

Some Notions on Urbanity

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This year the congress of The International Federation of Housing and Planning will take place on the background of a statistical claim that 50% of the planet's human population now lives in cities. On the one hand this tells about a turning point in human history. On the other hand you immediately have to start to question the concepts of the city and the urban, that is the foundation of these statistics. While in Scandinavia, from a statistical point of view, you can live in an 'urban area' even at densities as low as a few hundred people per square kilometre, the 2006 Biennale Cities - Architecture and Society' in Venice Biennale showed many cities with sub-areas of over 30.000 people per square kilometre.

The current Danish discussion on cities in urban research show a wide variety in what we understand as urban, from a narrow view on the cores of the cities and what is happening there to very large intertwined and still expanding regions defined in different ways according to purpose and mode of communication. Then, of course, there are many other aspects of the city and the urban than the simple question what is an urban area. Taken together, there does not seem to be a common notion of 'city' and 'urban'. This often implies that as soon as we start to talk about the city and the urban, we start to talk about something else.

The notion of 'urbanity' is less broad than the notion of 'the urban', and it contains within it questions of how people relate to each other in an 'urban' environment. But it is still a broad notion, as well as to some degree connoted to long-time dystopian and anti-urban perspectives on cities in the 'first modernity'. Anyhow, I think we need a new or renewed common notion, where different perspectives on space, city life and design can meet and crossbreed.

'Urbanity' in space syntax

Space syntax contains theories on space, people and development of cities, that have revolutionised the way I look at cities. In an exploration of the notion of urbanity, they will have to be included. The notion of urbanity is not used much within the space syntax community though, I think mainly because it is too vague and too complex. An electronic search on 'urbanity' through all digitally available papers from the first five Space Syntax Symposia only give hits for 10 papers (references to myself excluded).

Within space syntax the understanding of the city is developed from the notion of the 'city as an object', i.e. as a spatial object, not from e.g. from the notion of 'urbanity' on the Internet. From these starting points further aspects have been added like higher permeability in control parts, effects of the placement and number of doors, effects of the number of building plots along lines in the grid, etc. It has also been possible to demonstrate city dynamics at work, which starting from co-presence and integration leads to an increasing differentiation of the city (Hillier, 2002). Through space syntax it is also possible to show some of the 'lack of urbanity' in modern urban development in the 20th century, like islands of deeply segregated spaces.

On 'urbanity' in the field of Urban Design

When looking for the 'most urban' in urban design, I find first of all talk of density and mixed use, and increasingly also notions of pedestrianisation. There is not much real theory, though, on either the 'urban' at large, or 'urbanity', in what is generally considered as the field of urban design.

It is often dominated by concerns related to typologies at different scales, aesthetics and style, and relations between form and function that are based on normative processes rather than research. There is also a considerable focus on elements in public space like trees, paving and street furniture.

When there are actual studies of people, activities and use, it is often done one single space at a time, and although interesting data is delivered, the interpretation stays local and rather incomplete. Often the perspective of interest is also limited to aspects that can be handled in such a way as to promote a 'friction-free' environment, e.g. of enjoyment.

Part of the interest of urban design, which should not be forgotten, has to do with visual richness and complexity in the environment, not only one space at a time, but also as experienced through movement, e.g. 'serial vision'.

Overall though, we still know too little about many of these aspects and especially how to relate them.

'Urbanity' with difference

Sennett has another view on urbanity, which is the contrary of friction-free. For ethical and democratic reasons, Sennett wants to stimulate urban behaviour through difference. At a lecture in the School of Architecture in Copenhagen in 1994 he said: "What I think of as urbanity is precisely making use of the density and differences in the city so that people find a more balanced sense of identification on the one hand with others who are like themselves but also a willingness to take risks with what is unlike, unknown... It is this kind of experiences that make people find out something about themselves that they didn't know before. That's what urbanity is at its best... To me, how to privilege the notion of difference that is what urbanity is all about."

The social and physical settings that Sennett see as settings of and for "urbanity" can shortly be characterised with words like 'difference', 'diversity', 'density', 'strangers', 'mixture of people', 'complexity', 'unlikeness' and 'impersonality'. They have also to do with 'discovery' through 'dissonance', 'decentering', 'dislocation', and 'displacement'. As Sennett sees it, through difference, etc., you will experience difference, which will force you out of your habitual ways of looking at the world.

