Commentary

Transitioning Cities: A Commentary on Cities in Transition and Beyond

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Abstract

This commentary combines two readings: a re-reading of Shakur's (2005) edited volume Cities in Transition and a conceptual interpretation of the articles presented in this volume. This reading discusses the notion that contemporary "developed" cities (developed world cities) are transitioning in contemporary times alongside "developing" cities. The conservation of vernacular architecture in the contemporary context could be linked to wider political and conceptual concerns. Drawing on fieldwork observations and the interpretation of literature, the author attempts to re-translate and re-interpret articles from Shakur's edited volume alongside contemporary developments. The emphasis is on the political: the political and conceptual questions raised through re-interpretation of problematics pertaining to collective memory, the role of the vernacular and the contestation of space. How can we understand the problems opened by Cities in Transition and the problems left open by the articles in this volume, pertaining to the political constraints of implementing thoroughly conceived plans? The commentaries modest goal is to open the space for debate and discussion relating to the political dimensions of the built environment, including construction and design.

Keywords: Transitional Cities, Contestation, Collective Memory, Vernacular Architecture, Intensity.

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Introduction

This commentary re-reads Shakur's (2005) edited volume *Cities in Transition* (CIT from here onwards) alongside a conceptual interpretation of the articles presented in this volume. The readings discuss the notion that contemporary "developed" cities (developed world cities) are transitioning in contemporary times alongside "developing" cities. The difference however pertains to the *intensity* of transition or the degree of transformation: specific cities are transitioning at a higher rate than other cities. Also, intensity does not always refer to similar phenomena (the influx of refugees in Europe, capital investment in Shanghai and so on), it only refers to the degree of change or the rate of transition of a specific variable.

The conservation of vernacular architecture in the contemporary context (the previous articles presented in this volume and certain chapters within CIT) could be linked to wider political and conceptual concerns, including transitional built environments. The transitory status of contemporary world cities does not diminish the importance of localized architectural styles. The commentary attempts to re-interpret articles from Shakur's edited volume CIT alongside contemporary developments, including the articles presented in this volume by discussing a multitude of examples.

The emphasis is political. The political and conceptual questions raised through the re-interpretation of problematics pertaining to collective memory, the role of the vernacular and the contestation of space are ambiguous and complex. They also refer to different applications of the term intensity: the intensity of the local *within* the global (the prevalence of the vernacular), the intensity of individual memories within the collective imagination (who's memories are prevalent?) and the intensity of contestation (how radical or intense is an instance of spatial contestation?).

How can we understand the problems opened by CIT and the problems left open by the articles in this volume, pertaining to the political constraints of implementing thoroughly conceived plans? How can contestation (spatial political action) be managed or incorporated within the planning process, or does politics necessarily exceed notions of planning inclusion or inclusionary design? This commentary could possibly open the space for such a debate but cannot arrive at affirmative answers or conclusions. However, the initiation of the discussion and the [re]activation of the concerns of CIT is a partial step in the direction.

The vernacular and the Built Environment

The vernacular, 'the language or dialect spoken by the *ordinary* people of county or region' is a term that in architectural discourse is defined more technically, without losing its common meaning. Vernacular architecture is a style (unique in each instance) that attempts to reflect and postulate (on this point see Jencks, 1985: 30-1) localized tradition through utilizing locally available construction materials, incorporating traditional aesthetics into urban design and

attempting to meet the needs of local populations and publics (Misra, 2016; Previtali & Zhai, 2016; Adhikary, 2016; Foruzanmehr, 2011; Khattab, 2005).

The technical definition of vernacular does not give rise to any singular style or movement (e.g. the technical definition of modernist architecture could give rise to the singular 'modernist' movement with individuated leitmotifs within the movement), as vernacular style is particularized and localized in each instance. Vernacular British architecture is not the same as vernacular Turkish architecture even if their emergence can be explained by the same technical definition. In a similar fashion, the functions of the vernacular architecture differ depending context and application (e.g. the conservative uses of British traditional architecture (Burnskill, 1997: 32-40, 182-198; Scruton, 1994; Scruton, 2013: 3-22, 35-66, 192-216) versus a progressive return to local republican leitmotifs in Turkey).

