

R. Shields

#### 4. The Virtuality of the Urban

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‘What is the urban as an object of research’?<sup>1</sup> The tendency is to conflate the city and the urban, but by differentiating these two terms we are able to distinguish between the actual, physical city and other aspects such as its character or its immanent and virtual quality of ‘urbanity’. These two terms, however, are closely related. The ideal type, or stereotype, of the city may lead one to presume that a densely constructed, and functionally – as well as socially – diverse settlement is a prerequisite for the urban. Furthermore, in use, the terms have acquired a reversibility, adding the confusion between the two. Thus, ‘the city’ might refer to the ideal-type just mentioned (Weber, 1966). One often refers to ‘urban planning’ or ‘urban form’ in such a way that ‘urban’ is less an adjective than a term tightly associated with the physical fabric of ‘the city’. At the same time, the city is commonly understood as an abstract totality which is more asserted than experienced empirically as a whole, unless viewed from a great height, for example.

Differentiating these terms is essential in the present context in which the internet and other communication technologies lead us to realize that the extent of urban life reaches far into the surrounding hinterlands of major metropolises. Urban geographers have long been aware of the close relationship between cities and these surrounding areas. Thus, in contrast to life in the countryside, to be truly rural –that is, non-urban – is to be on a distant periphery, a frontier null-point of sociability which is increasingly difficult to locate in geographical space. This is especially true of Europe but also true of most countries including the United States and Canada. For example, the binary of the rural and the urban now maps unevenly onto the division of the countryside and the city with pockets of rurality and peripherality surrounded by the landscape of commuter 'belts' while within the same region affluent bedroom communities may punctuate disadvantaged and under-serviced rural areas. Some cities have also developed in patterns which seem more rural than suburban, such as as low-rise developments, malls and clusters of box stores interspersed with natural areas. Stitching together the elements of this patchwork landscape, motorways define and link developments (for example, the Charlotte-Raleigh-Durham triangle of North Carolina). While older service centres do remain, overall these are more ex-centric than concentric, network cities.

The difference between the noun ‘city’ and the adjective ‘urban’ points to a historicity of the urban which is quite separate from the history of its physical development. We usually think of the city as a material context, but of course there is more to it than that. For example, some urban centres are said to be ‘more like a city’ than others - what does such a comment refer to? The

tradition of research on urban form also recognizes that many morphologies can support a particular type of urbanity. But it has equally often been the case that the city and the urban are read together. The size of an agglomeration is an indicator of its urban status, even if size and position in an urban hierarchy is not a direct determinant of the urbanity of a city. For example, the notion of 'genus loci' interprets the character of a place as rooted in its spatial morphology. The heart of Rome is thus essentially determined by its seven hills (Norberg-Schulz, 1980). If not universally acknowledged, this 'character' is at least widely accepted amongst a given community.

### **Seeing the Urban**

We might approach the relation between the city and the urban by developing a few insightful comments originally made in Lefebvre's 1970 *La Revolution urbaine* (H. Lefebvre, 1970). This begins with a discussion of necessary concepts for theorizing the city. Lefebvre constructs a sociological and philosophical object of research, 'the urban' (Henri Lefebvre, 2003:58). The significance of the urban is that it unites the dispersed elements which take place, colloquially, 'in the city'. Rather than relying on the city as an agglomeration and collocation of activities and social processes, the urban provides a framework that is independent of the literal materiality of place and of a given city. Lefebvre appears to have understood the urban as a diagram of forces – a matrix that moves across, through and develops the city, capital and the state so that they all conceive, structure and imagine space and time in the same ways (see also Ch. 8)<sup>ii</sup> These forces are more than simply social; they are also informatic, environmental and economic.

Lefebvre is not the 'inventor' of the urban, but unlike Chicago School and ecological approaches he clearly differentiates the urban from the physical form of the city in such a way as to give the urban a status independent from the city. Classically, the urban refers merely to a site and condition in which behaviour takes place. The city is an expression of the collective behaviour and the equilibrium of urban social structure – that Park referred to as 'the vast casual and mobile aggregations which constitute our urban populations... in a state of perpetual agitation, swept by every new wind of doctrine, subject to constant alarms and in consequence... in a chronic condition of crisis' (Park, 1925:22). In a classic sociological conceit, social structure and its equilibrium –not the urban – is the 'truth' of the city and its form.