While Sennett mainly seems to be interested in urbanity as a setting for human comprehension of social complexity and the development of empathy, Lefebvre's concern with an urbanity of difference also, and to a larger degree, relates to the possibilities of action both through self-expression and more collectively. Co-presence in the streets is e.g. supplemented with the importance of works, like the meaning of 'works' in 'works of art' (in French 'oeuvre'), that has to do with creative, personal expressions and contributions.

As I read Lefebvre, his urbanity is about: encounter (meeting), life and play (for its own purpose), difference (including strangers), works (of "art"), possibilities and unpredictability, interchange, and the use of all senses. But the city must also contain the necessary opposition: recognition, stability, and possibility of withdrawal.

Lefebvre's urbanity, as well as Sennett's, is about urban liberty and complexity in a much developed capitalist society full of contradictions, oppositions and conflict. A developed notion of urbanity will have to include these difficult things, but neither Lefebvre, nor Sennett, develop their ideas to a point, where they can be used directly for empirical studies and even less as direct design guidance.

It seems clear, however, that urbanity has to do with an elementary social and cultural playing field related to public space, including strangers and chance.

My own short definition of urbanity would be, that it is a rich information field between humans and between humans and artefacts in freely accessible space, where the new and unexpected can happen and where it can happen in ever new combinations and in growing complexity. Related to this, urbanity also has to do with difference and the unique. And in developing a more qualified contemporary notion of urbanity, space syntax has to be included as well.

Urbanity as co-presence at three different levels

Concerning some aspects of urbanity related to the space syntax notion of co-presence, I have proposed, that there might be three important thresholds, where changes of quantity also change 'quality'.

The first threshold is related to the basic level of change from morals to the ethics. According to Bauman, morals concerns the relations of two people. As soon as a third person enters, we have to do with ethics instead. Combined with the largest visible social distance (Gehl 1987) we might then say, that three people visible in public space within 100 meters is the lowest level of urbanity as co-presence. Large parts of suburbia in affluent countries is below that level.

The second threshold might have to do with visual experience turning into a rather continuous flow of different stimuli. This seems to start to happen at the average level of about 15 new 'images' per minute, or roughly at 1000 persons/hour, if you consider co-presence. This coincides e.g. with Whyte's lowest level of co-presence to get the feeling of being in a central place.

The third level might have to do with crowding and change of behaviour related to crowding. If, in public space, you consider crowding to begin, when you on average can touch other bodies stretching out your arms, then crowding begins when there is only about 3 square meters per person. According to Whyte, and contrary to much 'first modernity' writing on the urban, many people in cities seem to like some crowding.

