

Mobile Spaces: Everyday Practices in Indian, North American and European Cities

Veranstalter: Interdisciplinary research group „Mobile Spaces“, Heidelberg University

Datum, Ort: 01.06.2014–03.06.2014, Heidelberg

Bericht von: Editha Marquardt, Geographisches Institut, Universität Heidelberg; Marie Sander, Institut für Ethnologie, Universität Heidelberg

In June 2014 the Heidelberg University interdisciplinary research group „Mobile Spaces“ organized an international workshop on comparative urbanism. The workshop emphasized on the challenges faced when studying and seeking to compare dis/connectivities of everyday practices in cities in India, Europe, and North America. The workshop strengthened the interdisciplinary exchange in urban studies and brought together experts from geography, anthropology, linguistics, sociology, architecture, urban planning and urban design. It discussed but also demonstrated the potential of comparing cities across distinct regions of the world.

The opening panel was chaired by Ulrike Gerhard (Heidelberg) and explored public spaces in Delhi, Heidelberg and New York. Based on his ongoing study of two functional metro corridors, urban designer ARUNAVA DASGUPTA (Delhi) discussed the emerging characteristics of spatial change in Delhi resulting from the newly built ‘Mass Rapid Transit System’ (MRTS). The metro was opened in 2002. In 2011 it included five lines and one side line and had a length of 181.8 km. The metro system has started altering memories of the everyday experience in Delhi and introduced a new commuting life for its citizens. It was seen as a step of Delhi becoming a global city. The analysis of twenty locations along two lines the project showed that all places changed simultaneously. Near the metro stations new urban villages developed with gated communities and new middle income housing types. The primarily elevated system has also become the vehicle of structural change in this city-region and is entwined with alterations of the built environ-

ment and a re-organization and reformation of public domains.

Providing insights into urban planning in Germany, MICHAEL BRAUM (Heidelberg) stressed the importance of public spaces by referring to the German constitution and the ‘dignity of cities’. Braum regards public space as a key strategy in urban development with several functions. Public space gives the European cities their special character. Because public space should belong to everybody it must be integrative and therefore more than only the „space between buildings“. Following his arguments public space can be seen as a space for social appropriation and trans-cultural exchange, as a place of natural perception or a scenery-artistic expression of a culture of the public, or in his function of shaping the cityscape by streets, lanes and places which promise orientation and commensurability. The quality of the public space can give us not only an insight into the city’s constitution but also into the character of the individuals in the city. And even further the openness or exclusion of public spaces reflects the constitution of a society.

JULIANE VON HAGEN (Kassel) discussed the historical development of parks, squares, plazas and green spaces in New York, and the recent efforts to change traffic spaces into pedestrian zones. One prominent example is the redesign of old metro lines in a green linear park. Besides, she presented so-called privately owned public spaces (POPS), products of the cooperation between the city and private builders. Depending on the site, the neighborhood and its actors, different partnerships evolved to create and maintain the spaces. Although different public private cooperations are not without conflicts, von Hagen argued that New York City has developed interesting modi to shape these interdependencies.

Workshop participants critically discussed the implications of such partnerships in city development. The panel and the following discussion showed that public space is also characterized by questions of power, as the three types of public space presented exemplified. Who makes the rules how to use public spaces – let it be metro stations, integrative space between buildings or privately owned

public spaces? Which groups and activities are excluded and which are allowed?

The second panel with a strong theoretical focus on comparative urbanism was chaired by Christiane Brosius (Heidelberg). Sociologist SUJATA PATEL (Hyderabad) opened the panel with a call for a strong historical perspective that promotes critical reflection of colonial influences in today's cities and in urban theories. Patel particularly promoted the need for establishing South-South networks in comparative studies. First of all there has to be answered the question of „What is South?“ In a geographical sense it can, according to Patel, be answered with Asia, Africa, South-America, but in a political way it means colonialism. Patel stated that the world has always been a globalized society, but the political and scientific discourse divided it into South and North. For that reason Patel criticised ongoing Eurocentrism in the social sciences resulting from the colonial past. To overcome that domination of Eurocentric thinking it is necessary to universalize concepts and to substitute hierarchical structures of thinking.

