Applying a dissident's stance on recent trends in urban research - quantitative methods as a symptom of growing marketing pressures on the city

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ABSTRACT: The paper investigates the rapidly increasing use of data in urban research, questioning cause and effect in order to understand how the usually publicized reasons for this trend - scientific progress and ecological threats - relate to wider economic interests as the actual underlying forces of transformation. Dealing in essence with a whole discipline within the philosophy of science - the relation between scientific progress, human behavior and the economic realm - the author does not endeavor to bring new findings to the philosophical discussion as such, but applies elements of it to the urban realm. Just like the fast development of mobile devices - as one example among many others - cannot simply be attributed to technological progress, but also to the market's fervent demand and the product's considerable profitability, the author argues that the impressive change of paradigm in urban research might as well be motivated by something else than simple pragmatic needs and a new fashion for computation. He also observes the dissolution of a formerly existing discussion between experts towards a situation in which the wider public is addressed as the consumer of a product that is defined by an oligopoly of public-private interests. The character of this marriage leads for the urban professional to a new method of not only approaching, but also perceiving and "selling" the urban realm, one example being different types of city rankings that are using figure-based information in order to attract investment through the creation of an image. This duality and tension, between the rationality of a figure-based approach and the marketing pressure that consists in provoking irrational buying decisions, crystallizes as one of the study's major outcomes.

Is what we see just the agreeable tip of a manipulative iceberg? How can the urban designer adjust to these trends, avoiding to be used as a mere tool for empty marketing campaigns?

Keywords: urban research, quantitative tools, data, marketing pressures, process

Introduction

In an unrestrained way, the author of these lines had until recently welcomed the increased use of metrics in the field of architecture and urban design. Arguably offering a more rational base for the development of new solutions to contemporary challenges - mainly sustainability related - he felt a certain relief and fascination to become more acquainted with the quantitative tools that other disciplines seemed to have successfully applied over long periods of time. An opportunity opened up through which the body of design knowledge could finally experience the gradual growth that the "non-artistic" scientific disciplines were used to. At a second glance - as influential as they might have been for insiders - the major works used in architectural education, from Rossi's *Architecture of the City* over Venturi, Scott-Brown's *Learning from Las Vegas* to Rowe and Koetter's *Collage City*, appeared as isolated one-offs if seen as research resources for all professions involved in the making of our built environment. In contrast, the unlimited comparative opportunities of GIS, cell-phone data and climatic computation could provide an interdisciplinary insight that would allow for a genuinely problem-solving approach to urban issues. In *Collage City*, partly based on the work of the British philosopher Karl Popper and his concept of piecemeal social engineering, Rowe and Koetter scrutinized the non-utopian opportunities for master planning with reference to the "bricoleur", but the result seemed somewhat to still have been understood in a mainly visual way. The fact

that the collage was not only meant as a more complex image, but also a process, did not really leave a lasting imprint on the profession. Neither did the warning, again based on Popper, that the artistic utopian approach was inherently linked to authoritarian tendencies towards the tabula rasa. Once again, the author of these lines felt that the new figure-based techniques, and the methods that they provoked, could finally lead the way out of this dilemma. Interestingly, another major trend occurred in parallel: the emergence of a new urban age, and the understanding of urbanism as a main societal driver, comparable in its impact to the concept of the nation-state that influenced intellectual thought since the early 19th century. The author himself has written about how the growth of metrics relates to these developments, and how it challenges the theories developed for the industrial city. Building on the work of intellectuals like Henri Lefebvre, and later David Harvey or Manuel Castells, the claim is made that the urban realm and its elements are subjects on their own, rather than just physical results of more conventional parameters. A city is hence not only an accumulation of factories, residential buildings, monuments, public spaces, and so forth, but also a creating force that impacts its environment and the people that inhabit it. The assertion can be made that such ideas were already part of the oldest philosophical discourses, but they were reinvented in the current version under influence of postmodern thought. The strong logo centric focus of modernism and the Enlightenment Project, insisting through polarization on a clear dichotomy and hierarchy between action and reaction, original and copy, truth and approximation, made it difficult to acknowledge the workings of communication and exchange functions in a genuinely complex network.

