

Sustainability and the Megalopolis Seminar Series



Sustainability, Society and Culture in the Megalopolis

20th May 2009

bridging the gaps

Supported by: Sustainable Urban Spaces

Speakers

Prof. Matthew Gandy (UCL Department of Geography)
'Liquid City'

Dr. Paolo Favero (UCL Department of Anthropology)
'Delhi, Anil and the phantasms'

Dr. Claire Thomson (UCL Department of Scandinavian Studies)
'"The sun will shine on the homes of the future": Urban Planning and Ethnicity in New Danish Cinema'

Summary

In the fifth of the sustainability and the megalopolis seminar series, speakers drawn from the UCL departments of Geography, Anthropology, and Scandinavian Studies discussed the ways in which analysis of the megalopolis could open up new, precise, and more poetic ways of understanding sustainability, society and culture in complex urban regions.

Matthew Gandy started by addressing the different possibilities for researching the relation between water and the city in his presentation '**Liquid City**'. Gandy discussed a variety of practical issues relating to water and urban infrastructure, while also raising the possibilities for conceptual ideas relating to the metaphors of liquid and fluidity that could be used in attempts to theorise modernity. Touching on the complex cultural history of the relation between the human body and water, Gandy looked at its early representation, explaining that examples from the visual arts could be useful clues in understanding the changing relationships between the body and technology.

Gandy then looked back at the complex development of rapidly growing industrial cities and their infrastructures in the nineteenth century. Although one of the driving forces behind the literature and debate surrounding the provision and modernisation of urban infrastructure was the terrible living conditions experienced by metropolitan inhabitants, Gandy argued that public health advocates have tended to exaggerate their role. The risk of fire, in the absence of adequate water provision, was, for instance, a factor driven by insurance companies, while the need for clean water for breweries, tanneries, and other industries meant competing business concerns were also significant in the transformation of water infrastructure.

Setting up these complex infrastructure projects in the nineteenth century was not only an engineering achievement, but a legal and institutional one. The complex politics of the

construction, maintenance, and management of these infrastructure projects had wider implications for the evolution of modern society. Some theorists of the modern state therefore posit that infrastructure systems and networks are closely related with social and political systems of administration and government. In situations where infrastructure systems fail, we quickly see the range of interdependencies that enable modern societies to function effectively. Modern urban governments are therefore inextricably linked with attempts to modernise infrastructure and sweep away incompetent and fragmentary government structures.

One should, however, be very cautious in supposing a teleology of urban form based on examples from Europe and North America. Lagos, one of the focuses of Gandy's research, is a typical example of one of the fast growing cities of the global south and has very different forms of social and political mobilisation than those historically observed in the evolution of the public sphere. Lagos has only a limited formal regulated water infrastructure, with only around 30% of households connected to a dysfunctional and unreliable municipal system. Other systems therefore emerge. Private water vendors dominate slums and illegal connections to municipal pipes provide water. Bombay, another focus of Gandy's research, is dependent on a very elaborate infrastructure system of dams and aqueducts and thus has a visual scenography in which giant municipal water pipes pass straight through the poor parts of the city. Water infrastructure thus forms part of the visible urban landscape.

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Gandy then discussed ideas surrounding the technological sublime and the cultural interactions with utilitarian forms, and described his fascination with industrial and post-industrial landscapes and the concepts we use to make sense of them. Concluding, he questioned what the complex planning implications for former aspects of urban infrastructure (Battersea power station being an example) were as they pass into a new historical phase.

Moving on to an anthropological perspective, **Paolo Favero** suggested ways to look into public visual culture as both a mirror and producer of identity in the metropolis in his presentation '**Delhi, Anil and the phantasms**'. Favero started by reading his own short ethnographic vignette gathered from a rickshaw trip in 2000. Playing with landscape and biography, this vignette described the life trajectory of one of his key informants, Anil, within and through a particular route made in the city. Favero's research focused on a generation of young men exploiting newly opened businesses in Delhi after India's entry into the global market, officially sanctioned in 1991. His text was part and parcel of material photographed and filmed during his field work. Favero used photography and film, not to document the lives of his interlocutors, but to get a sense of the context in which their lives were played out. His vignette thus served to try and see the interlacing individual biographies and signs that populated the urban landscape.

