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MULTIPLE PERCEPTIONS AS FRAMING DEVICE FOR IDENTIFYING RELATIONAL PLACES

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ABSTRACT

The relational web of a place, made of interactions between people, spaces, stories and times, produces certain cultural and social developments, business ventures and friendships, while disallowing others. Hence, an understanding of the various relationships configuring a specific urban network is required before the architect intervenes rearranging the relations between buildings, places, people and their meaning.

Architectural objects are *visible*, but relationships are not. Relationships lie on different layers: ‘inner’ worlds, linked to emotions and feelings and ‘outer’ worlds, linked to the physical and tactile. Thus, revealing only mathematical and formalistic dimensions of an urban situation would be insufficient for the design of a collaborative environment.

In this paper we propose a multi-dimensional approach for analysing of the urban situations that should provide a better ground for architectural designs to respond to the specific contextual features of an urban space and support an overall positive urban development, where visionary and pragmatic projects are aligned and not competing with each other.

An existing urban reality - Lugano - is analysed by the ways people use specific spaces and what they mean to them. These multiple views, ‘living stories’ (Boje, 2011), will be combined with the architect’s perception and traditional spatial reading of space (maps, drawing, sketch ...). The paper shows ways in which the integrations of narrative interviews can enhance the groundwork for design and urban representation, influencing the resulting architectural urban project that in turn has an impact on the relational web of a specific place.

INTRODUCTION

To change a city is to propose a subtle yet determined combinations of projects, to articulate a re-interpretation of the world that is partial and fragmentary, but as context specific as possible. The architect’s role in the game is that of a mediator, interpreter and catalyst for the experience of the others.

That is to say she needs an insightful knowledge of the reality in which she intervenes, before she rearranges its relationships by adding new projects. It requires a sifting through various messages, shedding light on what is already known while tracing unexpected awareness.

In his book *The production of space* (1974), Lefebvre described the city not by an accumulation of people and things in space, but by their interrelationships. Hence,

space is not only an abstract container in which life occurs. It is produced and re-produced by interrelationships of constructed environment, geographic form, symbolic meanings and everyday manifestation of culture. This relational dynamic provides every urban reality with its own spatial praxis, with its specific time and times, with its centres and the coexistence of many centres, thus making the temporality of places a central aspect to urban life.

Most notable about Lefebvre’s thesis is that our environment is defined not only by physical objects but also by a variety of territorial, political, psychological and social processes, that neither are all on the same surface, nor are they all visible. This difficulty suggests to classify space according to function rather than form or, in other words, according to its felt presence rather than its visibility. As a consequence, we have to be able to see also ‘invisible’ connections between things to build a city from within and not only from outside – as globality does, permanently moving from the past to the present and vice versa (Lefebvre, 1974. 334).

This relationality between the components of any urban reality requires an understanding that goes beyond the mere spatial composition, aiming instead to consider the proper relational web of the city.

But what relevance does the understanding of a ‘relational web’ have for its spatial analysis? Architects need to acknowledge the actual presence of every relational web considering that some elements are visible and other invisible to naked eye. Although some components may be invisible, they contribute in the same way to our orientation as visible landmarks, streets and places (Buchanan 2012. 2). Memories and affections make places stay active and coloured.

The description of urban space is generally linked to the means of production in the mathematical and physical space: codified drawings and survey maps, leaving out of the picture all multiple relations a certain location or building already has or potentially could have. The question is, “*How does it look?*”. This addresses external conditions, but ignores rich internal worlds of experience. But everybody knows, that sometimes we walk along streets for the most irrational reasons. Let it be for a particular bakery, a past encounter or just because of the way it makes us feel. By contrast, we are looking at the interiority of the space production process, including invisible dimensions of the lived space, through questions like “*What are the local centers and what are their times?*”, “*What is the relational web of a city?*”

In this paper we present a method in which narrative interviews with citizens are used to describe urban space

offering a different representation of an existing urban reality.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

We start from the assumption that cities are living environments, where time and space are inseparably entangled, and together create a spatial texture ('relational space'), that is coined by active knowledge and ideologies. That very '*relational space*' is described by its *physical attributes* (container), *use* (activity), *ambience* (feel) and *historical significance*; and by how these connect to the surrounding environment (White, 1999. 57-96; Frey, 1946).

