An Impossible Profession

How To Plan The Unplanned?

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A short film about how to design informality in the city. By comparing the chaotic Lagos with the orderly Stockholm the film rethinks the role of the designer and shows that planning as a sphere of building consistently destroys lived space. It illuminates the tension between the orderly and the chaotic, the ideal and reality.

**Project overview**

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Thanks to: Salimatu Miatta Balde  
Adeju Thompson  
Greer Hanshaw  
Emmanuel Obasuyi
Jate Bleeker
KTH Royal Institute of Technology
For the degree of Masters in Urbanism
21 October 2016

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The new town is a challenge to men to create human life! … Bit no one should say
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Theoretical Background

The origin of this thesis began with an intellectual struggle. It was a struggle that I started to develop when I was working on a design proposal for Grønland, a multicultural neighbourhood in Oslo, as part of the last design studio of my master’s program in urbanism. The aim of the studio was to develop a design strategy through the lens of informality. I studied informal urban settlements in both Oslo and Casablanca and tried to unravel their physical characteristics, their production processes, the people that are the driving forces behind them, the role of the architect and their definition. I realised that informal urbanism is perhaps the clearest example of city-making as ordinary practice and relates closely to what French sociologist Lefebvre (1991) called lived space. Lived space is an essential aspect of the urban, and what it means to be alive, to be human (Westin, 2014: 47) Such as informal space, lived spaces are produced by the patterns of everyday life and by the bodily experiences of its users and are not just constructed by assorted professionals and technocrats (Merrifield, 2006: 109).

The concept of informality helped me to grasp the complexity of cities and made me question my role as a designer in the design of cities. The fact that I as a designer can influence how people are going to live and how people will use certain spaces made me scared. Wasn’t I going to destroy the social structure and the multicultural identity of Grønland if I were to impose a classical architectural and aesthetically well-designed structure that does not represent the directly lived spaces of the local citizens? Maybe it was better to just propose nothing…On the other hand, I also firmly believed that designers can be extremely valuable for society by imagining other spatial futures, by testing new things out, by translating people desires into physical space and by dealing with the major issues the world is facing today. The design studio helped me to find a middle ground between the perspective of the architect, who often sees and choreographs the city from above, and the perspective of the individual, who makes and feels the city through its everyday life. By redefining my own role as a designer - being a facilitator rather than a choreographer of the design of cities - I could contribute to the bigger challenges of cities without disallowing individuals to represent the space of their everyday experience and exclude city-making as an ordinary practice.
Especially in Stockholm it appears that the role of the architect as the creator of cities is still very present. For most architects and planners the city is considered a highly conceived space, whereby modernist tools of representation, visualisation and power dominate the debate about future urban development (Westin, 2014: 13, Marcus, 2000). For example, guiding modernist principles such as the promotion of open space, order, the ideology of the straight line and the separation of conflict are still profoundly existent in the discourse on Swedish urban planning (Westin, 2014: 80). Approaching the design of cities from a highly conceived – or imagined – perspective makes the practice of design a very visual exercise. It puts the possibilities for bodily interaction of the individual with the built environment at risk. Without being able to include the bodily experiences of space and urbanity of the user into the design of cities we might face a future whereby the individual feels more emotionally estranged from the city than ever. Or, such as Sennett (2008: 98) put it: ‘by acting as the world fabricator and by putting emphasis on creating ordered cities, planners and architects run the risk of suffocating people’. When the lived space of the urban is disintegrated, through in this case a strong modernist approach to planning and architecture, the individual might start to feel alienated (Lefebvre, 1995: 121).

Alienation can be defined as a type of neurosis whereby the condition plays out in the body of the individual (Westin, 2014: 125). Being alienated implies two things. First, there is a conflict between society and the individual whereby a part of the individual’s desire must give way for a society to be possible at all. Secondly, the term alienation implies that someone feels alien or estranged from something (Israel, 1971: 11). The individual can feel estranged from society, which for example has an objective existence in the design of urban areas or has an existence in the mode of production, or the individual can feel estranged from a part of the self. In fact both are interrelated, because the estrangement from society is manifested in the body of the individual. Alienation – like most neuroses – is a consequence of an imbalance between forces in the human psyche (Westin, 2014: 126). It is often the result of the severe repression of the body’s desires and lust for play.

Alienation implies that something essential has broken into two pieces (Westin, 2014: 235). In this case it is the individual that is divided into two pieces and finds itself in the middle of his or her rational and emotional side. The internalized reasoning and behaviour rules of modern society teach the divided individual that knowledge and the intellect stand synonym for power, whereas bodily experiences have no purpose but being on themselves. As a result, the design of cities has become a very rational activity whereby the designer represses a part of his or her bodily, the sexual and the impassioned. We as designers have overdosed an orderly and rational world so much that planning and architecture can be diagnosed as a neurotic activity (Westin, 2014: 129). It is most dangerous that by repressing our body we do not only alienate ourselves but we also fabricate a world that does not represent the lived spaces of everyday life and risks the suffocating of the individual.

