

BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE: COLLABORATING IN THE CITY SPACE

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As most European cities and towns, the Danish capital Copenhagen has many different layers. These spaces and their meaning is of interest to many different positions: planners, artists, historians, urban developers, museums, researchers etc. Through a web-based 3D-environment and mobile technology, the parties involved in the city can collaborate in a way that visions, history and existing rules will impregnate each other.

In cities, and especially in the cities of modernity that grew rapidly during the industrialization, the change of physical form is one of the key characteristics. Old streets become part of mundane shopping malls, buildings are torn down to give space for new, former industrial areas become sites for creative classes, and so on.

This change is happening more and more quickly, at least when the forces of the market are strong, and they have a deep connection to our cultural history. Some changes, like the implementation of infrastructural networks, can last for decades, maybe centuries, while other come and go so fast we might not even notice it as ordinary dwellers of the city. So the modern city is a complex interplay of more or less resistant layers, all the time changing in different speeds and influencing each other. In Judith Butlers words, the world is a knot in motion. But how are we to capture, let alone understand this complexity?^[i].

Furthermore, the city involves a range of groups that all have part in the culture and physical changes of the past, and all have an interest in the changes towards the future. The politicians of every period has left traces and will want to influence the city in all future; the urban planners that are trying to provide an orderly city within the political framework; developing firms and others carrying out large projects to change urban space for long periods of time; social groups defending their local or general interests; and so on. What is the pattern of this whole influencing and how does it affect our physical surroundings^[ii].

What is interesting here is that there is a large amount of sources to this history of change and influence in the urban cultural history. Piles of technical documents fill the municipal departments in the major cities; Libraries have lots of press material, posters, drawings and pamphlets on the city; local and national archives keep accounts of life in the city, of riots, markets, dance halls, marriages and funerals. And for each year, more and more of this material is digitized. In Copenhagen where I come from, the city archive will undertake a total digitization within the next years of the most popular material; the national library has already taken part in this process, since only 10 percent of their loans are still “real” books – the rest is digital. So these sources are reaching an overwhelming size, and a problem of the future will be how to make them understandable for ordinary people who has no training or interest in archival techniques.

As Istanbul and most other cities and towns, the Danish capital Copenhagen has many different layers of physical buildings and structures, but also of stories and meaning attached to the spaces and places of the city. As the streets of Istanbul and Copenhagen was probably clad with asphalt at the same time, a

thing like the tram system was implemented in Copenhagen just before the first World War and in Istanbul I think just after. Most modern cities share these experiences [iii].

One of the profound changes in Copenhagen was the establishment of a new city center around a space that would become the Town Hall Square, and where around 1900 people, traffic and prominent buildings were attracted around the new, monumental Town Hall in national romantic style. Just a little more than a hundred years ago, this place was just a place of scattered buildings on the western gate of the city wall. Almost impossible to understand for people who do not know the story [iv].

Today the square is a hub of thousands of people, cars and public buses, soon also a subway. Large events such as TV shows, music awards and rock concerts are held at the square on a regular basis.

What happened in the meantime? Years have passed, two world wars, at least one depression, technological revolutions, political demonstrations and much more. In the search for ways to understand the change, and not least try to pass that understanding on to an interested public, I think an effective tool could be digital media. One of the characteristics of these media and the ways they have developed in the last years are the easy and yet sophisticated ways of collaboration they provide—and which could be a motivation for a public to actually get involved in the cultural history of the city. Furthermore, collaboration through visual, digital media could be an alternative way of discussing the development of the city.

First of all, if the multiple sources to the urban cultural history should be able to provide any insight for the public, they should be organized dynamically and intuitively. The systems used for storing and finding them in archives are developed by and for professionals, and they become a barrier for people without training. If the information, then was organized and mapped around well-known objects, that could activate them, this would make it easier. If these objects were also the ones the sources were about, a double goal would be reached: a general accessibility for the public would be in place, and an element in a powerful collaboration tool could be developed [v].

Just a few years ago, technologies for visualizing information digitally was about getting Geographical Information Systems to work on the Internet. This has changed dramatically. Constantly updated mappings of complex data sets are streamed directly through broadband or optical fibres into the living room of ordinary people. One of the technologies that has been revolutionized, as we shall see in another of the day's papers, is 3D representations. Through the active community of massively multiplayer games like Second Life and free applications like Google SketchUp, the 3D technology is now possible to use in a variety of practices on an intuitive and qualitatively high level [vi].

Another cluster of technologies that has become part of everyday practice for many people is the localized technologies. Geocaching, GPS, mobile gameplay and Foursquare are just a few of the activities that has been blossoming the last few years. Everyone with a smartphone is by now well acquainted with either mobile maps or pervasive layers, where information has been pasted over the experience of the real world in front of your eyes. One potential for this technology in relation to cultural history could be in the combination of the real space experience and the access to information about that exact space [vii].

A third form of technology, or rather technological idea, that I would emphasize is the concept of object history. If you go to Wikipedia and look up a phenomenon, you can follow the creation of the specific

post step by step to see how it has emerged and who was responsible for the changes. In a digital representation of the built environment of a city, this concept is extremely central, conveying the steps by which this space has been created.

And imagine if this history could be organized in a 3D space, so that the different elements of an urban structure would have attached the date and, for example the planner or architect responsible. If also the bulk of evidence I mentioned earlier would be accessible in this framework, it would begin to be interesting. And finally, if at any step in the framework, you, the user could step in and leave comments, share images or discuss future problems like for example urban development projects.

If, furthermore the 3D-version of the city space could have a corresponding, mobile interface, where people in the specific space could experience the past and future city in layers that were accessible, it would, I think, have a long-lasting potential for developing smart cities where the city builders, artists and cultural historians could collaborate.

References and Notes:

1 Anique Hommels, *Unbuilding Cities*, (MIT Press, 2008) 2 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, (Oxford, 1991) 3 Wirth, Louis, "Urbanism as a Way of Life", *The American Journal of Sociology* 44 1938 4 Barbara M. Lane, *National Romanticism and Modern Architecture in Germany and the Scandinavian Countries* (Cambridge University Press, 2000) 5 On the concept of intuitive digital collaboration, see Morten Søndergaard, ed., *RE_ACTION: The Digital Archive Experience. Renegotiating the Competences of the Archive and the (Art)museum in the 21st century*, (Aalborg Universitetsforlag, 2009) 6 For the gaming story see for example Edward Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games*, (University Of Chicago Press 2006) 7 For more about working intuitively with this, see Pranav Mistry's project *Sixth Sense* <http://www.pranavmistry.com/projects/sixthsense/> or hear him at TedTV <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mzKmGTVmqIs>