These considerations are part of a project among researchers stemming from architecture, economics and organizational communication¹⁾. It aims first to create a deeper understanding on three aspects of urban relationality, namely the *spatio-temporal* relationality, the one between *multiple users* of urban space, and the one of the *people ideating, financing and constructing* urban space; and second to propose 'relational projects' that will be able to account for the specific contextual features of an urban space, and support an overall positive urban development, where visionary and pragmatic projects are aligned with and not opposing each other.

Referring to Lefebvre, spatial praxis has different times which are all inscribed in space and thus still present, albeit some of these sensations and non-facts can neither be experienced nor seen today (Tiessen, 2007). However, by its actual presence through the linkage to the present day, the 'invisible' past, with all its active relations and interconnectedness, exists and is perceptible.

More precisely, a city's past offers inspirations and linkage for contemporary tasks. Hence, the materiality of past events, inscribed in buildings, determines anchor points for future development, and needs to be considered. Using this awareness as a framework for new projects calls for thinking about new objects as being part of an existing reality, that is also made of various emotions, materiality and stories of places.

THE INQUIRY METHOD AND DATA COLLECTION

In the act of assessing '*relational space*', the lived experience plays an important role. It creates memory that in turn assigns the space its meaning, making it an identifiable place. We start by interviewing citizens about their daily life and

their stories linked to a specific urban reality (Boje, 2011). We use the *narrative interview technique* to create site-specific knowledge.

Stories, including ephemeral memories, are seen as evidence for a specific social and cultural context and a testimony for an emotional involvement, a proper 'lived experience'. Pearce (2008. 21) argues it is stories that define places, that give us the consciousness of their existence, and produce space. Every place is thus part of a network of stories that always can be spun further and makes it part of a collectiveness. Their plot helps to understand the experiences (Jensen, 2007. 215). In turn, stories' anchor points are material objects (Schatzi, 2003. 89). They are organized around specific places, that can be located.

Our observation site is the city of Lugano, actively involved in an important urban transformation process, which offers a good opportunity to study the relations among people and between them and the existing and future built environment.

In the cultural domain, the focus in this study, Lugano is currently realizing a 169 million Swiss Franc art center - Lugano Arte e Cultura (LAC) due to open in 2014. LAC reflects in many ways the idea that an iconic art center may enhance a city's image attracting private investments and tourists (Rodríguez et al., 2001).

Given the amount of public funds involved in this project, and the relevance of relationality for its capability to transform the urban reality and contribute to a sustainable city life, we focus, next to the LAC project, on two other cultural existing objects of the city, which are conceptually related to it: Lugano's Congress Center, and the Off-space cultural center 'Nuovostudiofoce'. Their similarities and differences allow us to compare and contrast them to one another, to identify meaningful patterns and engage in theory-building (Yin, 2003).

1. From a *spatial* perspective, all three projects are situated along the lake and adjacent to the historical city center. Whilst there are multiple connections between the projects (in terms of the nature and content of the offerings), it is not clear to which extent they are thought of and planned together.
2. From a *temporal* perspective, the projects are similar but also differ in terms of the time of their construction (70s vs. 2000s), the duration of their realization (2 vs. 10 years), and the temporal procedure of its realization.
3. From a *stakeholder* perspective, all three projects have been commissioned by the city of Lugano. Yet they differ

¹⁾ Swiss National Science Foundation "The role of relationality in urban transformation processes" www.urbanrelation.org

in terms of the involvement of private investors and of the active participation of lower level groups within the municipality as well as of political parties and the general public. The involvement of these stakeholder groups differs, ranging from rigid hierarchical and top-down processes to more collaborative partnerships.

4. From a *users'* perspective, the projects differ in terms of the users' local provenance or their socio-economic standing. There is also a certain degree of user permeability between the projects and it is believed, for example, that parts of the users of today's Congress Center will migrate to LAC and the Congress Center will lose attractiveness for hosting large-scale and up-market concerts.

To attest the three projects' relationality we cartographically set up three so-called observation areas. They are defined by the reasonable walking distance of 500 meter in each direction starting from the respective project. Then we trace the *places* – made of memories and stories – in those areas. As informants, we met with citizens in their environment and interviewed them about their daily urban experiences and their perception of the three projects. The 29 interviewed people live or work in the immediate surroundings of the three key projects. They were selected carefully (Sorenson et al., 1975: 14), keeping the variance among them as high as possible in terms of age, sex, place of birth and socio-economic profile.

There were not a rigidly fixed questionnaire as we wanted the persons to say as much as possible, letting ideas and thoughts surrounding places deliberately come into light. Then we asked them for a 10-30 minutes common explorative walk, to show us an area of their choice. That 'being in the physical space' (Rasmussen, 1957; Polanyi, 1966; Corner, 1999: 249) is an essential part as the immediate physical and social presence of the city evokes special memories and relations.

