of a ‘society’, which is given and already present and which constrains or enables their actions.

A performative definition however would allow that the social bond can have *extra-social*, that is heterogeneous, properties; and that actors and agents *perform* society and in so doing define what the social is. A ‘spatial-performative’ social theory would “follow the actors”.<sup>15</sup> Seen in this way the social is constructed, formed and transformed *through* the multiple performances that define it. That is to say that the social, understood as a multiplicity of networks, has an important discursive component – but also that we have to be able to acknowledge the actions and ‘agency’, the forming and transforming power, of objects. A theory of performed networks – of actor-networks – draws on the work by Foucault in concentrating on micro-technologies as well as the social and discursive aspects of assemblages in social-urban space.

Foucault calls the Panopticon, for instance, a ‘technology’,<sup>16</sup> and, “Foucault’s discourse analysis is concerned not exclusively with language, but with a wide range of different materials. Indeed, it is *precisely* about how those materials (people, architecture, etc.) perform themselves to generate a series of effects”.<sup>17</sup> The social becomes simultaneously spatial and hybrid in this conception; it is a gathering into form, a *morphogenesis*,<sup>18</sup> that consists of discursive and non-discursive, human and non-human elements, which come together as more or less coherent, more or less fleeting or long-lasting assemblages. Society is held together through this gathering<sup>19</sup> which happens also, I am arguing, in a variable urban *situation* of potential and actual presence, connection, visibility and co-presence. This urban situation may *itself* facilitate, form and coordinate this gathering in space-time. This is a matter of form and the gathering of assemblages of people and things in dynamic fields and has nothing to do with the categorical orderings of planning’s functional and demographic places and zones. Categories and spatial boundings of similars are not the issue here; what we are talking about are dynamic *gatherings* of heterogeneous elements into situation or place.<sup>20</sup>

A truly *network* space of society implies therefore a different topology of the social: “modern societies cannot be described without recognizing them as having a fibrous, capillary character that is never captured by the notions of layers, territories, spheres, structures, or systems”.<sup>21</sup> This new topology recasts issues of far versus close, small

scale versus large scale, and inside versus outside – and these questions come to be framed more in terms of a monad-like ‘containment’ of the whole in the parts, than in terms of simple relations of elements with attributes at a distance. The global will be found *in* the local; the ‘far’ or the ‘large scaled’ becomes gathered to and *contained in* the ‘near’ or the ‘small scaled’ – by way of pathways that must be imagined, constructed, regulated and maintained – in order to be realised. Far to close relationships and scale in both social and physical space become thought of not in terms of metric distance and micro-macro distinctions but in terms of associations supported by networks: “A network is never *bigger* than another one, it is simply *longer* and *more intensely* connected”.<sup>22</sup> And: “A network is all boundary without inside and outside. The only question one may ask is whether or not a connection is established between two elements.”

A crucial point which actor-network theory makes is that, without the inclusion of objects, which according to Latour give back to the social its “missing mass”,<sup>23</sup> social theory gets polarized between micro and macro, agency and structure, constructivism and objectivism. The separation of the social and the material produces a separation of action and structure; on the one hand we get human agency and on the other a thing-like, social structure.<sup>24</sup> The theory of the actor-network concerns itself with *hybrid* order, showing how what is horizontally and vertically differentiated becomes reintegrated in a stable and consistent way in situation. It is a theory of gathering – of “drawing things together”.<sup>25</sup>

### **Space types**

Annemarie Mol and John Law present an explicit recognition of the fluidity and ambivalence of the social and have introduced the concept of a ‘fluid’ space as a complement to a ‘network’ space. The social, according to them, doesn’t exist as a single spatial type. Rather, it performs several *kinds of space* in which different ‘operations’ take place. They propose: first, that there are *regions* in which objects are clustered together and boundaries are drawn around each cluster; second, there are *networks* in which distance is a function of the relations between the elements and difference a matter of relational variety. These are the two topologies with which social theory is already familiar. They propose also however another kind of space, a *fluid*, where neither boundaries nor relations mark the difference between one place and another. In these spaces boundaries may come and go, allow leakage or disappear altogether, while relations transform themselves without fracture.<sup>26</sup>

Drawing on Mol’s and Law’s work, John Urry argues that “much of what happens in a ‘society’ is influenced by flows or fluids”,<sup>27</sup> and that social theory should pay attention to flows “within but especially beyond the territory of each society. ... Moreover, not only people are mobile but so too are many ‘objects’, as a consequence of diverse global networks and fluid-like flows”.<sup>28</sup> The mobility of humans and nonhumans must, according to Urry, become part of a society performed.

