



**Andres Kurg, Rob Shields**

## Knowing the city

*Interview with Rob Shields*

The "city" has become a favourite object of research in academia as well as the cultural mainstream and has spawned the areas of history, geography, sociology, literature and architecture. Rob Shields argues that the discipline has suffered however from its inability to clearly define the focus of its field and sketches out three important research areas for the field of urban studies: The social and economic sustainability of cities, future governance and administrative norms of cities, and finally virtual forms of urban life supported by new information and communication technologies.

**Andres Kurg:** I would like to start with the topic of "knowing the city". In one of your articles, "A Guide to Urban Representations", you start off by saying that while we speak about the reality of the city as a thing, then what we do is that "[w]e classify an environment as a city and then reify the city as a thing. The notion of "the city" itself, is a representation". Could you please expand/explain what this proposition means for the research on the city or for somebody studying the urban?

**Rob Shields:** Thanks for this question. It goes to the heart of the problem of the city as an object of knowledge. How do we "know" the city – under what conditions does the urban come to be "knowable"? Of course, the city is not an object, properly understood. In everyday life we accept and play along with the idea that we can grasp the entirety of a city from a glimpse of one small part of it that we personally witness. Todorov refers to this sort of object as a complex totality. We accept that the city continues on in a stereotypical manner, petering out at some sort of topographical, economic or administrative edge. This may seem odd, but we have been trained from an early age and from experience to accept on faith not only the continuity of landscapes beyond our point of view but the authority of maps and official documents. We might try to retreat to a great height, but as De Certeau pointed out, a bird's-eye view requires that we sacrifice our knowledge of the intimate detail of city life. It contributes to the tendency to objectify the city, overlooking the extent to which it relies on normative conventions which must be performed again and again by each and every citizen – rules which govern how people drive, or the framework of what Bourdieu might call a habitus of urban behaviour and social interactions which allows the city to operate relatively smoothly.

So we often engage in a representation – that is, an abstraction and generalization from what we empirically know of a city to the totality of the city, and to other cities. Since the article you refer to, I have also argued that the urban transcends the materiality of the city itself. Urban refers to an intangible quality of living and of socio-economic interactions which might

characterize interactions in settings other than a city, but which enough people assume to typify interactions in a city that it has become commonplace to elide the two terms, urban and city, and not notice that the first term refers to a quality, and the second term refers to the concrete and achieved aspects of life in large settlements.

More specifically, the urban is a "virtuality", or an intangible which is ideal but not an abstraction, and real but not actual. Examples of virtualities include memories, laws, norms, society and ideal-types related to gender, class and so on. The multiple potentials of this virtual object, the urban, are "actualized" in the singularity of a given "city". Understanding cities however, requires that we simultaneously appreciate their virtuality, their urban character. If we add this virtual aspect to the phenomenon of our faith in the extension of the city in a systemic manner beyond what we can survey in a glance around us or at a map (which often focus only on the city centre, requiring one to look at further maps or over the page to find maps of scattered suburbs), then we have more adequate sense of the city as a complex totality, as a unified concrete-virtual phenomenon.

These two critiques – representation and virtuality – demonstrate that the city and/or the urban have been poorly understood if approached as empirical, nominalistic objects of study which could in some way be adequately researched either by only mapping or counting up the material life of the city, or by only researching the qualitative urbanness of a place.

**A.K:** Several "Western" universities today offer the program of urban studies, but with very different content and ideas what it is/should be. In Helsinki University, where you also have taught, it is offered as an interdepartmental postgraduate program combining history, geography and sociology of the urban, in many other places urban studies is seen as a discipline standing next to urban planning and architecture. Where do you see this discipline standing? It does not seem to me to have established itself academically so strongly or universally as the cultural studies-related programs in the humanities: visual studies, gender studies, museum studies.