The urban is defined by Lefebvre according to what he calls its 'isotopic' character – a term used not only in its geographic sense but in the sense used by the linguist and semiotician Algirdas Greimas (Greimas & Courtés, 1982) to capture the differential combination of both utopia and dystopia, as well as critically encompassing Foucault's notion of heterotopia (Foucault, 1984). The isotopic designates the articulation of heterogeneous elements *together* with the linkages between homogeneous elements across distances, which means that the form of the city is an articulation of the city and countryside, never a pure urban space. Unlike heterotopia, isotopia is a critical concept which includes not only place but also its context, what I would term its spatialization (Shields, 1991; Shields, 1998). *Differential* space-time, which became the preferred term in Lefebvre's more widely read *Production de l'espace* (H. Lefebvre, 1974) transcends the spatial distinction of the near and far, allowing the urban – and by extension the city – to function as a site of exchange between different parties, forces and elements. Different networks are thus juxtaposed and superimposed (Lefebvre, 2003:121) such that cities are

'informed' by difference (Lefebvre, 2003: 133). Heterotopias are both excluded and interwoven in the urban: ordered times and spaces are separated by crossroads, neutral spaces, freeways, revolutions and liminal moments.

Lefebvre's theory of the urban makes this time-space an object of knowledge and opens up the historicity of the urban to investigation. As always, 'time-space' for Lefebvre is a code for a particular balance of social relations in which a specific form of rationality governing duration predominates. Anticipating a social constructionist and also the governmental point of view, this critical approach to duration is also at the heart of his critique of Bergson and thus his antipathy to Deleuze's neo-Bergsonian approach (Deleuze, 1988; Bergson, 1988). The urban as a space-time also allows Lefebvre to critically discuss the changes in the countryside by which the material order of the landscape is reorganized according to a differential, that is urban, spatio-temporal order.

### **Blanks, Dark Moments and Blind Fields**

The urban is distinct from the city, but Lefebvre emphasizes its overlooked status. For him, it is a shadow of the city but one that informs city life. The relationship between the urban and the city is outlined as an example of a dialectical relationship, but the analysis is not further developed through a social science method which would include, for example, a systematic discussion of indicators of the urban. Hogan comments preceptively in a review of a recent translation,

Lefebvre as writer... seems to be the lecturer and political pamphleteer who publishes as he speaks. Perhaps this is a function of an era when the public intellectual was to be seen and heard in real time and not just on the screen and the page. The result in words is that the whole is not greater than the parts, but some of the parts are worth cherishing, when digested in a pragmatic fashion.

... Lefebvre is like a latter-day William Morris, and this in part suggests why his name is invoked more often than his arguments used by contemporary cultural, urban and sociological theorists (Hogan, 2002:107-8).

How we actually 'get at' the urban is left much where Joyce's *Ulysses* leaves us (Joyce, 1997). A Leopold Bloom wanders through the city and in a surrealistic and idiosyncratic, 'overdimensioned' glance elaborates and amplifies all of the immaterial, intangible and symbolic aspects of the everyday operations of the city. In Lefebvre's romantic parlance, urban society is a virtual object which might be approached but not seen directly. As a virtuality, it is known only through its effects in the city as a material environment (see previous chapter). Even though he doesn't define this virtuality, he formulates the urban as an undecidable and equivocal entity: a 'blank... a dark moment... a blind field' (2003: 26).

In Lefebvre's subsequent discussion, a 'blank' is a rupture or paradox in the banal field of everyday, material order. 'Dark moments' are, for example, 'black boxes', gaps in the understanding of critical processes. We are blinded by ideologically luminous sources of knowledge. 'Blind fields' lie between disciplines or institutionalized fields of knowledge. They are unseen and unknowable.

Between fields, which are regions of force and conflict, there are *blind fields*. These are not merely dark and uncertain, poorly explored, but blind in the sense that there is a blind spot on the retina... The centre of vision doesn't see and doesn't know it is blind... The urban...remains unseen. *We* still don't see it. Is it simply that our eye has been shaped (mis-shaped) by the earlier landscape so it can no longer see a new space? ... It's not just a question of lack of education but of occlusion. We see things incompletely (Lefebvre, 2003:29).

Lefebvre argues that space must not be thought of as an abstraction but a virtuality, filled with concrete contents. 'Space qualifies as a 'thing/not thing,' for it is neither a substantial reality nor a mental reality, it cannot be resolved into abstractions... it has an actuality other than that of the abstract sign and real things which it includes' (see Rogers, 2000; Aarseth, 1988: 402).