Rob Shields,<sup>29</sup> summarizes the characteristics of social flows as follows: first, they are spatial, temporal, and “beyond merely being processes”. They have a content, and are material. Second, they have rhythms, and intensities – ‘tones’ one may almost say. Third, they have intentionality built into their vectorial directions, rather than origins or end-points, causes or purposes. They are relational, without being positional or being structures. Fourth, they have viscosity, and speed-related capacities for accommodating and producing shapes and geometries. Urry adds a fifth point; that flows are channelled within what he calls territorial ‘scapes’ or networks, which also organize in relational terms, and a sixth; that they facilitate diffusion of relations of domination/subordination and the exercise of power through their intersections, so that, seventh; a result of flows and the ‘scapes’ through which they are channelled,

are new forms of social power relations and inequality. Landscapes of flows generate new opportunities, new desires, and at the same time new social risks.<sup>30</sup>

The truth is we may find many forms of spatial fluidity once we begin to look at space dynamically. The 'fluidity' of Mol's and Law's space also amounts to a recognition of the schematic nature of our known spaces and the way these schemas abstract real world spatial relations and *fix* links and boundaries, as well as causes and effects. We all too easily take space to be a singular and universalising given, and can all too easily overlook the schematic and static natures of the spaces we talk and think in, not to mention the fact that forms we find in the world, which we use these schemas to outline and articulate, are the effects of much more dynamic, complex, fine-grained, interdependent, and contingently constructed and maintained relations. We could argue therefore for a *development* of different schemas of (especially dynamic) space – recognising their reductive and conceptual natures (as well as the necessity of our working with schemas when it comes to spatial matters) – to a point where we can begin to visualise and imagine some of the fluidities of these spaces and especially to see how spatial articulation – here we should start to perhaps use the word 'formation' – may begin to be produced in dynamic network-fluid relations *without* recourse to bordering or outlining.

#### ***From spaces to scapes and spatial productivity***

When we consider the urban *productivity* of flows today it becomes more and more evident that the city is not simply a form which spreads out from within; growing from the inside, as if it were spreading at its edges and enclosing territory and colonising the landscape. Rather it emerges as local eruptions – and as 'thickenings' of pre-existent vectors in a dynamically constituted outside-less connective surface whose scope usually exceeds by orders of magnitude the limits of the thing we in the past (and still too often today) hold as being the city. As paths and trails pre-exist the first city as an object in the landscape,<sup>31</sup> so also the 'object' city today exists in the first instance as thickenings of the wispy traces of stuff passing through – and this thickening, like any concrescence, is a work of translation and of alchemy; of the transformation of one kind of substance and energy into another.

The emergence of the city is therefore, we would argue, one of the eruption of fixed identifiable stuff out of a fluid and relatively non-differentiable, but 'already there' substrate. Jane Jacobs' obsidian traders tracing pathways over the Anatolian plateau,<sup>32</sup> are antecedent to the city, and exist as the virtual to the object-city's actual. We can today, when the fact begins to force itself on us, see the city again for what it is – for something emergent and radically open, out of processes which integrate it with what appears to us to be its outside, and with a dynamic forceful continuity that gathers to its movements and flows a heterogeneous mass. The city can at last again be seen as something constructed within dynamics which take place very substantially beyond what we take to be its borders, and which *becomes* in its own right according to its own and not our laws. In this view the city is 'machinic' in the sense Deleuze and Guattari use the term, where the dynamics of the 'organic' are conceived "not in terms of organs, organisms and species, and their functions, but in terms of affective relationships between heterogeneous bodies ... A 'body' can be anything – an animal, a body of sounds, a mind or an idea, a social body or collective ... This means that evolution speaks in fact of an involution, that is the dissolution of forms and the indeterminacy of functions, as well as the freeing of times and speeds."<sup>33</sup> I would go further here to say that this involution is something like a progressive generative folding, of the order of a fractal 'space-filling', in an implosion of imaginable worlds or bodies at ever finer scales (from the global, to the metropolitan, to the municipal, to the neighbourhood) – a sort of 'layered cake' assembly of the city collapsed into finely pleated places as we zoom in from the ultimate scale of the global. This ultimate scale

has always been given – today only more forcefully and insistently so – by the *global* limits of connective and communicative networks and infrastructures.<sup>34</sup>

