Human scales:

Understanding places of centring and de-centring

13

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Abstract

One property of cities of the traditional sort that continually amazes us is the way they appear to self-organise into socially and economically structured spatial systems. While urban planners believe that cities are distributions of programme, heavily shaped by top-down forces such as zoning laws and planning directives, there are also bottom-up processes that play a critical role in city organisation, creating distributions, concentrations and centres which we recognise in situ as being of a distinctively urban order. This bottom-up process is explored as an outcome of the movement of people concatenating 'regions' from the pathways they inhabit.

13.1

Following Gibson, who proposes that the environment is perceived in the round and in movement along 'paths of observation', and Casey who proposes that 'regions' are integrated perceptually through the movements of people moving from place to place, it is suggested that people inhabit simultaneously regions of different scales, related to the different scales of their orientation and movement needs. The movement space of the city will tend to separate out into discrete more or less coherent, networks of pathways, working at these respective scales, through this space. People will shift between these nested regions depending on their immediate movement and orientation needs.

The 'shift-points' (points where one steps up or down a gear in scale) in this perceptual landscape become critical to the city's dynamic functionality. They are broadly of two types which will be called: 'coincident' – where the movement towards the shift-point at the lower scale is coincident with a movement towards centrality at that scale – and: 'non-coincident' – where that movement is away from centrality.

The cities of Jakarta and Amsterdam are considered in terms of the way scales of movement and orientation, particularly at the shift-points, condition programme, character and significance of the place in question.