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Here and Nowhere. The Making of Urban Space

Jan Verwijnen

UIAH. Helsinki

My interest is in the conscious role of space and time or of geography and history in contemporary urban development, particularly in the generation of urban projects. Can urban development be seen in relationship to form and thus to urban projects that are shaping and being shaped by contemporary culture? I would like to draw attention to a shift of attitude in a series of urban projects within the field of architecture and urbanism based on a 'more fluid and kaleidoscopic socio-economic landscape' that is characterised by programmatic indeterminacy and instability. This parallels a shift in society: The fragmenting of centralised flows of power towards the power of flows induced by networks that become the dominant social morphology (Castells 1996). I then introduce the notion of a *material culture based on object form* and the production and consumption of form through complex processes of negotiation. This negotiation of form is increasingly a conscious process on the level of configuration, a conceptual and diagrammatic level within the design process between the virtual and the real that allows interaction and participation. This in turn refers to the notion of the deleuzian abstract machines in cultural and historical processes and evolution in general. Geography has created GIS (Geographical Information Systems), a digital tool with which we within the diagrammatic process of configuration can create any map and map anything, an interface for participatory action. What is the historical equivalent of this tool, which are the generative engines of change over time and how are they configured?

Urban development

My account of contemporary European urban development and its planning reality is pessimistic towards its future potential. The increased competition between European cities has led to a new paradox: the more competition the cities confront from the outside, the smoother they must operate on the inside. Cities can no longer afford a freewheeling situation, but need to harness their internal resources. *Urban policies become both the instrument itself and act as the showcase of this effort.* A dynamic urban policy becomes part of the image of a city and acts as a catalyst for its symbolic economy. (Barcelona, Rotterdam, Glasgow)

Once economic restructuring challenges the European city, planning becomes perhaps inevitable, but in a completely new way. Otherwise a city centre will decay and most economic activities will move to the periphery of the ringroads. Planning will in this case mean mobilising private capital through public-private partnerships. In order to successfully do this a city needs a *whole set of new instruments* to carry out such a mission. Successfully operating models of large projects in different cities (e.g. Lille, Rotterdam) show that these cities have tried to adopt themselves to this new reality. Within this new reality the *traditional masterplans have lost their power.* They still provide a legal framework concerning land-use, but fail to give a vision for the city, nor are they concrete enough to give precise guidelines for designing the necessary quality of the public spaces or do they have the flexibility to incorporate programmatic changes.

Instead of an all embracing master plan, newer planning documents have emerged that tend to split between those that deal with a *vision for the city as a whole* including its position in the region and so called *large scale strategic projects* that translate that vision. The new type of city

plan that deals with the current renewal and economic restructuring of cities accepts the fragmentary nature of this undertaking. It usually starts with the relation between the city and the region and further deals with the integration of a city's policy sectors. The plans may initially be more or less independent of programmatic aspects and only provide spatial potential. This independence of program results from the different perspective that these type of plans represent: they depart from the question how the development of a city could be directed along lines of infrastructure to create development corridors given the increasing importance of private investment in real estate.

If architects are going to participate in the mobile, often immaterial, shaping forces of the contemporary city, they must embrace both an ethics and a practice of motion. This involves the assumption that the classical models of pure, static, essentialised, timeless form and structure are no longer adequate to describe the contemporary city and the activities that it supports. ... Studies of motion have historically gravitated to those techniques that can manage complex information smoothly, allowing the study of temporal flow. At this moment, certain computer programs seem obvious as the sites for the study of motion. This interest in computation is not for the mechanisation of design, but rather a new medium in which designers can reconceptualise old problems in new ways. (Lynn 1997: 54).

Urban Field Conditions

The difficulty planning and architecture are increasingly facing is the urban 'field condition' generated by the flows of goods, money, people and information. Allen (1997) introduces the term 'field conditions' in relation to movements in art and technology as:

"an intuition of a shift from object to field in recent theoretical and visual practices. In its most complex manifestation, this concept refers to mathematical field theory, to non-linear dynamics and computer simulations of evolutionary change. It parallels a shift in recent technologies from analogue object to digital field. ... The infrastructural elements of the modern city, by their nature linked together in open-ended networks, offer another example of field conditions in the urban context." (Allen 1997:24)

Understanding the city as a field means accepting it being in a state of continual flux and continuous change. Aesthetic processes flow through the urban field and are carried by bodies of people in the form of fashion, but also influence the form of urban space, where these people meet – the cafés, squares etc. Such a field phenomenon is defined by simple local conditions and is in fact relatively indifferent to overall form and extent of the city. Global movements such as de-industrialisation or new information and communication structures determine the forces in a local field, but the actors on the spot behave according to local conditions such as habits, tradition and consensus. Increasingly these actors that have become critical about their environment want to be directly involved in planning the development of their district.

Under field conditions architecture and planning have to shift their attention from the traditional top-down forms of control and begin to investigate more fluid bottom-up approaches (Allen 1997). Although it is evident that urban planning and particularly architecture have had great difficulties in adequately addressing the complexities of urban life there is little evidence that the discipline is adapting itself to the new field condition. Similarly Lynn (1997) points to a different architecture that must be conceptualised and modelled within an urban field. The urban field is understood as dynamic and characterised by forces rather than forms. To an architect, urban questions have usually simply been questions of large-scale form or fabric. Instead of form, patterns of organisation are to be addressed on the urban scale.