It becomes questionable whether the city could ever have been ‘organic’ in Mumford’s sense. Today there can be no doubt the city and its parts are *points of articulation* and of translation between different extensive layers of the multi-scaled, multi-worlded, urban ‘cake’ in its scaled and timed circuits – their processes constrained and ordered by the networks and infrastructures which constitute and relay them and the ‘vertical’ processes of ‘translation’ between them. The space I will propose presumes firstly therefore, as Jane Jacobs has already more or less done, that a ‘virtual’ first city pre-existed its actualisation on the Neolithic Anatolian plain, and that this ‘virtuality’ consisted in the long-distance trading routes that criss-crossed the sub-continent before the processes of urban actualization began drawing in other finer-scaled processes and circuits down to the most local.

An idea that cities emerge, or just *happen* at the level at which we encounter them – as opposed to one which considers them to be our civilised construction and *reflection* of our bodies and societies – begins also to acknowledge the difficulty of inventing life forms or social forms out of nothing, and to take seriously the contingency involved in any creation. The possibility would first, I propose, have had to be *seen* to exist, in at least a rudimentary form, before it could have occurred to our proto-urban ancestors that *polis* or *civitas* may have been an interesting possibility for social existence. Developed social forms may be therefore a creative addition to – a building upon – a matrix of encounter that is in the first place *urban*. What I am trying to begin to build here is therefore a speculative story of *social* becoming at the same time as it is one of urban becoming.

### **Centres in mobilisations**

Individual stories of caravans and their masters, of ship fleets and their captains and crews, are largely lost, along with the details of their achievements and hardships and failures. What *does* remain are the trails they wore, the strings of provisioning posts and trading stops and ports they established. Today we see little of the details of the complex overlapping arrangements and agreements which underwrite exchanges in commodities, finance and other formal and informal, legitimate and illegitimate business, not to mention the countless movements and exchanges made for reasons of personal attachment or gain. What we do see, and what does remain, are the more systematised flight and train schedules, the seasons and the calendars – and the routes which draw together into one movement all the individual stories lost in every way except as another pair of lights in the moving stream on the freeway, another passenger in the queue at the check-in, another pedestrian in the moving tide on the pavement of the shopping street – or another sequence of pulses in the terabytes of data transmitted down optical cables.<sup>35</sup>

Before the city as we know it, before the city as a setting for individualisable stories and the times and spaces of institutions and people, comes a collective mobilisation of material, data and populations. The city is mobile mass, masses and messages that dissolves the forms of everyday appearance – to gather them together again according to *another* logic of a convergence of multiples in the space of the urban. The city is given, it is *there*, as a pulse, a rhythm particular in every place, shifting and sorting us by way of its “freeing of times and speeds” into an articulation of times and speeds in a flat connective frame subject to its own dynamic logics. These flat movements of anonymous materials and populations are the virtual, antecedent to a location or place that is a *relay*, a passing on of matter and pulses and rhythms that inform and transform each place in their passing.

This flat, virtual or antecedent centrality finds its most visible expression today in the freeway network – an evenly distributed net of pure movement *producing* as well as regulating its own dynamic integrative coherence – its own *time*. Flying over the urban landscape at night, this virtual ‘engine’<sup>36</sup> of the city is perfectly visible, perfectly concrete, but prior to anything we would call an urban place in its developed actuality. The visibility and intensity of this tracery at this scale points also to a mode of growth of cities. The movements of people, goods, money and information at this metropolitan scale were in previous times, outside the city as it was then commonly (but mistakenly) understood. Today, there is no question any more about it; this scale of movement exists *inside* the life of the *metropolitan* city as we now think of it. In fact what has happened is that a new layer of movement, a newly dominant *stratification* of connection and infrastructure and the centralities and times it produces and regulates has imposed itself ‘*over*’ what already existed, changing – by processes of translation through the layers of the ‘cake’ – every local reality ‘*under*’ it.