The prevalence of the vernacular (local) amongst universal (global) style thus has different political meanings depending on context. Culturally exporting modernist architecture to the developing world (such as the case of Doxiadis in Islamabad) and the resistance to such practices takes on a different political meaning than the European vernacular revival against avant-garde modernist architecture (tradition against radicality or tradition against empty or 'nihilistic' design). It is not simply that the application of vernacular style in the developing world is progressive and its application in the developed world is conservative (this however can be the case, especially if we look at spatial contestation within multi-cultural built environments in Britain (see Vaughan, 2007; Brice, 2007; Khan *et al*, 2007; Nasser, 2005: 42-55)). The complexity and ambiguity is that the divide between developed and developing 'worlds' does not necessarily apply to their cities (for instance, a colleague once stated that 'Naples was a pocket of the third world within Europe').

Moreover, the current condition of certain European nations (i.e. the economic condition of Greece during its perpetual economic stagnation and recession) and their cities can be compared with traditionally 'developing world' cities (including 'nations within cities'). The difference is one of *intensity*. This difference not only relates to the intensity of the vernacular within the built environment (how many vernacular buildings are present in relation to 'global' buildings), but also to the intensity of development (or underdevelopment) and the intensity of variables (e.g. economic condition, the size and distribution of the urban population, migratory patterns, etc.). Variables may undergo processes of intensification or de-intensification (see Davis, 2006: 20-50; Burchel, 2002: 61-77; Nolan, 2002: 112-137; Koslowski, 2002), in the contemporary context, migratory patterns are a significant indicator of intensification and de-intensification processes. The differentiation of population intensity (i.e. density within space) effects both developed and developing nations, such as China, where large population flows are effecting urban formation, organisation and social structure (Changmin, 1997; Eades, 2014; Lei, 2014; Mou et al, 2013; Schulz, 2012; see also Nail, 2015: 11-20; Woods, 1982: 9-22; Liu, 2005: 191- 200).

Transitory movements tend to refer to a forward progression or movement, but they can also refer to a backwards or regressive movement: decline (see Kreichauf, 2017: 75-95; Ligon, 2017:

221-233; Campkin, 2013: 57-77; see also Dorling, 2014). The movement against regression or decline is also an appropriate context for the application of vernacular design: utilizing the vernacular for the sake of tourism (such as the case of Chester in Britain or the revitalization and reconstruction of Barcelona's traditional old town or building hotels on the Turkish island of Yassiada).

The 'tourism question' (when presented within this volume) emphasise the alteration of functions and the prevalence of global style that is detrimental to local ways of life (the negative effects of the touristic functions of the Istanbul bazaar to the non-sustainable hotel construction on the island of Yassiada). The relation between tourism and the vernacular is also one of intensity: the intensity of global capital within the localized built environment (Cohen, 1998: 8-27; Clark & Wojcik, 2007; Dixon, 2014: 1-20, 153-160; Glaeser, 2011). How progressive or conservative the intervention of capital within the built environment is requires further investigation and interpretation. The crucial factor to emphasize is that the utilization of vernacular architecture is never simply neutral and the political is never absent from its application.

Collective memory and the Identity of the Built Environment

The cultural dynamic that is expressed by vernacular architecture relates to the notions of collective memory and identity. A multitude of architectural and spatial critics emphasize the important role of mimetics and identity expression within the built environment (Lynch, 1975; 1995: 35-47, 87-97, 205-226; 1984; 6-35; Jencks, 1985; Rossi, 1982: 20-34, 112-114, 127-131; Boyer, 1996; Tuan, 1977: 136-149, 161-179), linking it to both the experience of space and the process of design and construction. Both the notions of collective memory (the memory of a group of people, passed from one generation to the next) and identity (the fact of being who or what a person or a thing is) have various politico-critical interpretations and definitions that betray their common (or 'vernacular') uses.