The narrative interviews and explorative walks took place over a time span of 4 months. We met with the citizens in a place of their choice, at a time of their convenience. We began with general questions about their daily life and walks moving on to the 3 projects, ending with problems and desires for the future. This allowed us to find the 'personal' city and not the 'representative' city linked to the official image of it. We collected their stories and asked: *What do people see and observe? What do they cherish? Where do they pass day-after-day? What places serve the people's well-being? What are their affective places?* The themes we threw into the narration were: activities, problems and strengths

around the key projects as well as in general; felt changes and dreams. At the end, after the walk, we raised one last question: *From all the cited and found places, which place would be the one they feel particularly attached to?* In total, interview and walk together lasted approximately 1 to 1 ½ hour each time. They were recorded in their full length and, subsequently, transcribed word-for-word.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS RESULTS

Many beautiful and unexpected stories unfolded, but what are the relationships among them? How do we understand them? How can we map them and make them visible?

We must say that people were very open to meet with us. During the conversation, they became eager to describe their proper point of view, thus also becoming more precise the more we asked about the surrounding. Because of our background in architecture people's observations remained framed and focused on specific urban and architectural settings. It is a first linkage among the stories, and an essential reason for the interviews to be carried out by architects and not by other researchers.

During the first stage of the inquiry session the participant's memories played a major role, whilst later the immediate physical impact was of greater importance. The walk triggered more precise statements than in the calm and protected environment of bars, where the interviews were held. However, the descriptions in the first part were more discursive, more sequential or even more story-lined. While moving through the space in its proper sequence, people become aware of prior unnoticed spaces, thus activating spaces (creating places). The material presence made it possible to see connections over time and space. Past places became enacted, whilst remaining anchored in today's reality. Places became an inspiration source for future projects.

At a first view, we provoked an uncommon collection of situations that hardly seem to relate to each other. Actors and plots are different, feelings are different and paths are different. But they have something in common - their spatial information. Therefore the first step was to draw all explorative walks into the city map and to highlight all memories, public discourses and affections, linked to locations in the transcripts. Places did not merely emerge by a logical or deductive process, but sometimes there was an intuition that led to either ignore or choose them.

All places that were named and described, were LISTED. The list was subdivided into spaces "walked by" and "talked about", keeping the sequence and repetitions of places intact. Out of this we created a separate LIST of places in

which we grouped diverse story fragments and expressions. We had to break people's narration into single pieces in order to assign diverse story-elements to one and the same place. This allowed us to obtain a first feeling for a place's importance in the urban reality.

In certain narrations, there were also story elements, that position the place in the existing 'collective mind', revealing stronger relations between past, present and future. Hence, we decided to classify our locations in three categories and mapped them (Corner, 1999):

- *Collective places* are places that have a *collective* perspective, or are carriers of memories that refer to a bigger issue than an individual episode. They evoked stories (narrations) that are part of a broader common discourse, one that could have been experienced by many. There are memories which belong also to others. The stories are linked to their origin (place) and their value (content, form) and cannot be isolated from them. Thus the place (artifact) can stem from different epochs, might even have been erased, but is still there as a virtual trace.
- *Places of orientation or of reference* are places that are only mentioned in the narrations or are used to define the location of another place or the presence of a theme, like an architectural style.
- *Individual places* are places that refer to an individual episode or expression.

The interviews rendered momentarily visible, what otherwise exists only in the form of memories or desire lines. Different temporalities became visible on one layer. We obtained an indication of what people value in their environment and which places are 'present' or 'active'. What we notice is also that these collective places have different cultural and emotional importance for citizens. Some places are felt more, meaning also that they have a stronger anchorage in time and place than others. Consequently there are places with their origin in different periods or styles that have a similar importance to citizens today.

From the classification it follows that 'collective places' are not necessarily only public entities like squares, gardens or cultural venues but also smaller private venues like bars, bakeries and factories. It is the human contact that ingrained them into the collective mind.

The interviews and how people speak about different places helped us to divide the collective places into 5 groups that allow for a general overview of the diversity in the observation areas. To illustrate a first idea of the places

anchorage in time and place we have given the groups different labels; '*dead*', '*floating*', '*lasting*', '*malleable*' and '*moving*' (Appendix 1).

