EXPLORING EVERYDAY URBAN ENVIRONMENT: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY IMMERSION INTO UNDERSTANDING CITIES

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Abstract
Similarly to other research fields in the arts and humanities, architecture stands for a complex phenomenon which gathers a wide range of ideas and philosophies, theories and actions. But, more than anything else, architecture is also an inherently interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary practice, and is also inextricably related to people's everyday life. Therefore, higher education and research in the broad field of architecture and planning must learn how to deal with a wide spectrum of concerns, all of which can potentially impact directly on people's lives or on their perception of the surroundings.
Relying on scholars such as Repko (2008) this research focuses on investigations into the 'lived' dimension of the city, as a general concept to be addressed and further included in the architecture education and research. This understanding considers the city as a symbiosis of the physical layout and its experiential / *'soft'* (Raban 1974) one and, therefore, picturing it as a whole can help one reach a more comprehensive understanding of its true character. Ultimately, it discusses the relevance of rethinking traditional approaches and strategies of investigating the city. In doing so, an alternative method of exploring urban reality is conceptualized.

Keywords: Architectural humanities, mapping, spatial cognition

Introduction
This interdisciplinary approach this paper provides defines the secondary objective of the PhD research I am currently conducting, and which focuses on exploring mechanisms through which a more comprehensive understanding of the relations between people, architecture and engaging with the fragmented body of the contemporary city can be achieved. In the last two centuries Romanian cities, especially those located outside the Carpathian Mountains, have been confronted with the succession of heterogeneous urban policies and projects. Consequently, their contemporary appearance stands for a superimposition of unfinished / fragmented history strata materialized in layers of physical memories (architectural evidences). The current physiognomy of the cities can be read as a juxtaposition of discontinuous spatial images. These features are visible both at the street level and in the urban fabric and belong to different temporal sequences. The contemporary broken coherency in the dialogue of the urban scenes is not regarded as a stigma on the city's image. It describes the latter stage in their physiognomy and it can be considered a challenge to be read and understood as such. The city appears as a series of spatial unresolved conflicting relations or interactions among city fragments which are experienced daily by the inhabitants. Therefore, my research is concerned with shaping an alternative, adaptable and interdisciplinary method for investigating the palimpsest image of cities for further regeneration purposes, while relying on new visual mapping techniques.

Bringing the City Closer

Interdisciplinary approach and learning has become far more common and it gains recognition that it is needed to answer complex questions or to provide a more comprehensive and coherent understanding of issues situated increasingly beyond the ability of any single discipline to address adequately. Contextually, this paper focuses on explaining the meaning and importance of interdisciplinary studies in the field of architecture, and providing real examples of modes in which knowledge and concepts social sciences and humanities can be employed in this type of research, along with the understanding towards which they conduct.

To begin with, there should be stated that interdisciplinarity concerns integration, which in this context (Repko 2008, 3-4) defines as 'a process by which ideas, data and information, methods, tools, concepts and / or theories from two or more disciplines are synthesized, connected or blended'. Moreover, (Repko 2008,4) argues that 'integrationist interdisciplinarians' firmly believe that integration itself should be the main concern of interdisciplinarity as it addresses the challenge of complexity. The disciplines or the applied fields are not rigid or unchanging, but they are time-dependent. This investigation relies on a relational understanding of the city which depends on understanding the social, historical, cultural and spiritual context in which specific spaces were created and which also leads to knowing aspects related to the lived dimension of urban space.

My research emerges from the fascination to discover and examine the fragmentation as a contemporary condition of our cities. As Bernard Tschumi (1996, 23-24) argues, one is confronted with a contemporary world 'which is a dislocated space of constraints that may find few common denominators'. Spaces in architecture and cities are fundamentally different from what they use to look like or to be conceived and, therefore, they have to be regarded and understood as such. Cities developed into spaces of continual changes as a consequence of the complexity of the everyday life. In Postmodern conscience they appear as places of spatial and temporal fragmentation in which the traditional modes of understanding them can no longer be applied. In recent years, the cultural turn in human geography or in spatial sciences encouraged exploration of the image of cities while engaging a variety of new media, digital visualization and spatial representation techniques and technologies (Hubbard 2006, 59).

The dynamic directions, movements and paradigms in architecture and urban planning, urban policies along with the historical background of cities are profoundly engaged in the transformations that occurred in urban fabric and, further extended to their physiognomy as a whole. Contextually, their contemporary appearance stands for a superimposition of unfinished / fragmented history strata materialized in layers of physical memories (architectural evidences). The current physiognomy of the cities can be read as a juxtaposition of discontinuous spatial images. These features are visible both at the street level and in the urban fabric which belong to different temporal sequences. The contemporary broken coherency in the dialogue of the urban scenes does not have to be regarded as a stigma on the cities' image. It describes the latter stage in their physiognomy and it can be considered a challenge to be read and understood as such. It appears as a series of spatial unresolved conflicting relations or interactions among city fragments daily experienced by the inhabitants.

Additionally, this research is concerned with visually exploring the relationship and the boundaries between the 'ideal space (the product of mental processes)' and the 'real space (the product of social praxis)'(Tschumi 1996, 32). Cities cannot be understood separately from the interaction between the physical space and its inhabitants. People's perception of the urban space and their daily routine according to that perception are the ones who shape, influence and define life in the city. These elements can be defined as the *unseen forces* that mould the experienced / lived environment and have to be further investigated. As such, it aims to provide answers to questions such as '*How can they be spatially and visually*

rendered into maps?' or 'How can we explore the relationship between physical structure and "perceptual experience"?' In doing that it interconnects knowledge and key concepts through means of architecture, human geography, anthropology, cartography and visually merges them into a research that investigates the particular way in which relations between people, place and architectural / cities' space are (re)established.