In this context, the identity of the object (for instance, the Porsuk riverfront in Eskisehir, the Istanbul Bazaar, the Republican Square in Bursa the island of Yassiada) relates to the objects historical being. How the object (an urban artefact or singularity) is remembered and the accordingly essential elements that express the objects identity is predicated on its historical actuality: the urban singularities (i.e. Bursa's republican square) original form is foundational for both mimetics and identity.

The problem however is that the objects morphogenesis (how the artefact transitions or how space-time (the built environment and its socio-cultural context) transitions around the object) can be remembered *differently* in relation to the generational composition of the public. In other words, different age groups relate to urban singularities differently (how a young teenager relates to Istanbul's historical district will differ to an ex-craftsman). 'Time-space compression' (Harvey, 1990: 260-307) does not affect the differential relationship towards architectural objects, as the reduction of distance and the intensification of cultural homogeneity does not

reduce the difference between generations, it only decreases the duration of a generation through acceleration (see Sloterdijk, 2012).

How different agents (age is but one example) relate to objects differently introduces an antagonism into the interpretation of collective memory (see Trabsky, 2015; Slessor, 2011; Congleton & Rajaram, 2014; see also Acuff, 2012; see also Moctezuma-Barragan, 2005: 71-88): who's memories are included and excluded when collective memories are introduced into the design process? At what epoch (time-period, i.e. the 19th century) does the objects history determine its identity, thus is used as the reproductive aim within the urban design process? In other words, how does the architect or designer choose what historical period to represent when conserving or regenerating an architectural object? (Is the Porsuk riverfront more 'actual' or authentic in the 19th century or the early 20th century?).

The ideological and political problems relating to collective memory and identity (in the context of architecture and the built environment) are complex and ambiguous. One of the significant problems is that empirical assessment, investigation and evaluation cannot close the gap between perception (how an object is viewed) and its representation. Choosing what identity to represent and what collective memories to express is a political choice.

Spatial Contestation: Political Intensity within the Built Environment

Shakur (2014) defines the notion of contested spaces in relation to 'segregation' (he emphasises racial segregation and stratification in the colonial era), as the contestation of space (the action or process of disputing or arguing within, through or about space or spatial formation, the built environment) is inter-related to the notion of the 'disaffected communities': the product of a governing body does that does not recognise the needs of its populations (i.e. the ethnic-migrant population in districts of Amsterdam).

The notion of spatial contestation has two significant inter-related variants: the *actual-physical* and the *virtual-ideological*. Physical (actual) spatial contestation relates to political action *through* and *in* space (Badiou, 2012: 17-61; Zizek, 2012: 7-19, 63-77; Sitrin & Azzellini, 2014: 14-39; Harvey, 2014: 1-5; Lefebvre, 1991; Butler, 2012: 65-72, 97-104, 143-155, Nightingale, 2012; Tammaru *et al*, 2016: 1-30). Political riots in Oldham (Shakur *et al*, 2007), the London riots of 2011, the political protests in Egypt and Tunisia (Hussein, 2012), the #SaveOurSteel protests in Scunthorpe and other British steelwork towns (Reid, 2017) to the spatial politics of squatter settlements (Bahre, 2007: 134-147; Turgut, 2007: 158-167) can be termed both physical and actual as they relate to the motion and the presence of actual *bodies* within space: the active engagement of citizens during a political event. Actual-physical contestation can also be understood in relation to the concept of intensity: spatial intensity (how many bodies are active) and temporal intensity (the duration of the event) can be measured and analysed in relation to effects (outcomes, transition, etc.).

