Travelling an Urban Puzzle: The Construction, Experience and Communication of Multi(pli)cities

Bas Spierings

The recently renewed attention for everyday city life and urban rhythms (e.g., Simonsen, Knox, Cronin, Edensor, and Wunderlich) – usually building on the work of Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre – offers an opportunity to generate intriguing insights into how cities are constructed through personal experiences and spatial narratives. As Nielsen and Simonsen argue, people make cities habitable and meaningful in daily life by trying to understand the city itself as a collection of experiences and narratives of that particular place. In this context, an important and neglected question is whether personal interpretations of cities can be transformed into narratives that other people are able to understand. Can we really explain to other people how we make our hometown habitable and meaningful in daily life? How do we communicate our experiences of local city rhythms with other citizens elsewhere in the world? How do people together perform the meaning of cities? These questions are of great relevance for processes of interpersonal communication, including for researchers studying everyday life and rhythms in urban contexts. In fact, is it really possible to get a comprehensive image of a city when people intersubjectively communicate sensorial experiences and narrative constructions of their hometown?

To find an answer to these questions, I will take you on an exploration of the place I live. I will provide you with three coherent discursive city images or narratives by telling you what I hear, see and feel while strolling my city's streets. In an attempt to combine and make my observations and impressions understandable for others, I employ the metaphor of a "puzzle," a mixed-up image that becomes clear during the process of putting the pieces together – something which most of us will be quite familiar with since our childhood. I provide sensorial observations and impressions of my hometown as pieces of an urban puzzle. But what will these pieces tell you about the city I spend a great deal of my time in? Could the discursive image of how I experience this particular place really tell you what the place is like?

Bas Spierings is Assistant Professor in Urban Geography in the Department of Human Geography & Urban and Regional Planning at Utrecht University, The Netherlands. His research focuses on city centre redevelopment and spatial imaginations, retailing and urban competition, shopping, public space and everyday life.

The puzzle

As children we start solving puzzles of as few as ten pieces. The first puzzle I remember making shows an orange tiger with black stripes and white cheeks on a bright blue background. I still can envision for myself the joy of the eight pieces coming together after several minutes. Advanced puzzles for adults often require us to work with thousands of pieces which might take several days to complete. The pictures are bigger, the diversity of colours is larger, the pieces are smaller, but the principle of making the puzzle is still the same. Before even looking at the pieces you already know what the picture will look like after you have completed it. To make the puzzle you "simply" look at the solution on top of the box.

But what will happen if you don't get the box with the solution on top of it? If you just get the contents of the box, some pieces in a plastic bag. What will it take to understand what the puzzle is about? How many pieces do you need to see the picture? What will it take to get the picture? It depends on the picture itself of course; some are more difficult to guess than others. But maybe even more important is what pieces are revealed. Is it better to have some pieces in the middle of the picture or does a corner of a picture give you a better view? The first piece might not reveal that much. The second, third, fourth and fifth may give you a clearer view of the picture. Perhaps it reveals a lot if the subsequent pieces are contiguous to the first piece. Or maybe a more scattered view will reveal much more.

The puzzles people make usually are two-dimensional (although there are some versions in three dimensions available these days). But I want to deal with an even more dimensional and much more complex puzzle here. An urban puzzle is what De Landa calls an "assemblage" which develops through continuous interactions between its parts.[1] The parts here include me, the urban contexts I experience, and you who I am communicating with about what I see, hear and feel. This implies that there is no clear and single solution to the urban puzzle to begin with that I can chop into pieces for you. By being part of a dynamic assemblage I will try to construct pieces and a solution while strolling through the place I live. I will provide you with some pieces and parts of the solution by sharing personal interpretations of my hometown. But what pieces do you need to get the picture? And when do the pieces I give you together become a place to you instead of just pieces?

The pieces

A city may be understood through the ear - for example the silence of a building or the noise in the streets - or the gaze - for example the visual gestures of the urban morphology and the pace of street traffic (Allen and Pryke 459; Hubbard and Lilley 276). Therefore I will give you the first pieces of the picture by telling you what I hear and see in the city. In addition to describing noise and giving visual impressions,

---

[1] See also Arturo Escobar on the "ontological turn" in social theory.

perhaps the most important piece I can give you is how I feel about the place I live. By discussing my personal feelings, it is the sensorial experience of the geographical environment that is dealt with. This does not imply that people, personal emotions and environments are considered as clearly distinguishable. On the contrary, they are seen here as "fluid" and "unbounded" (Bondi 437). The self is understood here as "a multiple, relational process in which subjectivities are shaped and reshaped as individuals engage with past, present, and future experiences and environments" (Svašek and Skrbiš 371). In this contribution, I will try to communicate my interpretation of embodied feelings and spatially contextualised emotions as city narratives (see Simonsen 52-53) – which you will have to interpret. What kind of picture of my hometown will such interpretative processes bring about? The pieces portraying personal feelings are perhaps the most difficult to describe but by explaining my feelings, in addition to what I hear and see, the place hopefully will come "alive" to you. Inspired by Henri Lefebvre, I will wander the street network of the urban area that is most familiar to me and give some pieces of the picture by discussing its "rhythms."