"It is necessary that architects begin to design using dynamic simulation systems of urban forces and fields" (Lynn 1997: 55).

In this context Allen asks:

"How to engage all the complexity and indeterminacy of the city through the methods of a discipline so committed to control, separation and unitary thinking? We thrive in cities exactly because they are places of the unexpected, products of a complex order emerging over time" (Allen 1997: 30).

Allen suggests that architecture and planning need to recognise the limits of their ability to order the city, and that they learn from complex self-regulating orders already present in the field of the city. With growing recognition of the urban field architectural objects tend to lose their traditional form and design process - we move from the one toward the many, from objects to fields.

Material Culture and the Negotiation of Form

For understanding the process that generates object form we need a short excursion into the notion of material culture. The quantitative rise in the industrial production and mass distribution of material goods over the past century has led to a growth of material culture to the point where *material culture based on object form is the culture of the our contemporary society* and dominates the relationship between people and goods (things, products, objects and spaces). Firstly, more things are produced; secondly, more of social life is produced in a thing-like form. In *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* Miller (1987) develops a theory of culture concerned with the relationship between the human subject and the external world based on philosophical studies of the subject-object duality and its resolution in a dynamic process of becoming. Material culture is the totality of *what people do with objects*, why they buy them and how form and fashion contribute to the making, the social construction, of everyday life. Through material culture object form becomes a process of negotiation between production and consumption. Human subjects actively engage with the object world, transforming, moulding and creating it through their intellectual and practical efforts. Thus in working on the world, individuals and societies recreate it in relation to their needs – their subjectivity, their *meanings for the world*. These needs take material form, in the objects and spaces being produced. *The world of things is really culture in its objective form*, it is the form that humans have given the world through their mental and material practices; at the same time, human needs themselves evolve and take shape through the kinds of things, objects, goods available (Slater 1997).

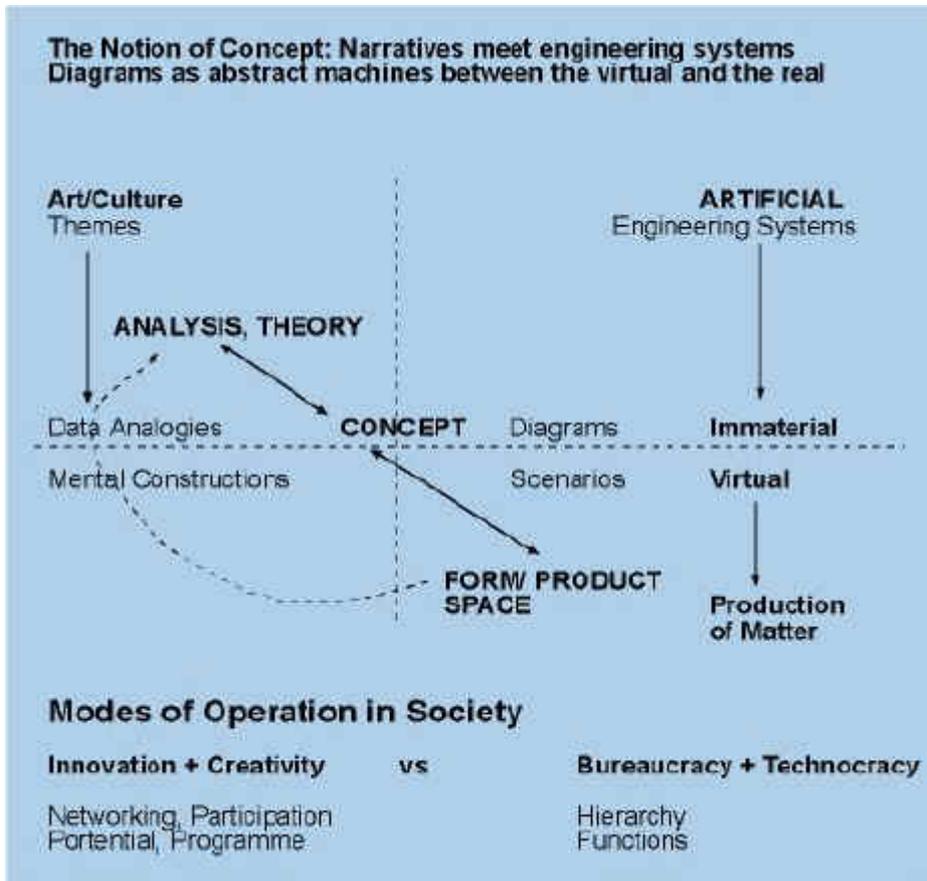
A major shortcoming of many theories of the *concept of culture* is that they identify culture with a set of objects, such as the arts in themselves, rather than seeing it *as an evaluation of the relationship through which objects are constituted as social forms and social spaces*. Culture is always a process and is never reducible to either its object or its subject form. For this reason the evaluation should always be of a dynamic relationship of people and objects, never of mere things. (Miller 1987).