In their comment to Patel's presentation Geographer EBERHARD ROTHFUSS (Bayreuth) and his project partners SIRISNAVASALU SUMATHI and RAMU MANIVANNAN (Chennai) pointed out that nowadays social sciences put great emphasis on countering the problems of Eurocentrism by reflections and dialogue. Consequences are shared projects, networks and workshops. Useful seems to be the concept of urban society as a critical theory of society. It concerns the transformation towards a world, in which urban rationalities become the dominant rationalities. This process proceeds around the world and is related to different developments of exclusions which they term the anti-urban society and the non-urban society. Rothfuß, Sumathi and Manivannan underlined the necessity of comparison of cities in different parts of the world by using such critical concepts. A good example is their project 'Urbanself: A North-South network on urban self-organisation and public life in Europe, India and China' with partners from seven countries.

The third panel, chaired by Beatrix Busse

(Heidelberg), focused on negotiations of the 'open', or cosmopolitan city. It discussed the ways in which marginalized groups such as women or migrants are part of the city's 'openness', but are at the same time immobilized and restricted to certain positions and practices.

Geographer MELISSA BUTCHER (Milton Keynes) explored the connection between mobility and gendered urban space in Delhi by using the trope of 'respectability'. The redevelopment of Delhi within a framework of achieving 'global city' status has led to the construction of a new mobilities infrastructure. The enabled greater access to public spaces in Delhi is intertwined, however, with a cultural discourse that uses the visibility of women in public space in legitimizing Delhi's claims to 'cosmopolitan' and 'world class living'. Through an analysis of the everyday mobility of young women through the city, Butcher showed that Delhi's redevelopment may represent new forms of 'freedom' for women, but that it also reinforces a degree of immobility through the continuation of cultural frames of reference such as 'respectability'. This continuation limits appropriate behaviors and places to be seen for women and defines boundaries between the permissible and impermissible, between public or private space.

ROBERT LEMON (Austin / Berkeley), Geographer and filmmaker, has studied taco trucks owned by Mexican migrants in Columbus, Ohio. According to him, taco trucks link time and space from Mexico to the United States, but at the same time struggle with North American policies and ideologies. There are two levels of mobility imbedded in the taco truck, the migration of the owners from Mexico and the truck's option to travel between places and shift space. Although the trucks exude robust mobility, most of them remain parked in one spot for several years and may move without notice to another location. There is no singular reason for why a taco truck will move, but remaining in business is the primary motive. The truck performs place, mobility is incidentally essential. Thus the taco truck embodies the notion of immobile mobility, neither fixed or extremely mobile, it is simply ephemeral and elusive. There

is indeed a symbolic representation of place found in the taco truck. Most often the food taco trucks serve is predictable and reflects a particular culinary region of Mexico, but the owners will augment the menu for taste preferences from one neighborhood to another. The mobile taco truck in the North American urban landscape forges new relationships between Mexican food and North American perceived cultural practices and demonstrates how food is a spatial process. By narrating stories of taco truck owners and their customers interesting insights of the mobile everyday practices arise. Besides, the analysis of Mexican taco trucks provides new perspectives on migration history.

The international workshop was concluded with a commentary by EDITHA MARQUARDT and MARIE SANDER (both Heidelberg). A productive plenary discussion about the methodological and analytical possibilities of and approaches to future comparative urban research followed that part and showed further challenges for new approaches.

Comparative gestures seem common in peoples' everyday lives. Citizens contrast their daily urban experiences to those in former places of living or imagine lives elsewhere. And urban research always contains comparative traits. But how to frame such urban comparisons theoretically? How do we gain additional value through thinking comparatively, and where are the limits?

Jennifer Robinson's observations of the divided nature of urban studies were a starting point for the workshop discussion¹, in particular her critique of the tendency of comparative projects to reinscribe *a priori* divisions and hierarchies by selecting cities with specific assumed commonalities. Several lines of thought for research across divides such as the Global North and Global South were proposed. Everyday life cannot be regarded as a homogenous term that bespeaks any essential truth about the ways in which individuals experience their urban environment around them. The presentations and discussions with the various regional foci showed that it is a highly contested terrain, fragmented, particularized and with distinct histories. The 'spaces' and 'places' of every-

day life are highly pluralistic and are constantly being defined and redefined through processes of urban planning and building (for instance new metro lines in Delhi or the redevelopment of green sites in New York), through mobilities (for instance Mexican migrants setting up taco trucks in Ohio), or through cultural frames and ideologies (such as 'respectability' for women in the Indian context).