The urban is a highly complex field of tensions, a *virtuality*, a possible-impossible that attracts the accomplished, an ever-renewed and always demanding presence-absence. Blindness consists in the fact that we cannot see the shape of the urban, the vectors and tensions inherent in this field, its logic and dialectic movement, its immanent demands. We see only things, operations, objects... With respect to the urban, there is a twofold blindness, whose emptiness and virtuality are masked by plenitude. The fact that this plenitude is called urbanism only serves to more cruelly illuminate the blind. Moreover, this plenitude borrows the objects and products, the industrial operations and technologies of the previous epoch of industrialization. The urban is veiled; it flees thought, which blinds itself and becomes fixated only on a clarity that is in retreat from the actual (Lefebvre, 2003: 40-1 italics added).

The comment that the urban is a virtual image to the concrete-ness of the city is felicitous. He notes also the importance of abstraction and its realization as well as the actualization of the urban as a given city.

Our tendency is to think of space as an abstract, with [concrete] physical contexts, as the container [*chora*] for our lives rather than the structures we helped create... But the analysis of social space, far from being reactionary or technocratic, is rather a symptom of strategic thought... that poses space as the terrain of political practice. An awareness of social space... always entails an encounter with history of – or better, a choice of histories (Ross, 1988: no page cited in Gregory, 1994:348).

### **The Virtuality of the Urban**

Like words and language, the structuralists' *langue* and *parole*, a city as 'The actual manifestation... has as a precondition the existence of the system, its *virtual* existence. ....Couldn't the urban be conceived along these lines? Couldn't it be considered a virtuality, a presence-absence?' (Lefebvre, 2003:51-2) A 'possible-impossible' and a 'presence-absence' recall Hegel's 'concrete-universal' and Marx's critical understanding of labour as a 'concrete-abstraction' in which a general concept of labour-time was instantiated in the particular process of individual work.

Bread, for instance, in passing from the baker to the consumer does not change its character as bread. It is rather that the consumer treats it as a use-value, as a particular foodstuff, whereas so long as it was in the hands of the baker it was simply representative of an economic relation, a concrete and at the same time an abstract thing.... To become use-values commodities must... enter into the exchange process (Marx, 1859: Pt. 1 online)

Thus, 'Whereas labour positing exchange-value is abstract universal and uniform labour, labour positing use-value is concrete and distinctive' (Marx, 1859: Pt. 1 online). Lefebvre sees a similar quality to space, which is both ineffable and, in the form of geographic space, a necessary part of any production or labour process (see the excellent discussion in Stanek, 2011). This is a pivotal conception for Lefebvre, yet he remains within the poles of the concrete and abstract. Even as he uses the language of the virtual, the Marxist-Hegelian framework in which he couches his work doesn't allow him to develop the virtual as a theoretical resource in and of itself. On one hand this is a strategic decision to theorize from within a Marxist framework which could be translated into the programs of the most progressive political forces of the time (the late 1960s and early 1970s), but on the other hand, he skirts the virtual, leaving it as a paradox even as other French thinkers considered the same issue: Derrida for the case of presence and absence, Deleuze for the case of time, and Lyotard for the case of incommensurable speech (respectively Derrida, 1970; Deleuze, 1981; J. F. Lyotard, 1988 and J.-F. Lyotard, 1984). The result is that critical thinkers were ill equipped to theorize the emergence of an economics that relied on accumulating value through intangibles (such as speculation on commodity futures, the service and information economies); a reactionary politics that rhetorically manipulated the virtual in the form of collective understandings of the the past and expectations of the future (the mythic and anticipatory, see Chapters 3 and 8; Castoriadis, 1987 and Massumi, 2005, respectively); and a shift in the tactics of struggle that was already happening at the time – from material sabotage and warfare to terrorism and hacking (cf. Shields, 2003; Mackenzie, 2005; Jones & Clarke, 2006).

The status of the urban is not merely an idealization, a theory, but a logic which is both temporal and spatial. The rules of private property and surplus value are integral to it, but the urban is not reducible solely to them; its sociality exceeds these economic and political processes. Lefebvre thereby initiates a debate later joined by Castells and later writers on the powers and utility of the urban as a problematique (Castells, 1977; Saunders, 1981). In the city, several spatial logics meet head on: consumption, the state, production and the residuum of everyday life. This is the 'isotopia' that Lefebvre refers to. It produces the historical-cultural form of the city. The urban designates this 'differential' space: each place or locale exists only within the whole through contrasts and oppositions which connect and distinguish it.