The French philosopher Jacques Derrida, insisting on the importance of language and signs in such a world without final truth and obvious significance, was probably the most influential advocate of these concepts for the architectural world, explicitly serving as an inspiration for, and partly even collaborating with architects like Peter Eisenmann and Bernard Tschumi. The intense semiotic role that architectural language plays in the projects of these two architects, or even Ricardo Bofill or Michael Graves - to state another branch of postmodernism - is different from the clean white surfaces of modernity and their obsession with structural honesty, acting just as an abstraction of holy truth, to be discovered in its entirety somewhere in the aftermath. In postmodernity, the signs become all the truth that exists, or at least the only connection to a truth that is rooted in history. Despite their profane nature, they hence gain rather than lose in importance.

In the realm of urbanism, rather than architecture, the rules are slightly different, but from a philosophical point of view, postmodernism allowed for the (re-) understanding of urban elements as bearers and creators of original sense, but also economic value. The technocratic and functionalist tendencies of the pre-war times did not really allow for such a vision to unfold. In line with this thinking is the modern perception of space as an essentially empty container, increasingly opposed to the more complex cultural understanding of « place ». If postmodernism really invented anything new is a question that the author is not able to answer, but the fact is that a new vision towards urban questions had been enabled, offering the field of urbanism a substance that allowed for new perspectives to emerge.

This little digression in the world of philosophy and architectural theory helps to understand from a more theoretical perspective how city and design issues did gain importance in current economic and political discourse. It complements the more straightforward explanation of these trends based on the fact that cities have become the more apt entities to answer contemporary economic dynamics, rather than nation states. London's currently booming real-estate market is a good example of an urban entity that global investment forces have disconnected from the still gloomy outlook of its national hinterland in the aftermath of the European debt crisis.

Main part

The preceding paragraph tried not only to highlight the growth of metric approaches to urban design, but also the reasons for an alleged growing interest for urban issues in general. The real interest of the study question sits in the interrelation of these two phenomena. Special importance must be given to the question of exchange and communication value provided through quantitative tools and the spread of descriptive figures. Though presented above as an

opportunity for inter-disciplinary collaboration - one that is lacking in a completely formal and artistic approach towards the city - the problematic of data-driven approaches to urban morphology, and maybe figures in general, is the fact that they tend to be sooner or later correlated to economic value. As one of the central points of this paper, the question hence intrudes, if economic forces cause this whole process or if their application is just a side effect? Do we only bother to explore these new techniques, because they help to further optimize financial returns? As an almost ironic reversion of the designer's usually qualitative approach to urban questions, the consequence of the figure-centric methods is the fact that almost everything that can be comprehended in figures can become commodified. Measured and compared only in quantities, the high exchange value can hence very easily become ingested by purely economic motives. This argument is not new, and already Marx wrote about capitalism's obsession with commodities. Closely linked to this phenomenon is the discussion about the consumer society, and its pertinence in urbanist terms. In the article *Generic City*, published in his book *X, M, L, XL*, Rem Koolhaas explains the pressures that surround contemporary city making. With an interesting twist, he dwells on the specificity of real estate compared to other, not place-specific products: the uniqueness and immobility of land and historic built structures. His skepticism towards nostalgia in architecture and urban design is based on the simple fact that an ever-growing world population looks for authenticity in an ever-decreasing amount of historic buildings and cores, and that this can only transform them into major places of consumption. His point is that such tendencies, due to the pressure of obvious economic gains, will come with growing planning control and less design freedom. Seen as a final product, a distinction between Disney Land and Disney-Land-like-situations will become almost obsolete (another author, Maarten Hajer makes this point for Salzburg). Going back to the 1990s, and a discussion turning around "themed urban experiences" which could also include projects like Seaside or Celebration, these cases are early and simple examples of metric urbanism, focusing on the economic potential of design features in a way that did not exist, or was not reflected upon, during the preceding decades. Today, we are just pushing the boundaries further, complementing the tourist approach to urbanism with all kinds of other reflections. The current question might be, how to attract the "creative class" to a specific city or district for the long-term, rather than to limit ourselves to the attraction of tourists, retirees or secondary homeowners.

