Non Places and the Generic City

Essay Urban Sociology

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Abstract:

The essay Non Places and the Generic City is a product of different theories on the undefined urban space and its repetition in a larger scale. Within the influence of increasing human mobility the perception of the cities changed rapidly. The cityscape became an agglomeration of undefined urban fragments. These fragments can be seen as new symbols to find definitions for a new city image.

In the last 25 year the term "Generic" has come up on various discussions on the contemporary urban space. Instead of clear historical, cultural and geographical elements such as monuments and regional symbols the image of the cities became more and more convertible. These generic elements are essentially exchangeable and can be located anywhere. The large extension of cities is possible with the repetition of many elements for urban life. The journalist Grady Clay made in his book *Real Places: An Unconventional Guide to Americas Generic Landscape* an ambitious attempt on "generic" elements in which 120 generic places like Dump, Flea Market, The Good Address, Lighting District, Parade Route, Suicide Spot, Temporary Housing Development, Vacant Lot and Wreck Site were registered.[1] The significance of these places he described as followed:

> "To understand our human made neighborhoods and the world beyond, we must deal with classes of places, sorts of places which do not exist "out there" but are products of the human mind. We talk about these generic, human made places, rising and falling in our esteem, as our places in common. As generic places, they have to latitude no matter how much we take in describing them. They have no longitude, but without them we cannot navigate in today`s world."[2]

Clay emphasizes how crucial the description of generic elements is for understanding the environment. These present day cityscapes of exchangeable components are in strong opposition to the significance of "place" in architectural theories of the 1970. In Kevin Lynch`s mostly empirically oriented research and Christian Norberg Schulz`s ideas

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[1] Steven Jakobs (2002): Post Ex Sub Dis
[2] Grady Clay: Real Places

influenced by the phenomenology of Heidegger and its importance of the genius loci[3] the place is explained as a unique archetypical architectural act. For them the environment of cities is strongly meaningful and unique by its quality of different places. Clay`s theory is made by the generic undefined space of places out of its exchangeable components.

Two other theorists Marc Auge and Rem Koolhaas seem to agree that the contemporary urban landscape has become more and more generic. According to the French anthropologist Auge an extended number of "non-places" are created in the new urban landscape: anonymous and interchangeable places in which people are nothing but passersby and to which they do not connect emotionally.[4] He states that the world of supermodernity does not exactly match the one in which we believe we live, we live in a world that we have not yet learned to look at.[5] He argues that we need to relearn to think and understand contemporary space. Auge identifies non-places as a self contained space as a sort of a theme park spectacle of supermodernity , that do not exist in pure form and in which lived places still sometimes constitutes themselves, when individuals come together engendering the social and organizing place. But actually the construction of spaces of supermodernity only deal with commodified individuals as customers, passengers, users or listeners that get identified on entering or leaving. For Auge mobility and being on the road has become the key element to create non places. In contrast Christian Norbert Schulz is defining that the urban space is not successful if the increasing importance of transportation infrastructure does not create meaningful environments.[6]

The Dutch Architect Rem Koolhaas also linked the generic phenomenon of the contemporary city to the increased mobility. In his controversial and influential essay from 1994 "The Generic City" he opens many questions on the global prototypical city of the end 20th century. He is questioning if the contemporary city has not begun to look like a contemporary airport. "In the completeness of their facilities, airports are like quarters of the Generic City, sometimes even its very reason for existence, with the added attraction of being hermetic systems from which there is no escape, except to another airport."[7]

Koolhaas definition on the Generic City is more radical then Grady Clay did in his publication in the same year. Clay`s work was mainly focused on small American towns and its identity

[3] Kevin Lynch: The Image of the City, Christian Norberg Schulz: The Phenomenon of Place
[4] Marc Auge: Non Places
[5] Marc Auge: Non Places
[6] Steven Jakobs: Post ex sub dis,
[7] Rem Koolhaas: „The Generic City" in SMLXL

of the undefined space. Koolhaas looked more on the global scale and the different functions of the contemporary metropolis with its extremely expanding airports, hotels, shopping centers, theme parks, air conditioned offices and glass covered skyscrapers. He describes that the "urban identity is like a mousetrap in which more and more mice have to share the original bait, and which, on closer inspection, may have been empty for centuries".[8]

For him the Generic City is no longer held together by the public domain, it's the carpet of private investors. For Koolhaas the Generic City has straitjacket its historical identity and the most important elements became the infrastructure of bridges, tunnels and motorways. The distances between center and periphery increased more and more and the city inhabitants became bridge and tunnel people. For Lynch and Norberg Schulz the identity of the city is the most important fact for its quality. Koolhaas sees this fact different, for him city with a strong identity became too static, fixed and unflexible. ("Paris can only become more Parisian, it is already on its way to become hyper Paris, a polished caricature. There are exceptions: London its only identity a lack of clear identity, its perpetually becoming even less London, more open, less static.")[9]

According to Koolhaas the Generic City is developed without any kind of urban planning. In his essay from 1994 "Whatever Happened to Urbanism" he proclaimed the end of urban planning.[10] Urbanity has become a universal condition and urban planning will disappear as a discipline.

