



CITYNESS IN THE URBAN AGE

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Urban agglomerations are very often seen as lacking the features, quality and sense of what we think of as cities. Yet, urbanity is perhaps too charged a term, charged with a Western sense of cosmopolitanism of what public space is or should be. Instead, cityness suggests the possibility that there are kinds of urbanity that do not fit with this very large body of urbanism developed in the West. In fact that may be part of history in the making and we do not have a language for it yet. So cityness in a way is an instrument to capture something that might easily get lost. Public space and cosmopolitanism are foundational elements of any city. They have however, been constructed in deeply Western ways. In my work on global cities, for instance, I address this issue through the notion of non-cosmopolitan forms of the global, of globality and vernacular cosmopolitanism. But as the Urban Age moves from one city to another, from New York to Shanghai, this becomes a critical question. In Shanghai, many interventions seem to be destabilising these very Western concepts. For example architect QinYu Ma argues that the Chinese city does not need public space because it makes public spaces that we might think of as private; bus shelters at night become a public space where people set up their tables to play cards. Clearly the notion of public space as we have developed it out of a Western European context might not help us read a city such as Shanghai, or perhaps even Mexico City, in ways that are very useful.

We need to strip our concept of the city from the overcharged meanings it currently has. In that process, I identify a couple of categories that allow us to understand, to see something about alternative kinds of urban-ity. The first point has to do with the whole and its parts. In traditionally defined urban-ity, multiple elements come together in the context of an urban aggregate and produce something that is more than the sum of these individual parts. When we look at a lot of the urban aggregates that we are dealing with today, these vast expanses of urban built space seem to produce a formula whereby the whole is not more than the sum of its parts. So that would be an obstacle to a notion of urbanity. The second point is differences. You could have many similar things working together but I would say that, in order to specify the foundations of urbanity

or cityness, it is necessary to acknowledge that the intersection of differences produces something new, whether it is good or bad, and that this actually occurring intersection is consequential. A very practical and subjective example comes from London: London is a city where there are many different types of Muslim groups, Muslim women with a Bangladeshi origin intersect with Muslim women who are Turkish, Muslim women from India, Muslim women from a number of Arab countries. In that intersecting they discover that the notion of “Muslim woman” is actually multi-faceted; there are many different versions of it. Something happens in that intersection of differences even within what we might think of as a very narrow range, (i.e. Muslim women). The city is full of that. So for me cityness needs to entail that intersection which begins to constitute a form of subjectivity and may or may not be translating into an immediate tangible outcome. Another more practical example from mid-town Manhattan: an incredibly solid set of high-rise buildings, that unlike Shanghai is not interspersed with typologies other than the corporate tower, signals neutrality, precision, engineering. But if you are actually in that space at lunch time, that visual experience is conjoined by the experience of smell coming from immigrant vendors grilling meat. There is already a juxtaposition of something but these are not two separate worlds. The people who are eating from those vendors at noon are not only the tourists and the secretaries but also the professionals who are in a great hurry, who inhabit a space of high-speed, for whom that intersecting with the vendor is the most efficient intersection of velocities. These are not two separate worlds. We could multiply these examples endlessly but what matters is the notion of intersection and its productivity.

This relates to Rem Koolhaas’ notion of Lagos, a city that might look like a mess but that has order none-the-less. My previous examples signal an order albeit not the order corresponding to the formal logic of planners. In this order of juxtapositions, that may be following a fuzzy logic, something can occur that was not considered in the space of the formal plan situation. In that fuzziness poesies, in the sense of making, becomes possible. This connects with the question of public