To return to our initial question, the problematic of an enhanced use of metrics is hence the high probability that these figures will be predominantly used in order to further exploit the city as a profit-maker. This is not a problem as such, but raises two major questions: one is moral, questioning the fact that profits will be equally shared on a long-term base, and the other one is professional: the loss of the above-mentioned relative irrelevance of architectural thought can now be seen as a loss of freedom and an intensification of pressures on the design profession. Like a Trojan horse, the application of quantitative methods has the potential to hollow out the profession's content, drawing decisions away from somebody who could be considered an urban expert. The enormous complexity of the field makes it even more probable that the result of such a scenario will be unpredictable. Figures can be interpreted in any possible way, and counter-indications are difficult to foresee. Examples vary greatly: city rankings and campus rankings are examples in which living or studying quality is determined on a quantitative base. It can be assumed that the decision to react to such important rankings through the definition of a development program will not be left to the designer and his poor credibility in economic affairs. The point to make, or rather the thesis to be established, is that this will not only be the case for the "hard" part of the program, but increasingly also for the "soft" factors that are part of the urban designer's work, like distribution of functions, building heights and the character of public space. The master plan of the future will not be designed, but managed. One of the motivations to write this paper is to suggest that this management should still be done and controlled by somebody who has a slight understanding of the impact of design, as is allegedly the case of the urban designer. Another problematic of a figure-based attitude lies in the fact that everything has to be based on comparisons. Despite the obvious usefulness of such a method, a side effect lays in the dilution of the uniqueness of place. Famous cities or districts will be able to acknowledge these special features, as mentioned above, but lesser-known entities might run across place-specific opportunities in favor of an increasingly generic face that has proven its relative financial success elsewhere, but only in the short- and mid-term.

These tendencies become further complicated through the still growing importance of the end-user for our markets and the increased use of social media. If design and urban features do gain in importance, what better idea than to test new proposals in advance, through surveys and simulations that are presented to the future consumers of a specific proposal? In a next and more sophisticated step, proposals can be produced as a reaction to consumer behavior that has been surveyed through smart phone applications and geographic data analysis. The opportunities are manifold and fascinating, and so is the pressure produced through the demands of a potentially manipulated public. We find ourselves eventually thrown back to the same issues that are currently discussed regarding the political realm, with the difference that the feedback coming from social media and mobile technologies can better focus on a specific, geographically defined area. In the “real elections”, voters have to deal with the abstract notion of a whole nation, one that it is not easy to relate to. Seen from that perspective, urbanism can now be perceived as the pragmatic implementation of politics. “Crowd-funding”, interventions that are financed through the direct support of the local community via Internet, just pushes these ideas further, including the problematic of potentially circumventing the public realm and its institutions.

These concepts complement an older and partly confirmed claim of the new communication technologies, liberating work patterns from geographic restraints. The theory prescribes that almost all types of services can be digitally provided, and that the city as a major cross point and market place becomes obsolete. Except of a rise in the number of home offices, we know that this has not really happened, for various reasons, but a different application of a similar logic has allowed for cities to implement change at a much faster pace than previously imagined. Miami, the author’s current residence, is a good example of a city that tries to attract tech-workers and start-ups on the base of leisure and climate advantages that previously would not have been sufficient as an argument. An important airport, the sea port, and the geographic proximity to Latin America cannot be dismissed as incidentals, nor the influx of highly skilled Cuban immigrants for political and not economic reasons, but for the first time a real change seems within reach, and is linked to the flexibility and lifestyle demands that the new technologies offer. The attempt might fail, but it is undertaken. These dynamics do certainly work in both directions, established cities being threatened to loose attractiveness that is not based on “hard” economic factors. Are we talking about the same development cycles that cities like Manchester or Leeds went through, or has there really been a change?