**R.S:** I agree – the discipline has suffered in part because of its inability to specify the ontology of its object of research. Without an adequate conceptualization of the virtual, the urban seems to be merely a non-existing abstraction. This is the epistemological position that has dominated European scientific thought since the Enlightenment – marking a division between the material and the abstract, without a more subtle sense of the existence of intangibles, nor the actuality of, for example, probabilities. But this changes for the natural sciences with developments in probabilistic mathematics from the eighteenth century and set theory from the end of the nineteenth century. There has been an inexcusable delay in appreciating the ontological import of these shifts for the social sciences. This becomes critical in the current moment because one simply cannot analyze global flows, knowledge-based economies, computer-mediated social interaction and multicultural societies of today without a theory of the virtual.

Without this, a synthesis has eluded practitioners who tend to divide up, parcelize, into different disciplines, the topics related to complex totalities such as cities. Furthermore, the urban becomes a paradox because of its lack of perfect fit with specific measures of density or classifications of the built environment. For example, certain cities in Canada (Ottawa, Toronto) have administrative boundaries which enclose un-built-up or undeveloped areas

which one can only call rural. Indeed, an urban–rural divide is less clear and perhaps less important than a divide between metropolitan and hinterland regions given the tendency of urban lifestyles to penetrate quite far into the peripheries surrounding major cities. One can also detect post–city examples of the urban such as North Carolina's "Research Triangle". This "rural sprawl" of corporate buildings in campus–like settings and condominiums set amongst golf courses is defined more by its motorways than its old built–up cities of Raleigh, Durham and Charlotte

It is time to shift our sense of the urban and rural away from the old notion of *urbs* and *orbs*, of the city and the country. We wouldn't have these multiple terms (in English and in other languages) if they historically meant exactly the same things!

urban = city = urbs

rural = countryside = orbs

The urban and the rural are different aspects of a context within which cities develop which are difficult to separate. Rather than a topological context (mapping the geology, the elevations and so on which are present in the notion of the rural), the urban is *chorological*, it refers to a socio–environmental context or *choros* (to adopt what was originally a Byzantine Latin term for that space outside the walls of the city (of Constantinople), and a space biblically held to be determining of the fate of those within the walls). Unlike the material city, the urban is a sociological and theoretical object (once again, a virtuality). This approach seems to me very different from, for example, the American focus on the postmodern city (i.e. Los Angeles) in a way which fetishizes the city to the detriment of its broader "urbanity" its context or *choros*.

**A.K.:** In the past decades the topic of "the city" has strongly emerged as a field of interest for different disciplines and areas so far vaguely interested in it. I have foremost in mind several art exhibitions where the notion of the city has served as the central core for curators (e.g. "Cities on the Move" by Obrist or "Century City" in Tate Modern), numerous popular or semi–popular books and readers in this field (e.g. a special series in Reaktion press, called *Topographics*). How do these different representations fit into the academic field of urban studies and the discipline of urban planning?

The urban city has not gone away despite the weakness of urban and regional studies as a discipline and the trivializing approaches used. Such exhibitions – and others such as Documenta X in Kassel which included projects involving interventions in various cities – have returned the urban city to the popular imaginary. Economists have recognized the importance of clusters of industries – not only of firms but of skills – in localities which offer a soft, cultural infrastructure to support the flow of ideas. Amongst these are understandings of key goals for a local industry or of key opportunities for the generation of wealth by applying a new technology. These understandings are shared not only between technicians in firms, but between technological enterprises and financiers who are necessary backers for major endeavours.

The significance of these exhibitions is that they present surveys of artistic research and cultural representations of not just the city but of the urban. Significantly, these representations highlight understandings of the urban and then get applied back into specific cities as critical artistic practice. Perhaps urban planning has not noticed, but urban studies, sometimes in the guise of

architectural projects and architectural visualizations, is an important part of the content of artistic interventions.

**A.K:** What would currently be the main academic interests in urban studies? How (where) do you see it developing?

**R.S:** I will only mention three areas, there are certainly more. Some of the main academic interests in urban studies are at the frontier between communications studies and planning. They focus on questions such as cultural representations, historical literary and visual cultures in specific cities and the manner in which these serve as cultural resources for ongoing social development. Virtual forms of urban life supported by information and communication technologies – not only the fixed internet and its services but also wireless and mobile phone interaction – complement mobility and concrete social interaction within and between cities.