Thinking about contemporary urban life shows how far it is characterized by mobility or as a contingent reality continuum. In this sense urban spaces are mobile spaces. For many migrants moving to the city promises better living conditions, easier way of earning a living. But mobility inside a city is an urban aspect as well and structures urban life. Inhabitants have to be mobile, e.g. commuting from one quarter to others or changing the living place. For that, infrastructure is recognized as a condition of possibility in urban discourses today. The character of the mobile city differs if we bring in further aspects (such as gender, migration, language or space). This interesting discussion is leading to take into consideration social mobility as well. Besides, spaces are mobile in the sense that they are changing rapidly. New everyday practices develop and change the city. People bring their own desires, needs and wants from rural places to the city, from one country to another, from North to South. In this way cities are places of longing and yearning, where people try to fulfil their expectations (e.g. in urban gardening, knitting in the public). Additionally, mobile spaces can mean mobile working places – also an important dimension relating to urban live. Creative workers often do not longer work in offices but use cafes, trains or co-working spaces.

Overall, looking at mobile spaces reveals homogeneous patterns throughout the city, while at the same time discontinuities and contradictions occur. These patterns are exemplified by trends such as gentrification, inequalities and exclusion, or feelings of in/security and fear of crime. Follow-

¹ Jennifer Robinson, „Cities in a World of Cities: The Comparative Gesture.“ International Journal of Urban and Regional Research 35 (1), 2010, pp.1–23.

ing Roy², comparative studies should take into consideration peripheries, informalities, zones of exception, and grey spaces. Patel stated in the discussion to focus on exclusions, politics, and informalities. The workshop revealed how important it is that comparative studies are highly self-reflective and should include the comparison of contexts. In this way it is possible to compare urban life, especially if we concentrate on contextual comparison of everyday practices as well as on the cities' specific historical developments. A comparative historical perspective on the development of infrastructure in the 20th century, for instance, can promote further understanding of the distinctive modes of transportation and their shaping of North American, Indian or European cities. Also universal concepts can be compared as the concept of fear and hope, search for pleasure, need for communications and aesthetics. The discussion about the comparative analysis on mobile urbanism and the overcoming of the North-South divide in urban research brought up new insights and innovative ideas for future research.

Conference Overview:

Session I: Exploring Public Space/s

Chair: Ulrike Gerhard (Heidelberg)

Arunava Dasgupta (Delhi), Emerging Characteristics of Spatial Change. A Cross-sectional Overview of Delhi

Michael Braum (Heidelberg), Knowledge Based Urbanism and Public Space in Germany

Juliane von Hagen (Kassel), Urban Spaces in New York City. Characteristics and Qualities

Session II: Comparative Urbanism

Chair: Christiane Brosius (Heidelberg)

Sujata Patel (Hyderabad), Is there a South Perspective to Urban Studies?

Discussant: Eberhard Rothfuß (Bayreuth)

Session III: Negotiating the 'Open City'

Chair: Beatrix Busse (Heidelberg)

Ingo Warnke (Bremen), Urban Space as Epigrammatical Arena. Forms, Functions and Contexts of Writing in Public Spaces

Melissa Butcher (Milton Keynes), Contesting Respectability. Mobility and Gendered Space in Global Delhi

Robert Lemon (Berkeley/Austin), Taco Truck Transfigurations. Food is Spatial

Reflections

Moderation: Editha Marquardt / Marie Sander (both Heidelberg)

Film Show

Transfusion (2013); followed by: Discussion with filmmaker and geographer Robert Lemon (Berkeley/Austin, USA).

Tagungsbericht *Mobile Spaces: Everyday Practices in Indian, North American and European Cities*. 01.06.2014–03.06.2014, Heidelberg, in: H-Soz-u-Kult 25.09.2014.

² Ananya Roy, „Slumdog Cities: Rethinking Subaltern Urbanism: Rethinking Subaltern Urbanism.“ *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 35 (2): 2011, pp. 223–38.