> "The professionals of the city are like chess players who lose to computers." "The evolution of cities has scaled up so substantially as to render traditional urban planning impotent": If there is a "new urbanism" it will not be based on the twin fantasies of order and omnipotence, it will be staging of uncertainty, it will be no longer concerned with the arrangement of more or less permanent objects but with the irrigation of territories with potential, it will no longer aim for stable configurations but for the creation of enabling fields that accommodate processes that refuse to be crystallized into definitive form, it will no longer be about meticulous definition, the imposition of limits, but about expanding notions, denying boundaries, not about separating and identifying entities, but about discovering unnameable hybrids, it will no longer be obsessed with the city but with the manipulation of infrastructure for endless intensification and diversification, shortcuts and redistribution, the reinventing of psychological space.[11]

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[8] Rem Koolhaas (1998): „The Generic City" in SMLXL
[9] Rem Koolhaas (1998): „The Generic City" in SMLXL
[10] Rem Koolhaas (1998): „Whatever Happened to Urbansim" in SMLXL
[11] Rem Koolhaas (1998): „The Generic City" in SMLXL

In recent days these impotence or bankruptcy of modern urban planning has forced a growing interest in investing in the urban periphery. While constructing in historical central cities was being obstructed by many regulations, the periphery became the new place for construction and architectural speculation. Out of this fact the decline of the economic hegemony of central cities is reflected buy the building boom in peripheral areas of western cities since the 1960. For Koolhaas the metropolitan potential which was opened up earlier in the 20th century in the enormous density of New York City should now be transformed into the periphery. The contemporary city is made out of the periphery and its homage to modernity which might be seen as senseless compared to the historical grown and developed cities. "At one day we will recognize that it became more interesting to look at cities like Atlanta or Houston than Paris and Amsterdam."[12] Theoreticians and artist already became more and more interested in the generic periphery of cities rather than in the dazzling city centers. Parking lots, shopping malls, gas stations, monotonous apartment blocks and office towers are the new urban typologies for researchers.

Out of the lost of government power in the contemporary city planning the new suburban cityscapes where produced. These spaces are made of different fragments and particularly hard to read. There is no scheme or concept like in the utopian modernist urban design which is holding the different fragments together by means of urban planning. In the capitalist logic of what David Harvey calls flexible accumulation, it is explained that the global city appears exceptionally to trace and define the relationship between urban fragments.[13]

The urban space of the generic city is quite hard to define and map. Kevin Lynch explained in his book *The image of the city* a physical and psychological disorientation in the contemporary cityscapes. According to Lynch, who conducted a large part of his research in the hybrid and amorphous periphery of Jersey City, such a space had lost every trace of identity: "Much of the characteristic feeling for Jersey City seemed to be that it was a place on the edge of something else," he writes in this case, the New York skyline. An inhabitant who asked himself, "How would I recognize Fairview Avenue when I come to it?"the answer:" By the street sign. It is the only way you can recognize any street in this city."[14]

In Lynch`s theory the loss of "place" is compensated with a new symbolic order or new image of the city. A new kind of symbolism is explained in the book *Learning from Las Vegas*

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[12] Rem Koolhaas (1996): Towards the Contemporary City
[13] David Harvey (1991): The Condition of Postmodernity
[14] Kevin Lynch (1995): The Image of the City

written by the architects Robert Ventury and Denise Scott Brown in 1977. They are describing the commercial Las Vegas strip and its symbolic architecture around and the role that signs play in conveying meaning and providing order to the landscape. For them it was more interesting to look on the symbolic strip and its influence for Las Vegas then on the urban sprawl. The image of the commercial strip is chaos. The order in this landscape is not obvious.[15] The scales of movement and space on the highway are defining the distances between buildings: they must be far apart to be seen from the car at high speed.

Big space between buildings is a characteristic of the Strip and parking is the filler for that "lost space".

> The sign for the Motel Monticello, a silhouette of an enormous Chipendale highboy, is visible on the highway before the motel itself. This architecture of styles and signs is antispatial, it is an architecture of communication over space, communication dominates space as an element in the architecture and in the landscape. This new landscape of big spaces, high speeds, and complex programs, styles and signs make connections among many elements, far apart and seen fast. The message is basely commercial, the context is basically new.[16]

Las Vegas has been described by many as America's most postmodern city, one that is always changing and reinventing itself to new markets and cultural shifts. Its built up by many fragments and got its own identity. Mobility combined with extraordinary symbols are creating a unique image of the city. Las Vegas is a spectacular city crown with the mainstream and the American dream.

The Las Vegas case shows us that also generic cities can get an identity if there is a huge amount of unique symbols. Las Vegas differs from what one can find in many other cities in that it presents not a single, solitary identity but, in fact, a fragmented identity. Las Vegas is a compressed and excessively stereotypical and romanticized version of many of the famous places of the world and representations throughout time. Form is designed with function in mind. We can see that the postmodern image of Las Vegas is dependent on the architecture that has been created to promote its most important gaming industry.[17]

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[15] Robert Venturi ,Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour (1977): Learning from Las Vegas
[16] Robert Venturi ,Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour (1977): Learning from Las Vegas
[17] Ronald Smith, Valerie Bugni (2002): Architectural Sociology and Postmodern architectural Form

Cities like Las Vegas can only resist with a huge amount of commercial investment. A huge amount of capital can create a utopian image of the city. World Disney was always imitating our reality but now we began to imitate Disneyland.

The contemporary global city is a carpet of different cultures, traditions and social differences. Within the globalized world homogenized urban space is more and more existing in fragments. There will never been the same amount of various fragments in each city. Out of that fact non places can become defined places and the generic city can become a defined model for the future where different fragments together can define a new specific identity of a mobile and multinational society.

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