A second area is the sustainability of cities, a topic that more often than not has been negatively correlated with the urban and urbanization in the sense of the expansion and densification of cities and their traffic. As notions of sustainability include the social and economic, the urban and other virtualities enter into the equation.

A third area is the governance of the city, notably the megalopolis. Law, planning codes, the framework of private property surveys, administrative norms and procedures, security practices and so on are part of the distinctive character of the urban. Especially laws and institutional capacities are good examples of virtualities and the manner in which they are not merely abstractions such as concepts, but are "really-existing" but still ideal entities which have demonstrable impacts on concrete actions. The character of this urbanity is changing rapidly, not just in unstable and rapidly changing economies of the global "South" but in the security-obsessed cities of the "North" including Europe which have sharply changed the legal frameworks of citizenship rights and participation in urban life which has always included dissent rather than being culturally or normatively monolithic.

**A.K:** You are known as one of the principal scholars on Henri Lefebvre. Could you please tell what has been the reason for the "rediscovery" of Lefebvre, his significance for urban studies and spatial theory? How is his role and intellectual heritage regarded in Anglo-American and French culture/academia? Are there any differences?

**R.S:** Why Lefebvre? The recent English translation of some of his key texts on the city, such as *Urban Revolution* (Minnesota University Press 2003) has prompted some insightful appraisals of his continued significance outside of France, where he is little cited despite the republication of many of his books. First, Lefebvre is inspirational. One reviewer, T. Hogan, calls him a "William Morris figure", now read less for his arguments than invoked as a icon dedicated to deep cultural change – a revolution in everyday life. For unlike his Marxist contemporaries such as Marcuse who prescribed revolution, Lefebvre proffered a diagnosis of alienation (everydayness, *quotidienneté*, *Alltäglichkeit*), but advocated a practice of change from the bottom-up, a revolution *within* the everyday. Second, he is recognized as a more political and academic writer, whose texts must be read as incomplete but parts of which may be cherished, regardless of their pamphleteering qualities.

Consider, for example, that Lefebvre comments in *Urban Revolution* that urban society is a virtual object which might be approached but not know through the city as a material environment. This accords uncannily with my argument but Lefebvre fails to provide a definition of the virtual other than to call it, a "blank...a dark moment... a blind field" (p.26 in the 2003 English translation) and goes on to muddy the argument by referring also to abstractions.

**A.K:** Edward Soja has spoken about the "spatial turn" in contemporary humanities and social sciences. Do you agree with him? What could be the implications of this?

**R.S:** In the English–language social science literature, the "spatial turn" dates from the pioneering research at Lancaster University's Regionalism research group in the early 1980s which intersected with UK urban geographers interest in the topic of "locality" in the mid–1980s. This was always an interest in social space, not in simple topographical space. To this might be added also a "cultural turn" which is still more strongly represented in the UK and Australia than in mainstream North American social science faculties. This was not culture in the strictly anthropological sense of an observable way of life, but a performative notion of culture developed from the British Cultural Studies and Frankfurt school sense of ideological practices.

The implications have included bringing new voices and interests to the field of urban and regional studies, and the prominent role of sociologists and other social scientists (Urry, Giddens, Lash, Sassen and others) in cultural and social geography. But what does a focus on "space" mean? For many it has meant a focus on cities, on the one hand, and on the global as a generalization of the urban on the other hand. It can also be operationalized in other ways, such as the current interest in questions of the geographic scale at which particular political jurisdictions and mechanisms operate and the scalar or scale–free qualities of specific socio–economic and informational phenomena such as networks. Alongside this, however, there has been a nagging concern for the temporality of present shifts and trends which is more and more to the fore. This interest in time could be understood in terms of not only tempo (speed) and rhythm (cyclical or fractal character) but of temporal modes. For example, forms of governance may involve representations of a past, a focus on the present, and simulacral attempts to anticipate the near–future (anticipatory power). Finally, there is a more recent "turn" – to the biological, influenced by Foucauldian interest in biopower, the media spectacle of advances in genetics and biotechnology, and prominent social debates around homosexuality, abortion, euthanasia and humans' relationship with animals and the ecosystem.