There are multiple virtual centralities existing at different scales and in different modes in the city at the same time – each configured by connective webs gathering movements into flat mobilisations. Technical (and informational and in general *connective*) infrastructures *stratify* these mobilisations into layers of different speeds and *produced* times. Time enters this realm of pure intensity as speed or vibration or rhythm. The impulse of these distributed networks is to distribute, but they distribute *themselves* as well as the material they are distributing; as they seek to cover the surface they are involved in integrating. A metropolitan freeway network will seek to cover and integrate the metropolitan surface, an urban boulevard network will seek to cover and integrate a functional urban surface, and a global telecommunications network will seek to cover and integrate a global surface. In the same way as a soap bubble economises by distributing tensions and energy evenly over its surface, these infrastructures tend, other things being equal, to distribute evenly over the surface available to them.<sup>37</sup> These infrastructures and the integrations they effect establish and *define* the surfaces they integrate, in the process revealing certain possible realities and suppressing others. They are also *built*, are costly, and are never ideologically neutral in that they will always tend to construct reality in the shape of the perspectives and interests they reveal, and render invisible other perspectives and interests.

Urban place, as relay point on multiple stratified movement nets, becomes a place of recombination and of translation – of the conversion of matter or energy of one sort into another. The urban we know, in its architectural, actualised form, emerges at the point where flat virtual centralities overlap, allowing globalised, metropolitanised, urbanised lives and other processes to adhere, to inhere, to become entrained and situated, in points of layered and mutually supportive and dependant connectivity. This is the point where multifarious centralities come together: it is not a coming together in one scale, one speed, one time and one space; rather the coming together is of a variety of times and spaces in a process of combination that creates the rich, complex, and active individuated compound out of multiple purer spaces and times. There is a *concrecence*, an alchemy, a real generative moment, which takes place in these overlaps between virtual centralities, activating situated condition, catalysing individuation; *actualising* the centralities we recognise as such in real urban places.

Locus or place is also the point at which the individual and his or her stories comes back into focus, and the actualisation of urban place is also its becoming as setting for embedded stories of individual everyday lives. The ‘non-place’,<sup>38</sup> the ‘concretely preindividuated’ simplistically accessible places we more often than not make today, cannot *hold* real lives and stories. It lacks the ‘thickness’ of the space-time layering of situation, in a *fabric* of multiple scaled and flat webs. Place requires layering and overlap in which speeds can collapse and ground themselves. The collapse of the lay-

ers generates friction and difference, providing the depth and 'stickiness' necessary to support the imbrogio of the everyday.

### ***The city as a technology of visibility and emplacement***

It is clear today that the urban has overflowed the limits of the traditional urban centre. It is even more clear that the instrument by which this overflow has been effected, is in the first instance the infrastructures of movement and communication that have spread themselves over the surfaces of the metropolis, the megacity region, the global region and the world. It is clear once one begins to think about it that the city has always overflowed its limits, and that this overflow is the engine of the city's being in the first place.<sup>39</sup>

The spatial schema outlined here serves as an instrument for making urban processes visible and for identifying the often hidden 'urban' in 'urban phenomena'. It is against this space that movements, patterns, formations and transformations are identified and mapped in our research. Underlying this spatial model, is the presumption that both our experience of specific urban places and the nature of the urban object itself are founded in the movements and connections we and others make through it. These movements then compound and generate *another* body with its own generative power, where we encounter other people and things, and are *formed* in interfaces structured in movement. Our preconceptions of what the urban is though have remained static while the urban itself has shifted and adjusted itself to new layerings of infrastructure and connection and the new dominant movements within those infrastructures. If the city of our preconceptions is no longer precisely the city we inhabit, it is because we associate the forms we see with similar forms produced by a city of the past. We may discount real and global relations and dynamics of our lives today because the local is the universal we reference our lives to.<sup>40</sup> And the global and metropolitan become embroiled, and available to us, *in* the local, which is stabilised and more or less constant in its form by virtue of its more or less dense layering. The grids of the new dominant scales are layered *over* grids of the past which *still* inform the ways the new scales come down to earth and ground themselves in the local.