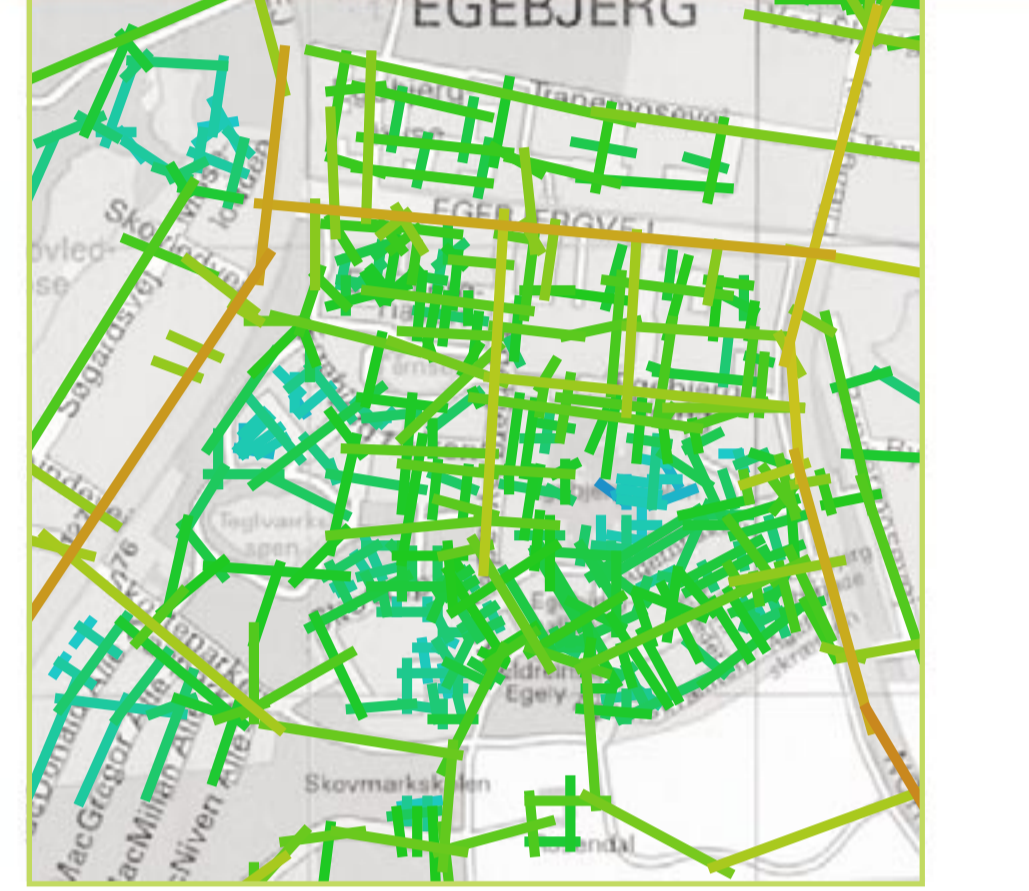
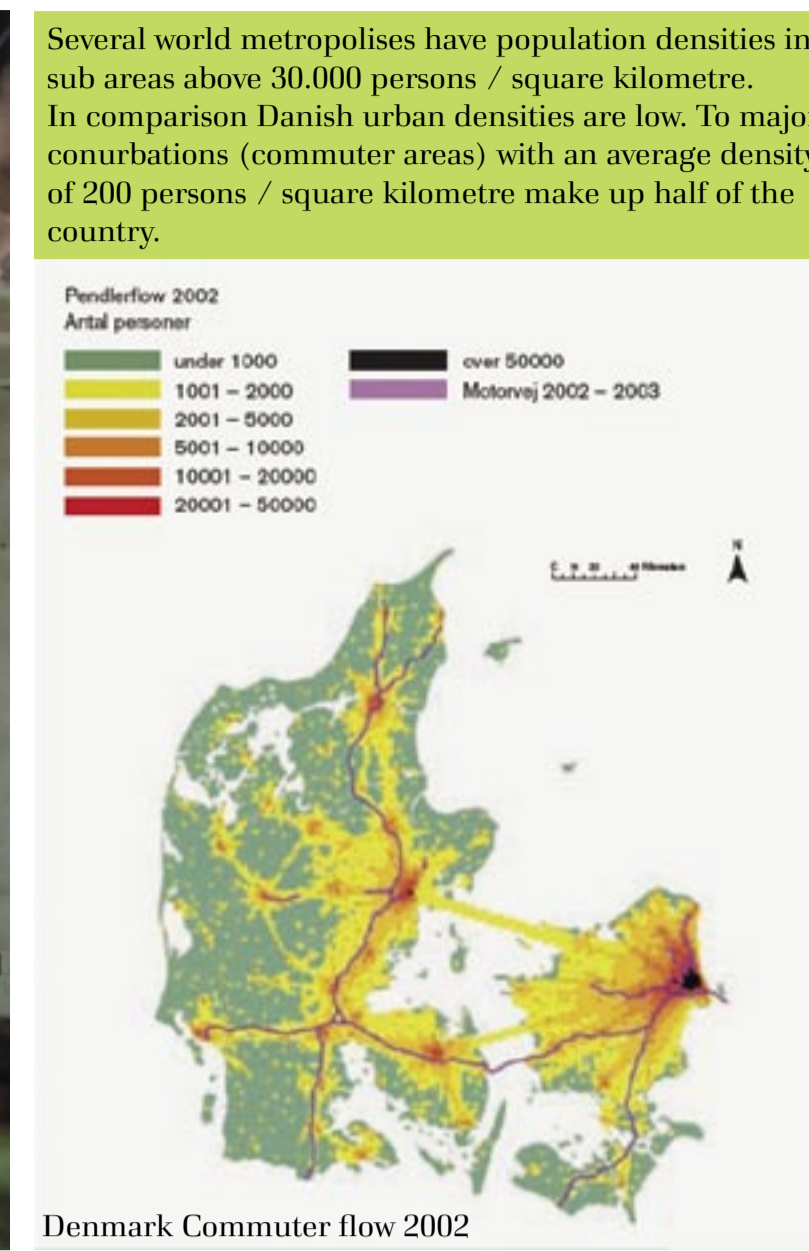