The novelty and also the challenge in this particular case lays in the sought to avoid 'the rigidities of traditional mapping' by bringing into light also the 'socio-spatial relations between the individuals' as well as those between the individuals and the city.[28] Delineating an interest towards a visual apprehending of both the 'hard-edged' side of the contemporary city and the 'soft' one is expected to bring to the forefront essential elements of the landscape that might otherwise be neglected.

Cities are complex organisms which are not to be understood in a singular way. Their distinct nature often requires the development of specific methods to describe and explain them (Hubbard 2006, 9). Knowing and understanding them means to engage in a deeper, 'symbiotic relationship' with them and with the spaces they provide (Leach 2002, 4).

'The idea that cities require particular diagnostic tools and conceptual languages can be understood only in relation to the emergence of cities themselves as distinct and recognisable phenomena'(Hubbard 2006, 11).

They have reached a phase in which we are constantly confronted with a severe and continuous alteration of their (known) identity. In this respect, I would argue that the phenomenon that is faced is related to reshaping / recreating / rebuilding their identity using a contemporary language.

This thesis is primarily concerned with creating an alternative, adaptable and interdisciplinary method for investigating the palimpsest image of cities for further regeneration purposes, while using new visual mapping techniques.

This research is portrayed as a series of possible instructions for professionals (architects, urban planners) that conduct to a provocative understanding of urban realities.

Relying on contemporary mapping theoretic approaches, technologies and projects, the research reveals and further investigates the *invisible* elements that shape our cities. The study aims to provide a deeper insight into cities' life as a sequence of condensed histories than the conventional maps have the potential of revealing. Simultaneously, the multidimensionality of maps is also explored. Cities are visualized and stitched together from several maps of spatial images. Mechanisms through which a more comprehensive understanding of the relations between people, architecture and engaging with place / urban space can be achieved are investigated in this research. Furthermore, the mode through which historical and theoretical knowledge can enrich the morphological study' is therefore explored.

Based upon new visual representation techniques, this research provides alternative readings of cities as conceptual evidences. It explores mapping as a 'creative and inventive process' which expose 'the potential of maps to unfold' spatial and temporal distant realities of cities (Amoroso 2010, xviii). Spatial and temporal fractures and incongruence in cities' layers are expected to be overcome. Along with these, heterogeneous images / portraits of the "unseen" cities are contoured and explored. Experimental mapping tests are used to create a visual connection between the *seen* and the *unseen* side of cities as well as prediction tools through which their future can be shaped (Amoroso 2010,14).

The reliability of this praxis as design tools in defining the core of cities and to fill the gap in existing urban regeneration approaches is further investigating and explored, as a secondary object of the thesis. It is expected that stronger communicative tools that influence design and planning process and decisions are provided.

This research develops an interest in understanding the way in which the contemporary representational techniques can be used for investigating the ways individuals' engage with their cities and to give them back in a visual mode. Interest has been shown to employ 'the palimpsest' as research methodology (Tschumi 1996, 191). This approach relies on the deconstruction of 'what exists by critically analyzing the historical layers that preceded it, even adding other layers derived from elsewhere'(Tschumi 1996, 14). The tools involved in this experiencing of cities belong to an interdisciplinary combination between theories and techniques from architecture / planning / spatial design, digital representation and (urban) cognitive mapping. Cities are examined using plan-analysis and modern representation techniques, interviews, repeated field observations and sketches, maps and other forms of spatial manipulation provided by non-professionals.

The *unseen* urban forces that shape the experienced city are depicted from inhabitants' discourses regarding aspects of their spatial routes and routines or their daily itineraries. The interviews are conducted based on contextually adapting and enriching the questions that (Lynch 1961) submitted for shaping the 'imageability' of New Jersey, Boston and Los Angeles. Additionally, groups of inhabitants' are required to provide alternative maps and sketches of certain areas. The interest of this investigation lays into discovering the main visual icons around which the city is tailored at a perceptive level. Not of less importance is to verify whether the clarity of image its correspondence to the outside reality or its locational characteristic are respected and accurately represented.

Acknowledging the city as an overlapping of 'material fabric' that frames the lived of residents and an 'individualized interpretation' of the perceived city constitutes the primary focus of the discourse sequence / fragment (Dear and Flusty (eds.) 2002, 216). This particularized juxtaposition characterizes the distinctiveness in city's images.

'The city may well be different things to different people, but the forms of the city clearly favour some people's urban visions at the expense of others. While place-making is about how we represent and use space, it is also about how varied perspectives on "what space should be" contend with one another (Dear and Flusty (eds.), 371).'

Conclusion

Essentially, the idea behind my research is to promote the engagement of concepts and approaches from social sciences and humanities into architectural research not only at a theoretical level. Today architecture theory and practice undergoes several creative transformations and requires a contemporary approach for the ongoing interdisciplinary challenges.

The ultimate purpose of this paper is to open up a wide range of possibilities and to introduce a variety of statements that lead to overcoming the current rigidity of architectural and educational approach and which ensures a controversial and multi-layered dialogue.

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