A profound shift in the scales of dominant movements may manifest itself on the ground therefore in ways which reflects a continuity with the past at the level of *form* – while at the same time manifesting profound changes in *content*. As far as today's urban is concerned, the global and metropolitan scales overlay and infect everything that looks local.<sup>41</sup> Beyond this, telecommunications, instantaneity, and media in general impact the image of our evolving city.<sup>42</sup> But the invisibility *as a form* of a core that coordinates – that choreographs and draws multiple worlds together in movement, and that makes the everyday practices of our realities stable, or relatively so – means precisely that we are *not* determined by profound changes in the technological means of our lives. We absorb these changes into practical patters as what James Gibson calls 'affordances'<sup>43</sup> – alternative possibilities that open within the 'optical array' of our immediately local lives – and we do not necessarily succumb as automata or 'docile bodies' (though those least empowered may be forced into even less empowered situations) to the global machine.

We have always placed ourselves and understood our place in the world through the ways we have moved in it – whether that movement was bodily through 'real' movement channels or through telecommunications channels, and today we begin to see the urban itself as a technology – consisting of a dense layering of 'skins' of mobility and communications infrastructure; extending our 'reach' into the world and effecting an ever more implicated exchange between global and local, whose resolution *is* the local. Much contemporary thinking on the issue of connectivity focuses on the so-called 'virtual' networks of the world wide web, telecommunications and data-

communications networks, including those of global financial transactions, mobile telephones, the distribution of information through broadcast and printed media and the pervasive reach of promotion and advertising. These networks need to be seen as part of, and as grounding themselves in, a re-spatialised urban ecology which includes the more traditional communications channels of bodily mobility, and the mobility of all the brute physical stuff traversing our landscapes.

### **Urban ground**

It is into an *already* mobile and fluid and communicative place that the effects of the new flows of data and information come back down to earth. It is into bodily experience and lived time, already extended and transformed by mobility technologies and the older communications channels that we now take for granted, that all this other newer stuff becomes submerged and embedded and grounded. There is an integral, indestructible (in spite of rather shallow claims to the contrary) continuity between the 'virtual' and 'physical' urban worlds. There is a continuity, over and above all the so-called 'revolutions' in mobility and communicability, of a phenomenal, information-rich and legible urban world as an accretion of layers of communication, that in their layered density *form* a ground that simply said, *does not even exist* as a 'pure-locational' thing or surface apart from them. The lower scaled grids fulfil a vital role in this layering, founding the conditions and experience we understand as 'place'. This is so even while the quality of that experience is transformed, and explains why, with the breakdown of a particular structuring of the urban fabric in the last century, we have come to experience new urban places as 'placeless'.<sup>44</sup>

We need to understand our global and metropolitan cities as an *effect* of all this layering of communication and mobility, and as a consequence of an accumulative and evolutionary process of extension, through distributed physical, informational and electronic spaces – and the technological systematisation of this extension – rather than being either on the one hand architecture, or on the other, simple systems of nodes in global networks.

Expanding, overlapping and systematising networks of communications and flow, set up a different class of ecology; one which does not depend in the classical way on relations and exchanges over static boundaries, but on the ways that horizontal strata of relations and flow intersect and interact with each other. The urban world becomes a layering of flat distributed communicative strata, producing depth and mass in the interval and at the intersection *between* strata. The globalised, metropolitanised city we recognise in place is what emerges out of this interval of intersection, and the productive creative work of alchemy that takes place there. Social reality cannot be distinct from these grids and the way we engage with them. Social reality is necessarily produced, inflected and actualised in their intersections, and in the way they constrain and enable, the way they open relations as well as effecting 'stabilisation' in levels of material infrastructure that provide some of the "missing mass" of our societies. At the same time these grids, in their "stratifications and tangles"<sup>45</sup>, draw together affects and effects into highly specific urban moments of integrated hybridity – those 'concretely abstract' places I mentioned earlier. We produce a *horizontal* and spatial society at this level,<sup>46</sup> a society remade in every moment around forms of encounter that are in the first place mobile and urban.

How can one conceive the production of the urban body today – something with mass and substance that in our contemporary state of urbanisation we can no longer simply understand as pure artefact, constructed of a transparent mentality and in proportions which reflect our own? – something we can no longer either understand as a system of dematerialised relations that function in a graph space of pure abstraction? What is the nature of an *urban* society or of a *social* city in a world of increasing connectivity and mobility? The ideas outlined in this paper aim to set up a framework to start

thinking about the way we can begin as a practical matter addressing the problem of a social urban form today and for the future.