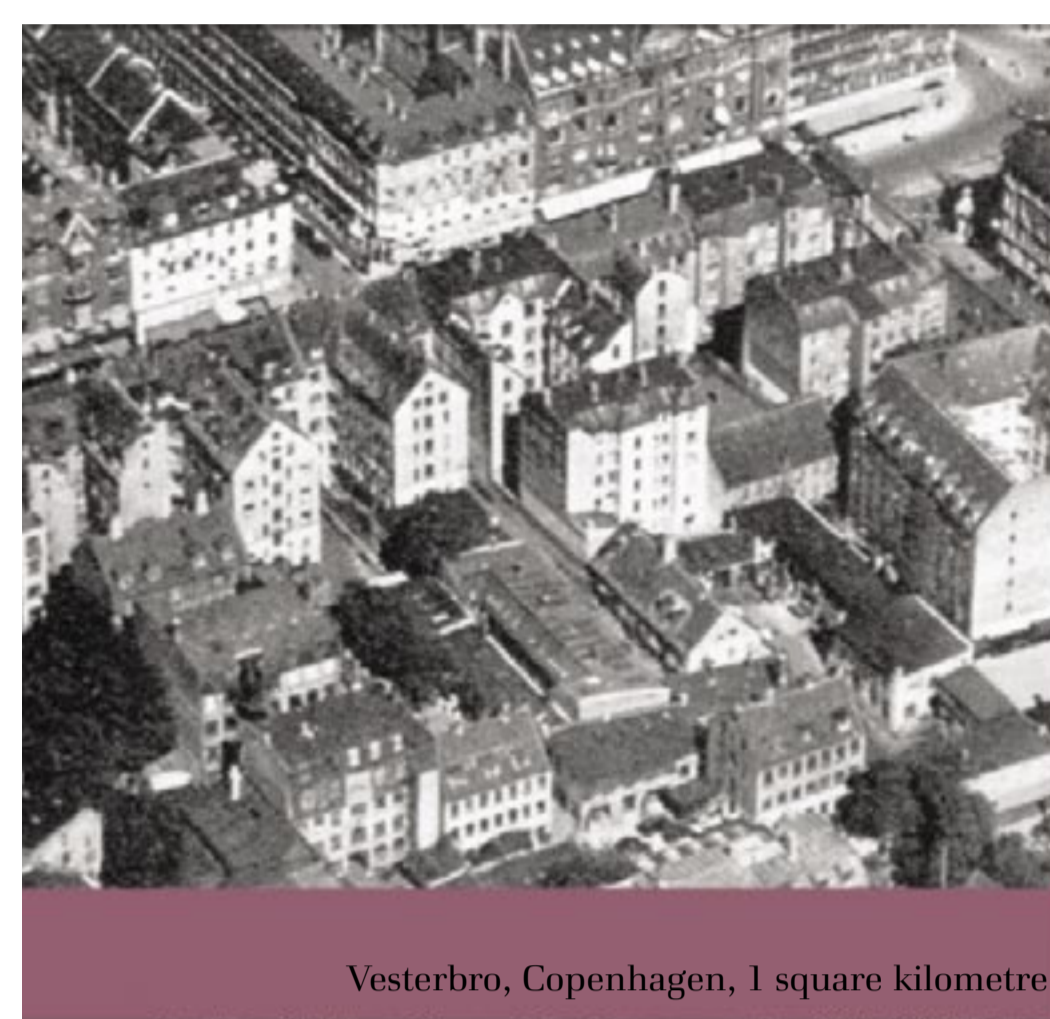
Adding more complexity....