Despite Bombay being the most prominent metropolitan signifier of modernity in India, Favero's research focuses on Delhi due to his interest in cultural hybridity. Between 1991 and 1999 the population grew by 50% and in the late nineties Delhi was baptized the new epicenter of India's modernization. The interlocutors were all people convinced of the potentialities of the city to offer them something that was not imaginable in their own pasts. Delhi, one of his interlocutors told him, was a city of aspirants.

Following the suggestions of his interlocutors, Favero spent time in public spaces, especially markets, gossiping and chatting about street life and street visions. He discusses this in his work through the notion of phantasms—the moment of crystallization of abstract notions of India and the West that are evoked by people when discussing street life and their own identity. Favero thus tried to make sense of the ways in which these young men constructed their identities by analyzing the interrelation of their accounts with the visual contexts surrounding them.

This category of middle class men had been traditionally depicted as ‘westernised’ Indians; however, rather than aping the West, to be a modern cosmopolitan Indian was to be a traditional middle-class Indian. These lower middle class young men were constructing a dream of India in their homes, with traditional décor and furnishings, while advertising and fast food restaurants were increasingly dominated by an Indian visual language. These factors in addition to the quick domination of Indian music videos on MTV and new villas that balanced a need for ‘Western’ comforts with architectural styles influenced by Northern and Southern rural homes were but signs of a process of ‘Indianisation’ and the growing sense of pride in India as a dominating superpower in the global sphere. Material collected from Favero’s interlocutors continually reproduced the idea that in the hybrid context of Delhi to be a strong successful young man was to be proudly and evidently Indian: an English speaker through necessity, and a Hindi speaker through choice. Their biographies coupled with the spread of signs (adverts, fashion, décor, architecture) all marked the importance of an overarching domination of Indianness in this hybrid metropolitan context.

Claire Thomson went on to describe the ways in which the representation of urban landscapes in cinema could be used in the discussion surrounding social sustainability in her presentation **“The sun will shine on the homes of the future”: Urban Planning and Ethnicity in New Danish Cinema**. Referring to the work of the cultural theorist Brian Massumi, Thomson pointed to the ways in which the humanities could import scientific concepts in order to renegotiate their own specificities and differences from the sciences. Film theory’s growing preoccupation with the architectural was therefore indicative of a new strand of thought that sought not just to discuss the visual in relation to screen studies, but grapple with the ways in which cinema activates our affective, proprioceptive and physical interactions with our environment and the spaces where intercultural encounters take place.

Laura Marks, Vivian Sobchak and Giuliana Bruno have all theorized cinema’s ability to move beyond the visual and evoke memories of the individual and the cultural through an appeal to embodied knowledge—touch, taste, smell—thus expressing experiences and memories that are not completely encoded in the narratives and images of western culture. Marks stresses the propensity in intercultural cinema to emphasise embodiment and tactility in order to map the impact of the intercultural encounter. Danish cinema has, in the last ten years, tended to use the built environment as a medium through which socio-cultural concerns are worked through, and Annette Oleson’s 2006 film *1:1* is a prime example of how a film can work with architecture to evoke and question the dynamic and emotional experience of living in, moving through, and interacting with, a given material environment.

Set in one of Copenhagen’s holistic new towns that sprang up in the 1960’s, the film opens by mixing views of the aerial plans of the estate, documentary footage from its early days in the seventies, digital footage from the present day, and a voiceover by the estate’s architect. The estate forms part of the unofficial plan of Copenhagen that was in the shape of a hand. The plan’s aim was to prevent untrammelled urban development and protect the natural landscapes and recreational areas that the welfare state presupposed as essential to the well-being of urban inhabitants. The film’s opening sequence invites us to reflect on the tension between representation, sketches, film and real life lived on a scale of 1:1. This film tries to give and contrast panoramic and ‘lived’ perspectives and concentrate on the idea that living the city is a misunderstanding of the planning of it.