**A.K:** You have recently written a book called *The Virtual*. What are its connections with the topic of the spatial that has been one of your central interests, and how it could perhaps be theorised in connection with the city? (Could the revolution in electronic media be thought of as a basis for an urban revolution?)

**R.S:** I hope the responses above show how the virtual can clarify our understanding of the fit, or lack thereof, between modernist categories and concepts and urban and city phenomena. The virtual can be used as a critical tool to reveal, for example, the imposition of a virtual figure as a standard of behaviour in economics. What Campbell and Miller call "economic virtualism" develops out of an abstract representation of the rational actor. We can also see the need for a critical examination of the status of virtualities in the economics

and accounting conventions being developed by the OECD, ISO and World Bank to support socio-economic intangibles such as intellectual property, brands and stock market valuations of the knowledge-base of firms.

Branding is now central to the marketing of cities and regions to investors and tourists. Brands are virtual objects that inflect and mediate abstract ideals (e.g. the concept of democracy) with the concrete (e.g. Athens as "the cradle of democracy"). Spatializations of places within complex webs of social meaning are precisely virtualizations of the concrete materiality of given places. Why? Places and regions are culturally constructed as appropriate only to certain types of socio-economic and cultural action – cast as "places for this and places for that". Spatialization involves an ongoing process of (contested) representations which legitimate or de-legitimate social action. They are virtualities because they consist of intangible attributes which may appear to be natural but are not necessary nor rooted in the nature, nor the topography nor geology of a place. As *Places on the Margin* showed, spatializations are as much about the absence of activity (located elsewhere in the network of distance and difference) as its presence.

**R.S:** While branding travels easily via electronic media and advertising, extending the hold of spatializations on cultures, it seems to me to risk an aestheticization of place and a commodification of the virtual. This is the opposite of an "urban revolution" such as the one envisioned by Lefebvre in which citizens "took back" the city as the social centre of an extended community. This would be a kind of revolution feared by Lefebvre – one with the trappings of revolution but in which economic liberation is missing.

**A.K:** In an interview to a Finnish Urban Studies Magazine you compared your brief experience of Tallinn to that in Helsinki and St Petersburg, noting the great difference in these three cities. The recent changes in Tallinn appear very dramatic and contradictory in many ways. You described the future of Tallinn as a "global space of consumption" that sells products mostly for visitors, tourists. The question is, should we be happy about it and try to accelerate it (and how?), and what other kind of changes it will bring to the city?

**R.S:** I'm fearful about the fate of the people of Tallinn. And there are many Tallinns, the world over. The city is beautiful and more splendidly renovated every day. It is a good case study which should be researched because it raises so many questions. Is it possible to avoid commodifying the urban quality of life when a city such as Tallinn is transformed into a tourist magnet? This would mean a type of Disneyfication of the life of citizens. Should the city centre heritage area be dedicated entirely to tourists and a "real city" be built in the suburbs for citizens? Or is it possible to strike a balance between citizens and tourists' interests? For other cultures, Tallinn will be understood in a different way than local inhabitants understand and live it. Research shows that this usually implies a struggle as, for example, entrepreneurs adapt and "redecorate" the city to match up to the expectations of foreign tourists. To balance this development equation it is essential to transcend tourism by developing another cultural industry or even another sector. Ideally this would complement the tourist spatialization (and temporalization) of Tallinn as an "ancient walled city" (to cite the stereotype) by creating new representations and respatializing Tallinn as, for example, a Baltic centre for cultural production (Multimedia? Drama? Film? Music?) drawing on but not fixated by its past or its beauty. The complexity of this can be seen when one considers that this task must be undertaken in relation to the spatialization of surrounding places – Helsinki, St. Petersburg, Estonia and the Baltic as a whole). A

collaborative effort is in order.

Should one be happy? The tourists are, workers in Disneyland may be, but will citizens in Tallinn be inspired, enthused and energized by the city in which they live? That is the question: will their city be a good *urban* place for now and for the future, not just a historical *city* for tourism?

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