A large body of scientific knowledge has made similar critiques about planning and design as a neurotic activity that consistently denies its emotional side and chooses conceived space above lived space as a major mode of the production of cities. Although critiquing is useful in order to illuminate major problems in society it often does not provide any directions for improvement of the societal condition. Since my position as a designer is being critiqued I feel like I have to reconsider my role and find alternative ways how to represent the lived space of the individual in the design of cities. Knowing this is a paradox, I will in this thesis explore the question: how can I design lived space?
References


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**Transcript of voice-over**

*Introduction: an impossible challenge*
I face an impossible challenge. As a designer from Western-Europe I have been taught to impose order upon the chaotic city. I have produced designs that repress the lived spaces of everyday life and treat the individual as an object. Sociologist Richard Senett (2008: 98) argues that: ‘by acting as the world fabricator and by putting emphasis on creating ordered cities, planners and architects run the risk of suffocating people’. So, how do I practise an urbanism that constructs everyday life, produces it, and consciously creates it?

1. The lived: Lagos
I went to Lagos to study lived space. Such as informal spaces, lived spaces are produced by the patterns of everyday life and the bodily experiences of its users. According to French sociologist Lefebvre (1991) and Westin (2014: 47) lived space is an essential aspect of the urban, and what it means to be alive, to be human.

Appropriation is an essential aspect of the lived space. Due to the rapid process of urbanization and the lack of central planning people have appropriated urban spaces in extremely inventive ways.

Mcgregor canal is an illegal community that is located underneath the eastern highway of Lagos Island. The community economically thrives upon its car garage and its farm. The community has organised itself in such a way that the self-constructed homes are invisible from the main street by operating the car garage and the farm around it.

What I also found fascinating was just to simply observe all the different types of informal trade that took place throughout the whole of Lagos. On the central market of Lagos Island it appeared that people have creatively appropriated the empty floors of the surrounded buildings. It was intriguing to observe how people changed the function of the railtrack by using it for their market stand when the train did not pass by. You can also find moveable stands selling food everywhere, although they are mainly concentrated around the highway junctions, that function as public transport hub.
During the traffic jam for example, most highways transform into busy market streets, with people walking around the stationary cars trying to sell their goods.

Makoko is an illegal community of 100,000 inhabitants. In Makoko people have appropriated urban space for the use of trade, housing and the production of furniture. The community of Makoko is extremely self-sufficient when it comes to the production of its own food and even foresees in one third of the total amount of fish consumed in Lagos. Most of the goods that are being consumed are transported over Makoko’s extensive waterways by canoes that are made of wood, which the community has extracted from the nearby rainforest. The community shows that without the existence of a formalised institution people still have the ability to organise themselves and install institutions, such as a court, that creates a certain social order.

The lived spaces of Lagos are threatened in their existence by an increasingly capitalist mode of production. The accumulation of capital forms a force that strongly reshapes Lagos’ urban landscape. Planners and designers have reproduced this status quo (Harvey, 2001: 237). They have stimulated capital to flow to real estate assets and new construction sites. Besides planners aim to transform Lagos built environment into something that is similar to Western aesthetics. Lagos’ formal architecture fails to represent the patterns everyday life because it imposes order on chaos. It downgrades the livings of urban inhabitants and signifies a loss of the city as what Lefebvre called, the city as oeuvre.

2. The conceived: Stockholm
When I came back to Stockholm I realised that the role of the architect as the creator of cities is even more present here than in Lagos. Compared to the urban structure of Lagos Stockholm fails to incorporate the lived spaces of everyday life. And if there is something that Swedish planning has tried to eliminate from its birth it is the friction between activities and bodies (Westin, 2014: 248). The individual however associates the urban with primarily the crowd, the sounds of traffic, the bodily sensation of animal warmth of other people and of life itself (Westin, 2014: 92).

With the knowledge I gained in Lagos I discovered that exactly in the most planned area of Stockholm, Rinkeby, there were a lot of examples of lived space.

The lived spaces of Rinkeby are especially experienced by Salimatu, who has been living in the area for almost 10 years.

In Rinkeby there are many small-scale businesses that have been added to residential buildings. Most of those buildings were often originally designed for the purpose of habitation only. Most corner stores are located at former storage spaces, laundry rooms and garage spaces. They were remodelled by the entrepreneurs themselves and formally administrated by temporary building permission (Olsson, 2008: 258). As of today they function as important places for public culture.

Through appropriation people have the possibility to inhabit the city, which is according to philosopher Heidegger (1977: 34) an essential aspect of our ‘being in this world’.

The process off self-positioning and relating to a society does not always feel similar to the one you grew up in is difficult without the possibility to appropriate. Through the appropriation of public space marginalised groups have the possibility to represent their interests and claim issues
of public concern (Olsson, 2008: 261).

**Conclusion**

I have learned that although urbanism is an impossible profession, it is possible to design lived space. In the case of Lagos lived spaces can be designed by the development of short-term strategies that improve the lives of the urban citizens as of tomorrow. This includes small-scale interventions such as the provision of sanitation, infrastructure or housing.

In the case of Stockholm lived spaces can be designed by forcing the planning regulations to become more flexible and promote the temporary use of space. The designer should trust the capabilities of the individual when it comes to the appropriation of public space and guide the individual’s desires where necessary.

I hope that by showing my struggle designers will realise that the city cannot be prescribed. The city is an infinite game that will never be completed. I plead for an urbanism that balances the planned and the unplanned so that everyone can feel at home in the city.

**References**


**Respondents**

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