Superficially it may appear that I have been describing and analyzing the genesis of the city as an object... But my initial concern has been with a virtual object which I have used to describe a space-time axis. The further illuminates the past, the virtual allows us to examine and situate the realized.

The complexity of the urban phenomenon is not that of an “object”... presented as

*real* prior to any examination...

Rather than being an object that can be examined through contemplation [ie. abstractly] the reality of the urban phenomenon would be a *virtual object*. If there is a sociological concept, it is that of “urban society” (Lefebvre, 2003:23,57, 58).

Such language uncannily anticipates the more rigorous treatment of the virtual provided by post-structural philosophers since the 1970s. Unfortunately, Lefebvre later elides the concrete (city) and the virtual (urban) when he discusses tangible and intangible aspects of the city. Drawing on a more rigorous approach which sees the virtual as intangible yet real and the actual as its concrete but performative materialization, it is possible to sort through Lefebvre's evocative text to distill a more structured critical approach.

The city is lived as a concrete and everyday performance of material necessity (as most people make a living on a day-to-day or month-to-month basis). Actualization is a matter of performativity. The virtual has been described as a code, a program; in sociological terms it has affinities to Bourdieu's still-too-structuralist development of the *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977). Butler and others refer to the citational quality of these performances and embodiments (Butler, 1993). In the same sense that a play may be performed differently by different companies of actors, so the gaze is always a performance which selectively actualizes, and may even contribute to a script or place image which itself is more a virtuality. The virtual (*virtus*) is what is known, not directly, but by its effects.

Lefebvre is thus justified in sliding between the tangible and the intangible as he tries to construct a non-fragmenting and non-trivializing approach to the urban. In effect, the reality of the city is two-fold, both concrete and virtual – as any post-structuralist would agree. And despite their disagreement over how the dynamics of the relation would be modelled, Deleuze specifically would agree that any object is both concrete and virtual at once. Thus, the 'real' is both:

tangible and intangible  
city and urban  
site and space  
place and context  
material and virtual

The urban is the virtuality of the city. It allows us to theorize its becoming and understand it diagrammatically as an unfolding scenario of forces in play and ‘players’ if you will, thrown into this milieu. It is not merely the idea of the city, but the naming and characterization of the world as a space of significant objects and processes. It is a non-place space of utopia and dystopia – paradise and hell. To the extent that we understand them as real, these are virtualities and not abstractions. Thus, when Paris is characterized as romantic or Euro-Americans understand classical Athens as a metaphor of democracy they engage with a virtuality which is as much imagined as it is lived and institutionalized in our societies. Dickens characterization of nineteenth-century Manchester as a living hell similarly produced a virtuality which impacted how people lived in the city and how it developed in response to urban hygiene and other

political initiatives of the time. This virtuality was quite independent of empirical data, measuring the quality of life such as the number of days of sunshine in the city and so on

This virtual aspect is a major element of the city. At the macro level it may be significant as an urban image, but at a more human scale and in the context of everyday life we are bathed in intangibles which are hardly abstractions. In the revitalization of city districts, advertising campaigns and community events are also an important part of changing the image of an area. Collective memory – Proust’s original virtual – informs our actions. Community is lived as a reality as much as it is actualized performatively in social interaction and embodied in a visceral sense of belonging (Cohen, 1982). When concepts are given an ontological reality, such as in the case of race or gender distinct from the skin colour or physical sex of bodies, respectively, then we are dealing not just with abstractions but with virtualities which are always creatively enacted and embodied. These are virtualities insofar as they are welded to material bodies through socialization, ritual forms, moral governance and the restraint and policing of deviation. The virtuality of gender allows it to function as a medium connecting diverse bodies despite their dissimilarity in body type and size, behaviour and sexual and physical form.

Public spaces, governed in the first instance by moral norms and cultural standards of conduct, need to be understood as the nexus of not just legal systems, land and property, but as a complex calculus of ontological modes – virtual, material, abstract and probable. Thus, for example, users’ *habitus* and the understanding of the publicness of a place are virtualities actualized in a given ‘public space’, such as a park. Despite the importance of legal codes and posted rules, sociological abstraction and theorizations of the ‘public sphere’ have demonstrated its collective and normative qualities. Where these fail, when the virtual and the ritual and moral mechanisms developed around it fail, the affordances (Gibson, 1982) of the place might be physically restricted to structure behaviour (such as the erection of fences or placing bollards to prevent automobile access).