Coming back to the impact that economic pressures exert on design and sustainability trends, questioning causality between action and reaction, the “return to the center” and “smart growth” strategies can also be viewed as financial operations: due to increasing fuel prices and the acknowledgment of sprawl’s social cost, developers have to look for new solutions, and - as a reaction - urban designers do by now provide them in denser populated areas. If sustainability concerns really are the driving factor is difficult to say. Some years ago, green tech has mainly been seen as an economic burden, questioning the roots of our capitalist system. Today, politicians present it as a new technological revolution and major economic driver. The point is not to criticize the fortunate congruence of ecological conscience and economic success, a truth that would be convenient for everybody, but the understanding of causality, if such a concept all-together exists.

Going back several decades in history, we have observed the reinvention of public space, but also an almost monopolizing obsession with this topic in the world of urban theory. Is it possible that this happened, because its implementation did not hurt the major stakeholders as much as it was propagated? Projects like the business district Broadgate in London, partly built above the tracks of Liverpool Street Station, exemplify the fact that the renovation or addition of public space was mainly achieved in order to raise land values. The question is, if other issues had been discarded from public discussion for one that found easy success with clients, the city and even the general audience? False Creek North, a prominent redevelopment zone in the south of Downtown Vancouver, is another example in which the indeed very generous provision of public green and walkways somehow overshadows the fact that a huge piece of land had been sold to a single developer.

Is it under these circumstances unfair to question, if the application of quantitative methods in urban design - another much discussed trend - really is motivated by the positive outcomes that it can produce? Or is it just a tool that helps to further optimize profits in a realm that business had previously not fully comprehended? If increased sales are the methods' real aim, how rational will we allow the figures to be?

Conclusion

This paper is overambitious in its outreach, if not confused, but the author prefers not to isolate the topics in separate papers for the fear of the message's dilution. The aim is not a detailed scientific analysis of each phenomenon, but a description of changes that currently occur in the designers' work environment as a reaction to the rise of new technologies and growing economic pressures. As the title suggests with a humorous note through the reference to the "dissident", the author endeavors to explicitly apply and test a very critical perspective on these issues, one that can be considered to lie on the verge of a conspiracy theory, never to be proven wrong. The truth however is that in everyday life architects and urban designers are service providers, and that it does not serve them well to question the background of their work. To do so is a privilege of academics who believe that critical thinking is a prerequisite for progress.

These lines should hence not be seen as a purely pessimistic exercise, but as an invitation to reconsider the urban designer's position in the world of urban development. If the author previously deplored the latter's little impact on urban decision taking, this should not be understood as a fatality, but as an opportunity to change such a historically entrenched situation. The heydays of the formally operating urban designer are over, barely 50 years after the profession's official birth. At least in western countries, the design of new cities or whole districts is increasingly rare. The future is about strategies to implement inner-city densification and renewal, not about urban design in the conventional way. If we still want trained designers to have an impact on what happens, they will have to better understand the rules of the game. The success of a handful of globally operating starchitects might from that perspective be misleading, suggesting power and control, where in reality marketing and political reasoning are the ulterior motives for their appointment.

The problematic of the urban field is its enormous complexity, to the point where the roles of different professions, but also their responsibility and accountability become deeply confused. This is the situation in which figures can provide a deceptive notion of « the way forward », in a positive as much as negative way. Theoretically, it could be claimed that the designer shall stick to his primary task, the design of buildings, but in reality he is often also the element of the development team that is required to communicate to the community and wider public audience about social and cultural issues. In the typical scenario, the planner represents the city, the developer his own interests, the geographer observes, and the architect has a fling at playing the urban designer. If he does not have the education to really comprehend the deeper issues, he will increasingly be used as a tool and further loose credibility. We might have to (re) contemplate a situation, in which the disciplines of urban design and architecture are clearly separated: if the architect relies on a relatively unambiguous set of skills, the urban designer will in contrast have to be trained as an urban professional, merging in terms of skills with the planner, real-estate expert, sociologist and urban geographer. If this does not happen, his impact might be limited to the conception of mega-projects in the Middle East or China.

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