### ***A methodological implication***

We can become paralysed in our research and thinking by certain methodological presuppositions about the categories of the 'real' and the 'imagined' This enforced duality can no longer be claimed to be helpful in furthering that research or to of serving the cause of 'methodological' rigour. The problem revolves around the question of objectivity, and a far too narrow view, I believe, on the part of some, of what constitutes a *scientific* objectivity.

The matter becomes critical when the object of study is the city – whose reality is clearly something which is difficult to consider apart from the way it works between and draws together issues of 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity' in a dynamic implicated *functionality*. Much current urban research done on the basis of a methodological empiricism opens itself to criticism by the distance of its methods and results from anything approaching a corporeal urban experience. There is, meanwhile, a pressing need to approach the *reality* of the experience of the city. This need is felt clearly when it comes to matters of value, quality, and power – but exists also, I believe, when it comes to matters of a hard-nosed and objective 'how things work' – given that matters of functionality must on the face of it follow those of experience to at least some degree. It is clear that the way the city *works* is also something that owes a great deal to the *imaginaries* of the people who use it.

There is I believe a simple misunderstanding, and some entrenched and for the most part hidden and unexamined presuppositions founded on this misunderstanding, at the root of this dilemma.

Some current methodological presumptions – and this could apply equally in 'modernist' and 'post-modernist' research – see 'subjective' and 'objective' as constituting polar opposites, consigning 'imaginaries' to an idealist and '*subjectively*' multiple realm of the representational, while granting 'reality' to an '*objectively*' singular realm of the real. The underlying assumption here – as I say, seldom examined but underlying much research thinking – is, simply put, that perspectives may be multiple but that reality is in the end singular. The point I want to argue is not that our world is subjectively relative, and that this is what keeps it open and available for different perspectives – in other words that multiplicity is a factor of *interpretation* – but rather that multiple worlds may be entirely objective and *real*, and put together as part of a construction (*not* a social construction) of realities. Further – that what we think of as our subjectivity is a co-construction as part of the same process of world-construction and the orchestration or coordination of those worlds.

The matter of the coexistence of different experiential and functional worlds in one urban landscape is therefore not one of real and imagined, or objective and subjective – but of (always provisional) constructions of worlds at multiple real levels. And we find we may objectively map these world-constructions as part of our research. Worlds may be crafted in multiple ways – but very often we find, in the city, to the production of similar patterns. When one of these ways of crafting is the researcher's we feel we are getting somewhere with our research – but it is a matter of a harmonisation or coordination of practices and processes, including *scientific* practices, relating to situated events, not to the final discovery of some kind of universal truth or formula. These practices and processes take place in space and time; one practice or process clicks, or at least appears to click, into sync with another; *forms* coordinate, and – bingo – something becomes intelligible and we have a result.<sup>47</sup>

But the realities we construct, and that our urban processes construct, profoundly constrain any further realities we may understand as being possible to construct. This Heideggerian point demonstrates the insidiousness, even the danger, of a singular dominant reality – we cannot even *see* any more the fact that other realities may be perfectly possible. Our *subjectivities* and imaginaries become very substantially constructed and constrained *in* the networks of ‘made visible’ or ‘known’ things and processes – and this channelling of our presumptions and preconceptions within a given constructed network of reality makes us quite literally blind to alternative networks which may follow other process and practice pathways. The whole of the world becomes constituted in a certain network of relations (and remember even objects are constituted in relations) and the gaps in – the alternative relations occupying the in-between of – that network space become invisible.

This is the substantial constructive effect of our technologies – and both knowledges and cities in this sense can be thought of as technologies: they construct realities that come to appear ‘natural’. They *naturalise* the pathways of thinking and doing they enable – which of course can be either a good *or* a bad thing. One could imagine how environments of comfortable familiarity, or stimulating edginess, as well as oppressive places inhabited by ‘docile bodies’, could all be naturalised patterns. The object of our research is also therefore to deal with hidden or suppressed realities – empiricism is not simply about dealing with what ‘exists’; it becomes about dealing with both immanent and suppressed realities, and with both real and virtual-as-real objects, in order always to expand the scope of what is visible and available to our thinking processes.