While linguistic and social constructionist approaches specify the categorical and epistemological technologies by which social groups interact with the virtual, the performance and embodiment of virtualities is more an ethnographic matter of ritual and the domain of distinctly social mechanisms of collective action and control (Taussig, 1998).

The urban is often overlooked because of its intangibility. Yet our encounter with it is anything but intangible. The significance of the urban is that it represents the coordinated intersectionality of many virtual objects as well as the codified apparatus relating these to other ontological forms. There is a two way process of abstraction and realization as well as a process of actualization or materialization and re-virtualization. The urban is a medium of interconnection which allows unlike, dissimilar objects to be coordinated into a whole – a city. This is not just a matter of zoning, space-planning or ergonomics, but of ethical and aesthetic balances and tensions. The urban as an encounter of virtualities is precisely the intersection of gender, race, class with community, the public and the civic. These terms are themselves dynamic: they must be enacted and embodied, and these performative citations are also creatively virtualized in return.

The urban is thus intensely ethical and political, a contest of social constructions of the city and civic behaviour. Unlike the concrete physicality of the city, the intangibility of the virtual makes it a domain open to intervention, *métissage* and experimentation by those with less power and resources, despite being resistant to immediate change through merely material interventions. Thus, spaces may be appropriated and events hijacked for new ends. Hence the interest of Lefebvre and others, such as Michel de Certeau, in the potential to refigure the way cities function through simple interventions in ways of occupying space and spending time, such as walking (Sheringham, 2000), or feminist activists' campaigns in the 1980s to 'take back the streets' against violence and harassment of women. The complexity of race and gender in post-heterosexual, multicultural public spaces has been too hastily reduced to questions of concrete behaviour, such as harassment and physical affordances of built environments. While it was a good strategic response, this blurs our understanding of the role played by intangibles, including the social construction of images of areas (safe, risky, pleasurable), the interaction between these images (consider the encounter of genders and bodies on street prostitution 'strips' and corners), and between the material, abstract and probable, which tend to be dismissed as mere abstractions.

### **Syncretism**

Returning to Lefebvre's terms, 'blanks' are paradoxes precisely because the urban has not been acknowledged. That is, the virtuality of the city, its urbanity, has been obscured by a nominalism which admits only the actual, whether material or probable. By contrast, 'dark moments' arise when idealities (virtual and abstract) are misunderstood as actualities (material or probable). While the temptation is to make the urban a new 'field', we need to *acknowledge* its virtuality, and hence treat it as a dynamic object of knowledge.

It could be argued that later 1980s research on localities foundered on precisely this point when it came to define localities in a geographical or economic manner, such as in terms of commuter areas (Cooke, 1989). Oil resource workers in Aberdeen were found to have huge travel-to-work areas as they worked intensively for a period and then went home to families all over the United Kingdom. The strength of locale as a sense-making term was lost when it was limited to a material definition. This issue also confronts current research and policy making on innovation 'clusters' and 'learning regions' which also rely on the proximity of economic enterprises to define the clusters. These very material parameters of research take physical location as a universal indicator of interaction and synergy. They also tend to overlook non-local patterns of causality, so central to geographers' interests in sophisticated spatial modelling (Waters, 2001). Acknowledging the urban as the virtual aspect of the concrete city opens up the intangible to social science analysis. This is not a question of abstraction but of breaking with the dualism pitting materialism against idealism to recognize the virtuality of every object. It allows us to better theorize once intractable but crucial aspects of the city such as community and the relationship between publics, public spheres and public spaces.

The 'syncretic' quality of the urban-city phenomenon parallels that between place and space. It is syncretic in the sense that not only is there a challenge to ways of seeing the city, but it needs to be grasped fluidly as both concrete and material (see also Shields, 2011). A third term is needed to capture this syncretism or liminal 'both-and' quality of the virtual urban and is in constant



exchange with the concrete city like a circulatory system. *Syncretism* denotes this circulation between the ideal and actual as simultaneous virtualization of the concrete, and an actualization of virtual capacities that produces a situation, a world, that is continually porous and incomplete, never fully achieved as a complete synthesis.

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ii Although they drop his emphasis on the agonistic, on the contest of wills, powers and forces which shape the city, Deleuze and Guattari also adopt the diagram as a way of theorizing the distinction between theoretical concepts and features immanent to a milieu, an object, or to the object of philosophical thought. (Deleuze, 1994:39-40).