Thanks to this subdivision we can also extract some conclusions for how to treat the different places. When people speak about the '**dead**' places they rather use a past tense, without being nostalgic and without referring a physical trace to the present day. These places are gone, but the idea of them is still there and makes people smile. The notion clearly indicates the chance of doing something about it. It can be used as an inspiration source for a new program, a new form in another place.

Speaking about the '**floating**' places they also use the past tense, but they are nostalgic and still rather upset about the alteration of the place. The place mentioned doesn't exist anymore in its shape, hence it cannot be brought back to life. Here also the anchorage in space is strong. The opinion expressed may be used as an indication for new programs and forms in other sites. The indication is more definite in comparison to dead places.

The "**lasting**" places are rather stable places in the urban system. People speak about them in a present tense and use them daily, meaning they have a strong anchorage to the contemporary reality. These are places that persist, no matter their shape or style. They are ingrained in the public mind and hence shouldn't be changed. There is no need to.

When it comes to the "**malleable**" places the stories are also in the present tense but we find traces of nostalgia, or better, a need for the place to alter a bit to still keep its presence in the collective mind without being neglected. People care about places. They are present in just the way they are. However, small changes are possible, people wouldn't mind improvements although only to a certain threshold.

The "**moving**" places are on the go. The stories about these places are projected towards the future. They are strongly anchored in time and place, but new ideas and proposals for the specific sites emerge, showing a will for future transformations. The notions may be used as inspiration for the very same place.

Also more general wishes emerged on the surface: the desire for more greenery in the city and for more direct contact with the immediate nature and with the lake. The public space that coincides with the local geography is most appreciated, even though it is felt that the city of Lugano does not make full use of it. What people look for are places of withdrawal, where objects and ornaments tell something, where the gaze is held for example by statues, windows, frames, doors, painted facades, graffiti, flowers. People

miss our floral portals, colored glass ceilings, patterned pavements... they miss the inventiveness of past movements with their fanciful life projects.

We conclude that the temporal aspect is not necessarily linked to the time of conception of a place or a building, but that it can rather be related to its cultural and emotional importance for citizens today, and hence to their internal worlds. This conclusion gives us new possibilities to handle the transformation of places.

CONCLUSION

We have presented an inquiry method in which citizens talk about their relationships to their built surrounding, raising problems, strengths, changes and dreams. It allows citizens to understand and describe their urban experiences and makes it easier for architects to recognize frameworks and rules inside the context in which they are asked to intervene.

We would like to underline three main results: First, **stories materialize**, also past ones, and they become visible identity points. Memories are not flying rootless in the air, but they can take tangible forms. Hence, we can locate them through their relationship with material situations, and this allows us to make the invisible stories present.

Secondly, a deeper urban portrait of the areas surrounding the three key projects is drawn by identifying local centres ('identity points') with their actual presence ('time') in the public mind, discovering furthermore that they are not only representational buildings and places, but also minor, less conspicuous venues, like bars and restaurants and anonymous buildings. These places are culturally and emotionally more important for residents and have a stronger anchorage in time and place. But their 'times' are independent from the date of conception and stylistic form. They can be animated and hence change their status of presence through new interventions.

Thirdly, identity places with a higher spatio-temporal relationality allow for more playful handling of changes by enacting linkages between past-present-future. As *reference points* for future developments they may ensure a certain continuity of thoughts and times enabling new interventions that are immediately integrated into the urban tissue supporting an overall positive urban transformation. Although they are not stable, identity points may still indicate which way to go, by offering a loose framework for new projects as part of an existing reality. We would therefore like to emphasize that the **identity points can be seen as switchers** in an urban reality (Weichensteller). Hence it is important to know which are the identity points in a context and how they

are inscribed in space and time, because their temporality, as described before, can inform planning and design processes. It might also help to decide when to protect, adjust or transform certain places. By acknowledging this aspect, we start to **understand the long-term tendency** of an urban system, that includes both subjective information (invisible emotional relations) and existing spatial relations.

We thus transcend the impetus of a spatial order and suggest to take also temporality as an inspiration source for new architectural projects. Using this awareness as a framework for new projects calls for thinking about new objects as being part of an existing reality, that is also made of various emotions, materiality and stories of places. Hence, a city's past offers inspirations and becomes a foothold for contemporary tasks, without wanting to recreate the past.

The outcome is another reading of today's reality, where artefacts - beyond functionality, form and usability - mediate between individuals and society, between past and present and represent the territory from the citizens point of view. In the view of this, we offer another view on the urban reality, grounding projects on the stories, not only the histories, of the places involved.