Concluding, Thomson looked closely at the short film *Out*. The action of the film takes place in the shadow of the Øresund Bridge that links Copenhagen and Malmö and thus creates the only megalopolitan region in Scandinavia. The bridge ends in the artificial island of Peberholm, an unpopulated nature reserve, built to protect the ecology of the natural island Saltholm that would

otherwise have been affected by the bridge. The film details an intercultural encounter between a suspected terrorist and the island's ranger in these environs and thus triggers debates about sustainable imagined communities in the context of those surrounding protected ecological environments. *Out* therefore gives expression to a very physical everyday reality that speaks to the overall sustainability of the region.

In the discussion that followed four main themes emerged.

1. Terminologies

The term sustainability is more difficult to define in a social and cultural context than an environmental one. Reflecting on the sequences and vignettes of Favero and Thomson's presentations Matthew Gandy stated that he was conscious of the need to reflect on appropriate languages and ways of trying to communicate these themes. When crossing disciplinary boundaries how well do terms like sustainability travel? Gandy argued that they often became opaque and diffuse, and were thus problematic when moved out of their original contexts, often from a natural science background. Jargon heavy vocabulary thus needed to be discarded in favour of a more poetic and embodied expression of aspects of everyday life.

Paolo Favero pointed to the ways in which the visual as a language could open up a space for experimenting and communicating, and expressed the need to squeeze these terminologies. In reference to Brian Massumi, Claire Thomson similarly thought that when the humanities engage with other disciplines they have the right to rework terminologies and appropriate them. The term sustainability could thus be used as a tool to consider how tightly enmeshed the idea of an imagined sustainable community is with the idea of a sustainable ecological system.

2. Phase transitions

The group discussed ways in which rapid changes, or phase transitions, in climate, cities, and social behaviour were related to ideological discourses and conservative or progressive change. Historically the notion of crisis engenders a rapid social and political response. In an urban context, structural elements can be gradually taking shape and then very suddenly recombine in a new form creating the perception of a very sudden change to the city.

Thomson noted how inaccurate ideas about the rapid change in the ethnic composition of Scandinavia, caused by poor immigration policy that saw extreme demographic changes very small pockets of the urban environment, had led to a conservative discourse and panic about the rapidity of change. Rapid change, in this context could thus lead to conservative discourse. In the context of climate change, it was, however, suggested that phase transitions need not inevitably lead to conservatism. There was a choice. The response to climate change might well take shape in an alternative form of politics.

3. Social sustainability , memory and nostalgia

Social sustainability is a term that should suggest ways in which to sustain and create better communities and improve their quality of life. The term does, however, imply inertia and is redolent of memory and nostalgia, looking back instead forward. Collective memory, its symbols and rhetoric, are often manipulated for the purposes of nationalism; however, memory can also be used as a resource to better understand contemporary challenges.

The critical and analytical tools of the humanities and social sciences thus have an important role to play in analyzing past and present urban conditions and cultures to inform the ways in which people might move towards creating more sustainable and socially equitable cities

4. The role of analysis and critique

Urban inhabitants are engaged in a dialectical relationship with the city. To what extent can the analysis and critique of individuals' relationships with their urban environments be used to drive agendas? The convoluted design, planning, and political processes that determine the forms our cities take often fail to abide by the lessons to be drawn from similar projects in the past. The recurring temptation to look for design solutions sometimes occludes engaging with the social and economic determinates of equality and inequality in the urban arena. The humanities and social sciences have an important role to play in reflecting urban practices back upon themselves. If architects, planners, politicians, builders, and developers could better use these lessons and reflections on their disciplines they may have a much more interesting and informed point of departure.

Each of the presentations emphasised the importance of the embodied practices in the city. The role of the lived being within the city is hard for designers to research and engage with. Even processes of public consultation fail to fully engage with the urban inhabitant's lived experience of the city. Culture is thus a way of representing how people use cities but also has the ability to shape the ways in which people use it.

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We would appreciate your comments, please email karolina.kendall-bush@ucl.ac.uk with any comments or corrections you may have.