What I am arguing really is that there is something objective about subjectivity – at the same time as there is something flimsy and contingently constructed about the objective. Our city is a technology that sits in middle of all this – and can perhaps even help us in fact to unravel the muddle in our thinking. I have argued that the city is itself a machine that achieves a certain coordination between worlds – effecting interferences and interdependencies between those worlds – which have both subjective and objective characters – and establishing ‘urban-social’ forms, in their ‘interfaces’. What we in our research try to engage is an urban relationalism that never descends to relativism – the reality of the urban world *also* demands that it coordinates multiple realities, and we come to the apt little catch-phrase of Annemarie Mol which captures something of the shape of what it is we are dealing with. Reality according to her is “more than one and less than many”. Its a motto we use to keep our eyes on the balls, as we attempt to juggle the complex realities of our urban worlds in a forward-looking empiricism.

## Notes

- 1 Henri Lefebvre (2003), *The Urban Revolution*, trans. Robert Bononno, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- 2 See: Gregory J. Seigworth & Michael E. Gardiner (2004), 'Rethinking everyday life', in: *Cultural Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2/3, pp. 139-159.
- 3 Seigworth & Gardiner (2004), p. 141
- 4 The 'constitutional settlement' of Latour. See: Bruno Latour (1993), *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass.
- 5 Lefebvre (2003), p. 28. The layers of 'the rural' and 'the industrial' have turned out to lack the power, even as 'floating signifiers', over urbanisation processes that Lefebvre granted them at the time of writing and from his particular ideological position in the 1960s.
- 6 See: Latour (1993).
- 7 'Events' are from A.N. Whitehead (1979), *Process and Reality*, Macmillan, New York. Lefebvre's own 'monadology' involves 'moments'. See: Henri Lefebvre (2002), *Critique of Everyday Life: volume II*, trans. John Moore, Verso, London.
- 8 This is a rather Whiteheadian reading of moments and time though it appears to also be implicit in Lefebvre. See Charles Hartshorne on 'Whitehead's novel intuition' in: George L. Kline, ed. (1963), *Alfred North Whitehead: Essays on his Philosophy*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs N.J.
- 9 See: Bruno Latour (2004), 'Why has critique run out of steam?: From matters of fact to matters of concern', in: *Critical Enquiry* 30,2 (Winter 2004) pp. 225-248
- 10 See: Bruno Latour (1993), *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass.
- 11 See: Manuel De Landa (2002), *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*, Continuum, London.
- 12 Two books are proposed; the first dealing with urban form and design, the second with movement, form, technology and society.
- 13 The main line of argument in this section follows Niels Albertsen and Bülent Diken, 'What is the Social?' (draft), published by the Department of Sociology, Lancaster University at: <http://www.comp.lancs.ac.uk/sociology/soc033bd.html>
- 14 Strum S.S. & Bruno Latour (1987), "Redefining the Social Link: From Baboons to Humans", in: *Social Science Information* 26(4), pp. 783-802.
- 15 Bruno Latour (1996), 'On Interobjectivity', in: *Mind, Culture & Activity*, 3 (4), pp. 228-45.
- 16 See: Michel Foucault (1991), *Discipline and Punish*, Penguin, London, p. 195-230.
- 17 See: John Law (1994), *Organizing Modernity*, Blackwell, Oxford, p. 25.
- 18 See: Stephen Read (2005), 'Questions of form', Paper presented at the 5th Space Syntax Symposium, Delft University of Technology.
- 19 See: Latour (1996), p. 238.
- 20 See: Edward Casey (1996), 'How to get from space to place in a fairly short stretch of time', in: Feld S. & K.H. Basso (eds.), *Senses of Place*, School of American Research Press, Santa Fe. See also: Bruno Latour (1996b) "On actor-network theory. A few clarifications". *Soziale Welt* (47), pp. 369-81.
- 21 See: Latour (1996b), p. 370.
- 22 See: Latour (1996b), p. 371
- 23 See: Bruno Latour (1992), 'Where are the missing masses?: Sociology of a few mundane artifacts', in: Wiebe Bijker and John Law (eds.), *Shaping Technology – Building Society; Studies in Sociotechnical Change*, MIT Press, Cambridge Mass.
- 24 See: Latour (1996)
- 25 Bruno Latour (1990), 'Drawing Things Together', in: Lynch, Michael & Woolgar, Steve (eds) *Representations in Scientific Practice*, MIT Press, Cambridge Mass., pp. 19-68
- 26 Annemarie Mol & John Law (1994), 'Regions, Networks and Fluids: Anaemia and Social Topology', in: *Social Studies of Science*, Vol 24 (4), pp. 641-72.
- 27 John Urry (1997) 'The Concept of Society and the Future of Sociology'. Paper presented at the conference *The Future of Sociology*, Aalborg University, October 1997, p. 3
- 28 Urry (1997), p. 8
- 29 Rob Shields (1997), 'Flow', in: *Space and Culture*, vol 1, pp. 1-8.