Through a dialogue within a specific spatial setting, we limited objective available data by positioning inhabitants in the framework of an emerging urban project and thus, acknowledging their role as co-creators of urban space, without removing the creative process of the architect that can be built upon this different urban portrait.

Based on the experience gained so far we argue that a narrative interview technique can be used to increase the context awareness. The method better supports small areas of observation, as it helps people to stay focused and tell more stories rather than just list places. We believe that this kind of analysis through the eyes of people, linked to memories of their lives and related to intervention areas, can be of incredible value for the architect. A personal, yet *multiple perspective* on the urban reality, through an intuitive understanding, might help to suggest new patterns or structures that respond to a larger group of people. This attitude allows both a more human-centred and context-specific approach to urban planning, which is of relevance beyond the city of Lugano.

OUTLOOK

We collected a variety of spatially located information in relation to emotions, sentiments and affections, but there is still the challenge in mapping that "lived space" without losing the essence of it. Thus the portrait needs

to be enriched by additional visual evidences (drawings, archival and/or contemporary photography) and deeper site observations (user behaviour, activity pattern, spatial orientation, stakeholder involvement). We propose that all this different information should find a common ground in the form of 3 storybooks, one for each key project. Pieced together by a new narration, they might help an overall social and historical understanding of the site to unfold.

The storybook will be an open story, a lived story, where the leading plot is composed by the story elements extracted from the narrative interviews. People's voices, that are embedded in specific places (Lefebvre, 1974), will be arranged in a simple sequence (ante-narrative). Their expressions will remain leading characters in the text, because they include more context, more meanings, motivations and attitudes, than mere descriptions of specific built elements. They describe best the way people live the city today. Otherwise, fine information like: *saying every day hello to the man who is selling chestnuts in front of the pastry shop, a child's accident with a car on the main square or citizens' project proposals* would be lost.

Our ambition is to create a city portrait out of what ordinary people appreciate, of how they lead their lives, rather than out of what experts see or want to see and represent. By acknowledging spatial narratives, the architect might be able to generate projects which emerge from within, recognizing the creative potential of the relational web inherent in the place. This 'collective frame', made of local knowledge such as emotional, visual, functional and spatial relations; could help and inspire architects and planners offering codes that await a translation into form.

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APPENDIX 1

Levels of consciousness indicating culturally and emotionally important collective places for citizens with their diverse activity levels.

1 'dead' place	2 'floating' place	3 'lasting' place	4 'malleable' place	5 'moving' place
"There was a nice garden,..."	"There was a nice garden, we went always, I miss that atmosphere..., because today there is"	"There is a nice place, I go there, but in the past it was slightly better."	"There is the place, I came when I was a child, I do always come today."	"Here we have this wonderful building, I don't understand why they don't do anything about it."
It is a mere description of something that happened in the past. The place only exists in people's memory.	It is a mere description of something that happened in the past. The place only exists in people's memory.	The place exists in the same manner as in the story.	The place exists in the same manner as in story.	The place exists in the same manner as in story. Place is very present in people's mind as they feel the need to do something about it.
What they refer to is gone. There aren't necessarily physical traces anymore. We are <i>unable to be in direct relationship</i> with the artifact.	What they refer to exists in the form of an empty shell. One <i>is able to be in direct relationship</i> with the artifact.	What they refer to exists, is experienceable. One <i>is able to be in direct relationship</i> with the artifact.	What they refer to exists, is experienceable. One <i>is able to be in direct relationship</i> with the artifact.	What they refer to does not exist yet. A new 'image' emerge in the story (project proposals). One is unable to be in direct relationship with the artifact.
While speaking people are using the <i>past tense</i> . The discourse stops here. There is no direct link to the present, no desire for bringing it back to life.	While speaking people are using the <i>past tense</i> . There swings nostalgia in the peoples' voice. The desire it back to life or stay alive.	While speaking people use <i>present tense</i> . There is no nostalgia. There might have been alternations, but they are to almost everyone the same (visible legacy). They can't be more what they already are.	While speaking people use <i>present tense</i> . There swings a kind of nostalgia in the voice for a past that makes the experiences not being the same for everybody.	While speaking people use an imperative or future tense.
The story indicates a lack of meaning in the contemporaneous reality. It can be inspiration source for the setting of the program or form.	The story indicates a lack of meaning in the contemporaneous reality. It can be inspiration source for the setting of the program and form.	There is no intervention really needed. It is appreciated the way it is.	There might be some minor changes needed.	It can be inspiration source for new projects.