space, not as a representation of what it ought to be, but public space as the activity of making. An important distinction must be made between public space and a space with public access, in the latter there is no poesis, no making of public space. If there is in fact some order underlying the spaces where all kinds of things seem to be happening chaotically, then in that fuzzy logic type of order, there is room for certain kinds of intervention that have to do with making public space. Here again I think Shanghai is a very interesting city. There are different ways in which this space is used. I am intrigued by what I see from the outside and want to dig into these spaces even though it may look like there cannot be any making in them. A proposition that has guided my own work is that the excluded also make history and the space of the city can allow you to capture that making in a way that other situations do not. So again in the instances of big corporate buildings for which foreign architects usually take the blame, who knows what kind of making is happening within them? It might well be an economy producing poverty. The critique of Shanghai's emerging built environment should go beyond the architects who were let in and did their thing. But now we are stuck at the limit, some of it is very attractive some of it is not. However, there is still the possibility of transforming, of making, coming back to some of the elements of flexibility and the fact that buildings can be morphed by usage. One example is Chicago, a landmark of historic monuments. Twenty-three Taylorist office buildings in downtown Chicago have been transformed into fantastic housing, interior parks, child-care centres, all kinds of things. So even those structures that seem so rigid and to have a single function can actually be now morphed into something else. The same thing applies to this question of cityness as a way to capture forms of urbanity that do not necessarily correspond to our more Westernised eye, who knows what morphing is going on, even in these very rigid structures. Beyond the case of Lagos and its underlying order, I thought Enrique Peñalosa's notion of the long street, or what could be conceived of as an extended linear public space, is another example of where cityness can occur. It does not correspond to our notion of public space, the piazza, the centre ville, Central Park or whatever. But in fact that there are instantiations of cityness that take place in forms that we do not easily associate with what we know about the city. A different example comes from Frank Duffy's notions of networked office buildings, the idea that work can be done in several places at the same time is still connecting a potentially networked space that is multi-sited with the question of real place. In my work also, I have found that spaces that operate partly in territory and partly in electronic space can actually

be part of the constitution of place, even though they do so in very different ways.

Now coming back to what you have here in Shanghai, its multiple experience: when I exit my hotel, a certain kind of transnational space, I am immediately in the street fabric, a thick street fabric. I walk 30 metres and I am in another world. This raises a question for me to which I do not necessarily have answers but that nevertheless needs to be asked: are those two worlds connected? As I argued earlier, the part of that world that we experience as very different, either belonging to another economic era or belonging to another technological era with a certain backwardness to it, might actually be part of the infrastructure for the advanced sector rather than actually a different world.

I want to conclude with the notion that certain inequalities and gaps might be reaching a threshold in cities such as New York, Shanghai, London, Paris, etc. The question is whether in some of these cities, in some of their components, we are reaching a threshold in the dynamics that keep the intersection of differences from happening, from being productive. Partly this is an empirical question but, coming back to this notion of stripping urbanity from its Western richness and trying to use cityness as a tool to detect urbanities that may be constituted in very different ways, I would say that one issue that cuts across all of this is if the gaps between the differences, between component parts that belong to slightly different worlds, if those gaps cross certain thresholds, to what extent do we actually lose the possibility of cityness? What I am also saying then is that cityness can reside in a long line. It can reside in what to the Western eye might look like urban sprawl, either flat or high-rise, but that nevertheless meets to enable productive intersections. If those intersections cannot happen then cityness is really lost but at the same time they do not need to inhabit, or be limited to, certain urban forms. There are more possibilities. Now a final point here, I want to return to fuzzy logic as a structuring sort of logic, a dash of anarchy, inefficiency, disorder, because in that possibility lies this making; the fact that something can happen, that these intersections can be productive. So I have lots of questions for my colleagues in Shanghai because when you think about it in that way, when you try to strip it down from what you know, you see all kinds of possibilities for cityness to happen including the vertical urban sprawl that you experience here, this ocean of buildings. This is really a scale that one does not see easily around the world, I would say, so when we use cityness rather than urbanity,

rather than public space, rather than those more familiar categories, where can we detect cityness in a place like Shanghai? Are those who have been confined to spaces that may really have serious limitations nonetheless able to throw in that dash of creativity, whatever you might want to call it, so that cityness is constituted even when you have a built environment that might be working against it?

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