In their book *The End of Organised Capitalism* Lash and Urry argue that the contemporary audience is sensitised to the reception of such cultural objects and forms because of a 'semiotics of everyday life' in which the boundary between the cultural and life, between the image and the real, is more than ever transgressed. (Lash and Urry 1987).

Here the contemporary design process of urban and architectural space introduces the diagram as an intermediary level for the negotiation of form as an abstract model between the virtual and the real. The variables in a diagram may include both formal and programmatic configurations: space and event, force and resistance, density, distribution, and direction. Multiple functions and action over time are implicit in the diagram. The configurations it develops are subject to continual modification. A diagram is therefore not a thing in itself but a description of potential relationships among elements, not only an abstract model of the way things behave in the world but *a map of possible worlds*.

In this context I would like to introduce a scheme that represents the design process as a diagonal movement from immaterial thoughts to the production of matter. It identifies three levels of design knowledge and praxis that have a specific relation with each other. My hypothesis is that for design to be relevant for praxis it is necessary to connect all three levels.

- a level of analysis and theory,
- a conceptual level between the virtual and the real that operates with diagrams as a sort of professional shorthand and that for different reasons (group work, participation) increasingly is developing an own life (generative diagrams, templates etc.)
- a level of final form in which the things or products present themselves in their material form. This has for a great deal been linked to categories of style and therefore art history.



Increasingly new professional practice is characterised by providing solutions through mediating between municipal bureaucracies or production (distribution) systems and the participation of new groupings of actors in the design process. This type of mediating seems to provoke an intermediary level of operation, in which the analysed data are interpreted and transformed before becoming solutions or form. Increasingly open-ended solutions and templates are demanded. The practice of architecture today, for example, must "negotiate a field in which the actual and the virtual assume ever more complex configurations: a field in which diagrams matter" (Allen 1988). He further states: "A diagrammatic practice.... locates itself between the actual and the virtual, and foregrounds architecture's transactional character. It works in the midst of architecture's constant interface with human activity, and its own internal negotiations of actual and virtual." (Ibid.)

Gilles Deleuze described the virtual organisation of the diagram as an 'abstract machine'. Other than Foucault, for whom the plan for the Panopticum prison is "the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form" and represents the spatial organisation of a specific form of state power and discipline, Deleuze is interested in the diagram as an abstract machine that makes no "distinction within itself between a plane of expression and a plane of content. ...The diagrammatic or abstract machine does not function to represent, even something real, but rather constructs a real that is yet to come" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 141-142). Thus Kwinter argues that the diagram operates primarily in time, i.e. abstract machines manifest their materiality rather in time than in space.

Manuel De Landa's *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (1997) is such a diagrammatic account of the products of historical processes which are bottom-up and guided by system generating processes. He explores the history of urban economics since the Middle Ages and relates it to flows of matter and energy that generate form through particular 'abstract machines'. An understanding of this type of generation of form is crucial for the making of contemporary space and it is perhaps here that history has role to play.

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Notes

1.- In her book *The Cultures of Cities* Sharon Zukin draws attention to the new symbolic economy of culture for cities: "As a set of architectural themes, it plays a leading role in urban redevelopment strategies based on historic preservation or local 'heritage'. With the disappearance of local manufacturing industries and periodic crises in government and finance, culture is more and more the business of cities – the basis of their tourist attractions and their

unique, competitive edge. The growth of cultural consumption (of art, food, fashion, music, tourism) and the industries that cater to it fuels the city's symbolic economy, its visible ability to produce both symbols and space." (Zukin 1995: 1-2)

2.- The electronic integration of all communication modes from the typographic to the multimedia particularly consists of (fashion) images and signs. People are increasingly able to monitor and evaluate these images as well as place themselves within the world, both historically and geographically. The more that societies modernise, the greater the ability of knowledgeable subjects to reflect upon their social conditions of existence. Lash (1994) characterises this as 'reflexive modernisation'. In a world of ever-faster change and growing abstraction the process of reflexivity opens up possibilities for the recasting of meaning in work and in leisure and for the heterogenisation and complexity of space and everyday life. Confronted with the increasing cultural content of flows reflexivity becomes aesthetic - a notion for which Lash and Urry argue in their book *Economies of Signs and Space* (1994).

3.- Field conditions are bottom-up phenomena: defined not by overarching geometrical schemas, but by intricate local connections. Overall shape and extent of the parts are highly fluid. Form matters, but not so much the forms of things as the forms between things. (Allen 1997: 24).

4 When everything is connected to everything else in a distributed network, things are happening at once. When everything happens at once, wide and fast moving problems simply route around any central authority. Therefore overall governance must arise from interdependent acts done locally, and not from central command. (Kelly 1994: 469)

5 Self-organised order in evolutionary systems occurs if the rules of the game are composed from bottom up. Interacting forces at the bottom level will change the rules as the game progresses. Systems balance themselves by learning and adapting already present in the field of the city. With growing recognition of the urban field architectural objects tend to lose their traditional form and design process - we move from the one toward the many, from objects to fields.