Hearing the city

Let me start telling you what I hear by strolling the urban street network. According to the ear, people seem to have different interpretations of the use of the same space. A church bell striking eight means it is still quite early in the morning and what I hear mostly is the low engine sound of trucks driving up and down the streets. Some also add high sounds signalling that they are driving backwards. I can also hear people sweeping to collect trash and clean streets. For the rest, it is rather quiet. I hear some footsteps of people and a few rattling chains of bikes passing and suddenly squeaking brakes of a bike stopping. I also hear the engine sounds of a few automobiles and every now and then of a bus as well as their tires hitting the street pavement. Sometimes a bus driver blows the horn to warn people they are in its lane. Close to ten o'clock, the sound of trucks and cleaning has been replaced mostly by a variety of music coming from both sides of the streets. I recognize soft easy listening tunes and much more pronounced and loud contemporary hits. More and more people are also walking the city. Listening to the pace of their steps I can tell that some people are in a hurry. A man is talking on his phone, explaining why and apologizing for the fact that he is late for an appointment. Other people are walking much more slowly. They are just strolling, laughing and chatting about the lovely weather. Some people try to earn a little money by approaching strollers for change or by singing and playing the guitar for the same reason. A barrel organ is playing in the distance. The sound of cars and bikes has faded away mostly or has been pushed towards the background by the increasing and omnipresent noise of walking and talking people that dominates my attention.

Seeing the city

Let me continue by telling you what I see. It is lunchtime now and the place has become a real spectacle. People are drinking and eating while sitting inside pubs and restaurants or outside on terraces. Many of them catch the eye because they are dressed like businessmen and women wearing suits and ties. Waiters, more casually dressed, serve coffee, tea, soup and sandwiches to them. Simultaneously, lots of people are walking around in the streets looking at shopping windows and other people. Many stop to admire young skateboarders performing stunts on staircases and railings. Some go inside shops, ask for information on merchandise from retail staff in uniform, try things and buy things. Bags in different colours with different brand names are everywhere. Some people just stroll around. They are "hanging out," just observing the urban scene and enjoying the crowd (Shields 149). Some of the streets are quite wide, revealing a big crowd and many of the well-known, international chain stores. However, most of the streets are not that wide at all. They are also much less crowded and contain several local stores. Most streets are pedestrian zones, although some are open to other forms of traffic and have sidewalks. Red rectangular stones are used in most streets as pavement to mark coherence. Looking at the buildings on both sides of the streets, I see a mix of many small and some large buildings. They usually have no more than 3 or 4 floors. Inside them, shops, restaurants and pubs are doing business on the ground floor and most of the time people are living on upper floors. By looking at the exterior of the buildings, many different styles of architecture can be observed. For example, a trading building from the 17th century in Renaissance style, a sober department store from the post World War II period and the "play and pleasure" architecture (Hannigan 51) of a recently built shopping street. I see a group of elderly men and women wearing sneakers and daypacks making pictures of the most typical features of the built environment.

Feeling the city

And how does the place make me feel? Well, I believe it is the most interesting part of the city. That is the main reason for me living there. The place offers a huge variety of services and entertainment - like shops, pubs, museums, cinemas and street festivals - and a historical awareness because of the many different styles of architecture. All this stimulates my senses; it makes me feel alive. Looking at the shopping window of a CD store seduces me to enter and further expand my collection. Looking up now and then at the upper floors of shopping buildings often surprises me when beautiful facades I never noticed before reveal themselves. Many other people are also attracted to the part of the city I call home. A big crowd adds to a lively atmosphere but in the weekend the crowd can become quite overwhelming. The main streets are packed with people, making it hard to move around freely. It forces me to go with the slow flow, which frustrates me a little. At the same time, hiding in and moving among the big crowd offers the splendid opportunity to move around the city and observe others

anonymously. However, it also makes me part of the real hustle and bustle of shopping that I decide to avoid. Walking the much less busy streets makes me feel more at ease. While strolling around I also never know what will happen and who I will meet. The opportunity to meet friends and get to know "strangers" excites me. The place I call home therefore is not a dull, "routine" space (Bauman 128).