Just to count people moving and staying in public space is not enough to evaluate urbanity, although it is a necessary beginning. If urbanity has importance, then it could be interesting to break up the concept of urbanity into further aspects that can be studied empirically also.

From the different notions on urbanity mentioned above, and from the learning's of my research, it is possible to construct a table, that lists some aspects of urbanity that should be the practically observable, or close enough to be possible develop some measurable criteria. Out of the two types of relations - human / human (i.e. based on co-presence) and human / artefact - and two major kind of qualities of urbanity - human information richness on the one hand and possibilities for the 'new' or 'different' on the other, four fields of observations can be generated. Some of these aspects have already been studied by space syntax researchers, others have not, at least not as far as I know, being at the edge of the space syntax community.

I would like to go on studying these things, and I hope that some people within the space syntax community will discuss this with me and maybe even collaborate with me on the further development of a more developed notion of urbanity.

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In 2007 according to statistics more than half of the world population lives in urban areas. But general statistics does not tell much about the cities, as there are large differences. In Denmark an urban area has to have at least 200 inhabitants living at a maximum of 200 meters apart. So you can have urban areas with as much as 18.000 square metres / person. Recent studies by Gehl, Gemzøe et. al. shows that urban life is growing in public spaces in the inner part of Danish cities. On the other hand Danish Social Research shows that for Denmark as a whole the time spent in public spaces has been reduced by 27 minutes per day since 1987. If you take a walk in the suburbs you will very often see almost nobody. We need new ways of mapping what is urban and new statistics to describe the city and urban life, also dynamic ones, that makes sense in this new situation. Maybe the notion of 'urbanity' instead of 'the city' can contribute the development of this.

Change in some urban factors in Copenhagen in a 100 years

Aspect	New working class city area 1880-1900 Vesterbro	New district in the suburbs 1980-2000 Egebjerggård	Difference
Indoor dwelling space / person	ca. 8 sqr. meters	ca. 60 sqr. meters	7 times
Built density (FAR) Floor area ratio	ca. 2,0	ca. 0,3	7 times
Length of streets and paths/sqr. kilometre	ca. 20 kilometers	ca. 60 kilometers	3 times
Unique 'works' / 100 meters of street (buildings, shops, art, personal decoration)	ca. 25-50	ca. 2-6	10 times
Children in school & institution 0-20 years of age	ca. 4000 hours total	over 24.000 hours total	6 times
Time spent on other media/day than public space	less than 1 hour	ca. 6 hours	6 times

Phase Transitions of Urbanity	The City of People (human / human relations)	The City of 'Works' (human / artefact relations)
Crowding - possibly experiential stress	More than 5 - 10.000 persons/hour in a 10 meter wide pedestrian street, or less than 3 - 4 sqr. meters/person in public	More than 10.000 experienced artefacts/hour ?
Urban Centrality, lower limit level	More than 1.000 persons / hour, or 30/100 meters of street	More than 1000 experienced artefacts/hour, or 30/100 meters of street
Basic Urbanity, lower limit level	At least 3 / 100 meters of street, or 3 within 100 meters of visual field	At least 10 unique houses / 100 meters of street (street entrance oriented)

Some aspects of empirically observable urbanity (the lists can be extended)

	Human/human relations (related to co-presence)	Human/artefact relation (human / 'oeuvre'; human / 'works' e.g. as with Lefebvre)
Information rich, rich in difference, complex, unique	Number of people walking, biking and staying, all kinds of people, people that are different, people showing off to others, people performing in public, people in pairs and groups, people talking to each other, people spending time in the context of others, people working outdoors / in public space	Buildings, builders and architects / 100 meters, ornamentation, numbers of doors, interesting shop windows, art in public space, personalised environment, front gardens, benches, fountains, a manmade place with an identity of its own
New, unexpected, unplanned, open to initiatives	The proportion of strangers, the occurrence of chance meetings, people stopping and talking in the middle of the flow, people 'hanging out', individuals or groups 'taking over' some spaces temporarily, special events (festivals, etc.), political demonstrations, children playing in spaces not designated for them, using public space for fitness purposes	Something unfinished, possibility to alter the environment, possibilities for individuals to personalise spaces, temporary exhibitions in public space of art and/or goods, spaces that can be used in many ways

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