Virtual-ideological contestation relates more directly to the political problematics pertaining to

both the use of vernacular architecture and collective memory, as the virtual (or the imagined, the perceived) relates to what a spatial object represents, what it *expresses* (Deleuze, 1990: 14-26; see also Scott & Swenson, 2015; Minkenberg, 2014; McQuire, 2016: 124-156; Dikec, 2016). While the spatial object (such as the groves in Istanbul or the Bazaar) is a physical object (it exists within space), what the object represents (its ideological significance) and its meaning (its effect on identity formation) cannot be reduced to its physicality (its materiality). However, the meaning of an object and the aesthetic quality of the built environment can be contested. While actual-physical contestation relates to direct political action (the event), virtual-ideological contestation implies indirect political activity (alterations to design, aesthetic criticism of the built environment, altering the perception of the environment, etc.)

The physical and the ideological (i.e. the actual and the virtual) are inter-related notions, as the aesthetic meaning of an architectural object *cannot* be separated from its material-physical existence, even if it can be understood and analysed as an independent variable. Moreover, the aesthetic and cultural value of architectural objects and how they are perceived cannot be separated from the populations materiality. Disaffection, the predicate of spatial contestation (the intensive variable that causes spatial contestation), can be related to both the actual-physical and the virtual ideological. Disaffection can also be related to intensity (how intensely a community or a population is disaffected), the crucial political term that relates disaffection to the application of the vernacular, to the representation of collective memory and to the physics of spatial politics.

Shakur (2014) holds that disaffected communities are multiplying in contemporary times, thus intensifying spatial contestation. It is this increase in contested spaces that problematize architectural discourse and practice on a global level. Contestation introduces what Lyotard (1984: xxiv-xxv, 53-60) calls 'instabilities'. Instabilities, in this context how not meeting the populations needs induces disaffection, what can be interpreted as a political instability (as disaffection leads to contestation) is related to the 'production of space' (Lefebvre, 1991): what space is produced and for what population?

Coda: Cities in Transition today

This commentary attempted to briefly discuss problematic issues pertaining to issues located within CIT and the articles within this volume, focusing on a political interpretation of intensity: developing and developed world cities are undergoing both global and local scale transitions that may best be understood through an analysis of intensity (the intensity of variables). CIT's major contribution was its scale, explicating transitionary movements within a multiplicity of world cities. This emphasis is crucial. In the global context (post 'time-space compression' (Harvey, 1990: 260-307)), the crucial analytical difference is intensification: segregation and destitution in certain spaces of Amsterdam or London is different to the level of destitution in Dhaka (see Shakur, 2007) due its intensity. In short, destitution is a global notion while its intensity is not.

This applies to the discussions of the vernacular and to notions of collective memory. The

application of the vernacular in developed world is not fundamentally different to the application of the vernacular in the developing world. That is not to say that the colonial uses of European architecture in the Americas or in South East Asia (or even the Japanese imperial uses of architecture in Korea and parts of China in the 20th century) is neutral or is not different to their uses in core imperial cities (London, Tokyo, etc.). It is to say that in the 21st century, the use of the vernacular is opposed to the global *as such*, if the 'global' designates a political-economic orientation (global capital). The political interpretation of this opposition can only be made after the application of vernacular architecture within a specific context. Collective memory and the conservation of memory can be included in this line of thought, in the sense that collective memories representation of the historical being of 'urban singularities' or 'urban artefacts' is opposed to the global utilization of space as such (reducing the republican-square in Bursa to corporate usage). Collective memory however cannot be globalized in the same way that vernacular architecture could be (traditional Japanese architectural style being deployed in the US), as collective memories are routed in a site: place. Style can be globalized, but its local cultural meaning cannot.

Contested spaces (the contestation of space) can be related to the application of the vernacular and the representations of collective memory, as disaffected communities have memories (that are both singular and collective) and have their own ideas of the 'vernacular'. Both the articles in this volume and CIT could be related to the notion of contested spaces (in both variations of the notion) and to the notion of intensity. This commentary, as previously stated, cannot offer affirmative answers or conclusions, it can only point towards the fruits of analysing the variations of intensity in the context of the built environment.

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