- <sup>30</sup> Urry (1997), pp. 6, 8-9
- <sup>31</sup> See Stephen Read (2006), 'A brief history of flights to the periphery and other movement matters' in: Read & Pinilla (eds.), *Visualising the Invisible*, Techne Press, Amsterdam.
- <sup>32</sup> Jane Jacobs (1970), *The Economy of Cities*, Vintage Books, New York. The proposal I am making is a speculation built on a speculation, whose veracity, I would argue, is to be determined in its productivity as a model for thinking, rather than in its literal applicability to every settlement form in every historical circumstance. There may have been other types of settlement in the course of history – villages perhaps, towns even, of variable size – conforming to the conventional model which would see 'community' as providing the 'glue' for social aggregation and settlement forming. My argument is that settlement as a product of and as an expression of 'social aggregation' is an inadequate model for understanding *cities* – and this fact becomes all the more clear as cities distribute themselves everywhere and begin to constitute our whole world.
- <sup>33</sup> See: Keith Ansell-Pierson (1997), *Viroid Life*, Routledge, London.
- <sup>34</sup> The model presented here begins to become suggestive as regards the idea of 'omnicausal' systems (when the whole determines the behaviour of its parts) as opposed to those which are 'particausal'. See: G.E. Mikhailovsky (1993), 'Biological time, its organisation, hierarchy and presentation by complex values', in: A.P. Levich (ed.) *On The Way To Understanding The Time Phenomenon: The Constructions Of Time In Natural Science (Part I)*, World Scientific Publishing, London. There is a potentially rich line of investigation here which goes into the purported 'negentropic' properties of omnicausal systems.
- <sup>35</sup> See the movie 'Koyaanisqatsi' (1983), directed by Godfrey Reggio.
- <sup>36</sup> This engine is again not that of a system – of a technocratic movement-connective machine – but as part of a 'machine' effecting translation and transformation, and the actualisation of urban virtuality or potential. This 'engine' produces at the moment of its encounter with another 'concrete virtualities', creating a 'thickness' of present time – somewhat in the spirit of Mikhailovsky (1993). This is a point which will be developed elsewhere. See for a first step: Gerhard Bruyns & Stephen Read (2006), 'The Urban Machine' in: Read & Camilo Pinilla (eds.), *Visualising the Invisible*, Techne Press, Amsterdam.
- <sup>37</sup> This assertion needs some qualification of course because at certain moments in history all roads *did* lead to Rome or London or Paris or wherever. Nevertheless today in the time of Negri and Hardt's *Empire* (), it seems that this statement is becoming more rather than less true.
- <sup>38</sup> See: Marc Augé (1995), *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, Verso, London.
- <sup>39</sup> See: Stephen Read (2006), 'A brief history of flights to the periphery and other movement matters', in: Read & Pinilla (eds.), *Visualising the Invisible*, Techne Press, Amsterdam.
- <sup>40</sup> See: Bruyns and Read (2006).
- <sup>41</sup> The PhD work of Gerhard Bruyns for example.
- <sup>42</sup> The PhD work of Marta Mendonça for example.
- <sup>43</sup> J.J. Gibson (1986), *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, LEA Publishers, Hillsdale NJ.
- <sup>44</sup> See: Read (2006).
- <sup>45</sup> See: Henri Lefebvre (1991), *The Production of Space*, Blackwell, Oxford, p. 402
- <sup>46</sup> See: John Urry (2000), *Sociology beyond Societies*, Routledge, London.
- <sup>47</sup> The argument, in its broad outline, is taken from Mol and Law. See: Annemarie Mol (2002), *The Body Multiple*, Duke UP, Durham NC.; John Law (2004), *After Method*, Routledge, London.