The informational city and the street as urban form:
Four new urban districts and their relation to urbanity

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Abstract

The project poses the question as to whether newer urban districts built with goals on urbanity since the early 1980s really became vibrant urban places.

Theories on urbanity are reviewed together with empirical studies of the districts Södra Station and Skarpnäck in Stockholm and Høje Taastrup and Egebjerggård in the Copenhagen metropolitan area.

A quest for more urbanity - also in new urban districts - broke through in Scandinavia together with postmodernism 25 years ago and several areas with this goal have been built. The planners have typically been concerned with a more traditional urban pattern of blocks, streets and squares, a mix of functions and visible people in public space.

Several reviewers have expressed disappointment with the result of these projects and interviews with the residents show a preference for a green environment in relation to the dwelling.

The question of urbanity in architecture and urban planning suffers from a relatively weak theoretical underpinning. Architects often see the urban as special formal typologies or floor area ratios, while other professions emphasise human actions, forms of life, public conversation, diversity, coincidence, or the like. In space syntax the term is used for a specific topology of the movement network, etc. If goals for urbanity shall be meaningful and possible to evaluate in practice, a greater agreement on the concept and its complexity is needed, although it should not be too rigorous and probably can never be complete.

From a theoretical point of view the project tries to look at urban design through the perspectives of e.g. Johan Asplund, William Whyte, Henri Lefebvre, Richard Sennett and Bill Hillier. It investigates urbanity as the city of people and the city of 'works' respectively. Both of these are also studied in relation to spatial topologies. The focus is primarily on difference and possibilities of experience in public space, but also the mix of shops and private firms with other functions, which seems difficult to achieve.

The purpose is to give architects and planners a better understanding of the possibilities and limitations in developing urbanity as well as hopefully to contribute to better planning- and evaluation methods

The empirical studies shows spatial configurations where the grids are too fractal in their character and also have a quite uneven distribution of lines, too many lines and too many short lines. Pedestrians in public space are few, often close to zero, not only because of the spatial design, but also because wealth means few residents/km2, unless extreme floor area ratios are used. Shops and private firms often do not find the new districts attractive enough. Overall architecture also often is too monotonous, with large units and a too limited number of developers.

The conclusion of the project is that the promotion of urbanity outside of the old urban cores demands a careful selection of qualified places and a programming that goes further than formalism combined with optimistic hopes for a functional mix, happening by itself only if permitted to do so.

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Difficulties with urbanity in new districts built at the edge or beyond push forward the question of other or supplementary strategies that possibly can have a greater success, i.e. a gradual addition and restructuring of nodes and streets outside of the city centre, where the preconditions for a development of the wanted qualities already exists to some extent.

At the same time we need a better understanding of thresholds of urbanity, where quantitative changes of 'intensity' of people and 'works' might mean a qualitative change of situations from no urbanity to low level urbanity to central place urbanity to crowding and maybe information overload.

Note

Bo Grönlund's poster will be available at his homepage after the symposium:

http://homepage.mac.com/bogronlund/posterSSS4.htm