When the shops close, the big crowd disappears. The warm sun goes down slowly and the temperature drops a little. The falling darkness, the lights in the houses and neon light of shops give the place a warm and relaxed ambience. The place also comes to a rest but not for long because the urban nightlife begins. An enthusiastic mass of people dressed up is finding its way towards pubs and dance clubs, either by foot or bike. Their presence creates a lively atmosphere enticing me to go to the movies and have a beer afterwards. It is almost midnight now and I return to my apartment feeling the need to get some sleep. The celebration of many others lasts until the following day when people are getting ready to clean and supply the place once again.

The picture

I have told you about a place as my *P*ublic space, my *L*iving room, my *A*ccess to urban life, my *C*laim of space and my *E*motion in life. Hopefully I gave you enough of the pieces to get a picture. Obviously, while interpreting the pieces of the puzzle you are co-constructing the image of the city I live and co-performing its meaning. So I wonder whether the pieces of the picture have indeed become a *PLACE* to you. Or are you still puzzled? You probably did get some kind of a picture. But to what extent does the city where you are differ from the city where I am? Maybe you just recognised the place you live, used to live, or somewhere you have visited before. Perhaps the picture of my place could have been just about anywhere. Do we all live in the same urban puzzle? Do we construct, experience and communicate "multiplicities" perhaps?

Multi(pli)cities

When providing you with observations and impressions of my hometown, I found myself making many comparisons with other cities I've lived in and visited. While giving you pieces of the urban puzzle, however, I did not give you any explicit references to other cities to keep you "puzzling" about the place I live in, although my mind wandered in many cities. The sound of trucks, for instance, reminded me of the lorries passing my apartment in Dublin and awaking me at night. Skateboarders made me consider that I did not hear any in Beijing in contrast to their omnipresent activities in Rotterdam. One of the songs I heard while strolling shopping streets made me think of my visit to London for attending a concert of the same band. Seeing people on terraces reminded me of the times I worked as a bar tender in Tilburg. The many bags and brands made me reflect on the many ways in which

global consumption trends have an impact on the physical appearance of cities across the globe. In fact, the striking appearance of the recently built shopping street made me recall the more or less similar look of a shopping mall in San Diego. The experienced crowdedness made me think of Dublin again, a place where I lived for quite some time, especially for its packed shopping streets during weekends. Thinking about urban unexpectedness reminded me of New York, where I met a Dutch friend who I had not spoken to for ages. Observing the nightlife in my hometown made me think of the reasons why streets in Saigon display a much larger diversity of city life at night. Reflecting on the extent to which I feel at home in my current hometown generates the question of which city I felt this feeling the most? My answer would be that I feel at home here in Nijmegen, in the city centre as you might have guessed, in great part because of having heard, seen and felt many other cities.

These examples show that discussing one city implies discussing – consciously and unconsciously – many other cities at the same time to find similarities, differences and peculiarities. You probably also experienced this while trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together. Whatever city you think or talk about, observations and impressions of other places will always come to mind and have an impact on its interpretation. This implies that cities are made of relations with other cities (see Smith 266-7). More specifically, they do not exist outside the relational processes that construct and define them (Harvey 273). Processes of construction and definition occur when spatial narratives and personal experiences of many cities come together and constitute an urban assemblage. For that reason, a discursive image of a city does not exist in isolation because it is always compared with and connected to discursive images of other cities. So, interpreting the pieces I provided tells you something about "my" city but probably even more about "your" city. Moreover, the process of making an urban puzzle by providing as well as interpreting pieces is never finished. It continuously changes and expands when we visit, experience, memorise and interpret other cities. As Italo Calvino writes in *Invisible Cities* (describing how Marco Polo painted pictures of many cities to emperor Kublai Khan), "the more he wandered about unknown neighbourhoods of distant cities, the better he understood other places he had already passed through, before he eventually arrived there" (29, my translation).

Cities should be considered complex assemblages combining many other cities into continuously changing and expanding urban puzzles. The experience and interpretation of everyday city life and urban rhythms therefore takes place in multiple places simultaneously. To find out how localised experiences and interpretations of cities are constituted, relations between cities stretching across the globe need to be studied. These are the assemblages we construct ourselves and travel in our minds as urban "nomads" (Deleuze and Guattari 532) to understand and explain the place we live in as well as to understand what people try to explain when communicating characteristics of the places in which they live. In doing so, people are in one city physically and in many cities imaginatively at the same time. All of these cities together are visited, traversed and experienced while we relationally construct and

define our hometown. This is in line with Michel de Certeau's claim that every story should be considered a travel story (115). (Explanations of) cities are understood through different stories of that particular space but also and especially through different stories of many additional places. An investigation of everyday life in cities and urban rhythms, therefore, should prevent a focus on a single city and, instead, adopt a "multicities" approach to fully understand how citizens narratively construct, sensorially experience and intersubjectively communicate "multiplicities" of places. Building on the argument raised by Bondi – drawing on Peter Hobson – that psychoanalytic meaning-making occurs between people, one could argue that urban meaning-making occurs between cities as well as between people. The "betweenness" of people and places can be revealed by tracing the mental trajectories that people travel when they try to explain and communicate urban rhythms. In doing so, a detailed analysis is achieved of relatively dissimilar, distinct and striking characteristics of any city. It pinpoints what a city is (not) as compared to many other cities. Considering the intersubjective nature of communication processes, the mental trajectories of both the "sender" and the "receiver" – e.g. researchers and respondents participating in analysing everyday city life and urban rhythms – have to be taken into account. Both have to be considered in the process of urban meaning-making because they perform crucial and inseparable roles in the travelling of an urban puzzle and putting the assemblage together. In undertaking a really thorough attempt to communicate the ways in which we make the place we live habitable and meaningful in daily life, senders and receivers should aim to disclose, clarify and discuss all parts of the many places they think about while trying to explain what their hometown means to them. It is only by scrutinizing this betweenness of people and places that a solution to the urban puzzle can be found. Well, I did "my part" of the urban puzzle. What cities and urban characteristics did you think of when interpreting the pieces of my puzzle? What does that say about where you are?

Works Cited

Allen, John & Pryke, Michael. "The Production of Service Space." *Environment and Planning D* 12 (1994): 453-75.

Bauman, Zygmunt. *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995.

Bondi, Liz. "Making Connections and Thinking through Emotions: between Geography and Psychotherapy." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 30 (2005): 433-48.

Calvino, Italo. *De Onzichtbare Steden*. Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Bert Bakker, 2001.

Cronin, Anne. "Advertising and the Metabolism of the City: Urban Space, Commodity Rhythms." *Environment and Planning D* 24 (2006): 615-32.

De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

DeLanda, Manuel. *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*. London: Continuum, 2006.

Deleuze, Gilles & Guattari, Félix. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Continuum, 2004.

Edensor, Tim. "Reconsidering National Temporalities: Institutional Times, Everyday Routines, Serial Spaces and Synchronicities." *European Journal of Social Theory* 9 (2006): 525-45.

Escobar, Arturo. "The 'Ontological Turn' in Social Theory. A Commentary on 'Human Geography without Scale', by Sallie Marston, John Paul Jones II and Keith Woodward." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 32 (2007): 106-11.

Hannigan, John. *Fantasy City: Pleasure and Profit in the Postmodern Metropolis.* London: Routledge, 1998.

Harvey, David. "Space as a Keyword." Eds. Noel Castree and Derek Gregory. *David Harvey: a Critical Reader.* Malden: Blackwell, 2006: 270-93.

Hubbard, Phil & Lilley, Keith. "Pacemaking the Modern City: the Urban Politics of Speed and Slowness." *Environment and Planning D* 22 (2004): 273-94.

Knox, Paul. "Creating Ordinary Places: Slow Cities in a Fast World." *Journal of Urban Design* 10 (2005): 1-11.

Lefebvre, Henri. *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life.* London: Continuum, 2004.

Nielsen, Esben Holm & Simonsen, Kirsten. Scaling from 'Below': Practices, Strategies and Urban Spaces. *European Planning Studies* 11 (2003): 911-27.

Shields, Rob. "Social Spatialization and the Built Environment: the West Edmonton Mall." *Environment and planning D* 7 (1989), 147-64.

Simonsen, Kirsten. 2004. "Spatiality, Temporality and the Construction of the City." Eds. Jørgen Ole Bærendholdt and Kirsten Simonsen. *Space Odysseys: Spatiality and Social Relations in the 21ˢᵗ Century.* Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004: 43-61.

Smith, Richard. "Poststructuralism, Power and the Global City." Eds. Peter Taylor, Ben Derudder, Pieter Saey and Frank Witlox. *Cities in Globalization: Practices, Policies and Theories.* London: Routledge, 2007: 258-70.

Svašek, Maruška & Skrbiš, Zlatko. "Passions and Powers: Emotions and Globalisation." *Identities: Studies in Culture and Power* 14 (2007): 367-83.

Wunderlich, Filipa. "Walking and Rhythmicity: Sensing Urban Space." *Journal of Urban Design* 13 (2008): 125-39.