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Recent discourse recognises the city as a multi-layered construct, whether as the ‘layered city’ or ‘many cities in one city’. (Kahn; Marcuse) Further deliberations range from considerations of the nature of social space through perception as occurring through a series of filters. (Borden; Lefebvre) Evolving urban histories echo these pluralistic readings, as do emerging discussions in ecology and landscape urbanism. (Czerniak; Girardet; Huyssen) Each understands the city as comprised of a plurality of layers formed by cultural, ecological, economic, political and social actions, agents, forces and structures[1]. Within this context traditional notions of the city as a collection of people inhabiting contiguous space and having common concerns are suspect. What was once spatially constituted locally has been subject to significant shifts in connectivity brought on by physical and virtual networks of exchange; concurrently, both mobility and diverse, dispersed opportunities have fostered disparate groups overlapping across multiple spaces. This multi-layered condition is not a predetermined absolute, static, homogenous or singular, but rather constructed, changing, heterogeneous, and operates at multiple scales simultaneously. Nor do these layers exist as distinct stratum; rather they interrelate, with overlaps, gaps, adjacencies, conflicts, connections and fusions that exist or lie potent between them.

This conceptualisation affords a joined-up approach to the city’s making. This attitude, grounded in community development and urban regeneration, recognises that synergies are achieved through a multi-layered approach. (Brown) Such practice echoes other emergent shifts towards “pluralistic’ and ‘organic’ strategies for...urban development as a ‘collage’ of highly differentiated spaces and mixtures, rather than pursuing grandiose plans based on functional zoning of different activities.” (Harvey, 40)

Working within this condition presents however two notable and interrelated challenges. Firstly, the city’s spatial and temporal complexity render it unmappable and hence unknowable. The danger is of course that the subject falls back into totality conceptualisations. While recognising that we can’t map or know the city in toto, in order to operate in this context we need some mechanism that allows us to frame the city as a space of simultaneous multiplicity, and from which one can both construct knowledge and carry out subsequent action. Secondly, the conventions that we have inherited are based on a Cartesian geometry – one that is fixed and singular. What are needed are new tools that will enable us to operate within the city’s dynamic nature. In this paper I will consider
these questions, drawing upon recent work from the University of Plymouth Master of Architecture design studio to explore a praxis of multiplicity called “palimpsest”.

**Inherited Practice**

Urban representations have historically operated within a dialectic of the strategic and experiential. The strategic is characterised by pictorial representations and diagrammatic drawings, enabling a panoptic perspective and a sense of meta-cognition. The experiential in contrast is marked by graphic mechanisms that convey intimate and immediate spatial experience, notably as encountered through vision or touch. While also using the pictorial and diagrammatic, the primary intention is to simulate the richness of the actual experience of place.

This dialectic, while offering useful frameworks within which to operate, poses significant limitations. Inherently exclusive of the other, more significantly each fails to engage with the multiplicity that the city represents. The panoptic overview tends toward reductive visions, prioritising selected viewpoints and marginalising others. The immediately experiential meanwhile is fragmentary, limiting connectivity between individualising narratives. Each equally fails to engage fully with the temporal; their depictions are static, delimiting their validity. Such a representation ‘automatically freezes the flow of experience and in so doing distorts what it strives to represent.’ (Harvey, 206)

In juxtaposition, place is subject to multiple interpretations from multiple perspectives. Further, these are malleable and permeable, shifting and evolving dependent upon the subject’s viewpoint and underlying attitudes and values. No totalizing nor fragmentary representation therefore can truly capture and express the manifold interactions occurring between people and place accumulated over time. Like comparable observations on the fluidity of culture, actions and events within the city are not part of singular condition, but rather exist as multiple strands which are in a constant state of flux.

A wider conceptual framework is needed in which to formulate discussion. Yet in so doing we are confronted by a vast plurality, a challenge echoed by Frederic Jameson in questioning whether a comprehensive knowledge remains elusive. (Jameson) How then to make sense of this condition and articulate some accessible account? How can we build upon this to generate a field in which we
can act and which will inform the design process? These are concerns raised by practitioners and theorists, who have called for a reconsideration of traditional praxis, and new ‘techniques that engage time and change, shifting scales, mobile points of view, and multiple programs.’ (Allen, 40)

constructed practice

As Denis Cosgrove suggests, though it is impossible to represent all spatial-temporal conditions, mapping as a tool allows us this illusion. He further contends that it provides a fertile way of knowing and representing the world. (Cosgrove) The goal of the mapping as proposed here, i.e., palimpsest, is not however a singular representation. Rather, it embraces and aims to give presence to plurality, and so intrinsically engages not only with spatial form but more ephemeral considerations of meaning perspectives. This is not however so much a matter of getting any supposed reality “right”, but is more of a process of knowledge formation; that is, it is a way of ‘constructing forms of knowledge that can cope with multiple realities.’ (Kahn, 289)

There are several aspects key to the process of mapping in palimpsest. First is an analysis within differing thematic and/or attitudinal viewpoints (i.e., various layers within the city). Though this focus can have limitations if uncritically considered; it does enable a more incisive view and can also reveal hidden conditions, whether dormant, marginalized or neglected. A second key move is a juxtaposition of these individual mappings. This operation’s intellectual roots lie in Edward de Bono’s arguments on lateral thinking. It offers an engagement of seemingly known information and phenomena with a fresh perspective, and is particularly useful ‘as a way to restructure existing patterns of thinking and provoke new ways.’ (de Bono, 11) As he further suggests, this approach raises awareness of alternatives, including those that may not be so obvious. (de Bono) Juxtaposition equally owes a debt to discourse on “unlearning” and “transformative learning”, which enable an exposition of the constraints and limitations of our existing attitudes and ways of working. Moreover, it aids us, as Saskia Sassen might suggest, to reveal the connections of the seemingly unconnected. (Sassen a; Sassen b) The third key aspect is the use of narrative. Stories help us to remember and make sense of our experiences in time and place, the wider forces at play and those places themselves. They make accessible patterns, linkages and contingencies that inform the relationship between personal thought, action, experience and memory, and broader, shared narrations. Most significantly, these stories can be
mapped, revealing boundaries, trajectories, intersections and fields occurring in
time and place. (Potteiger and Purinton) The use of multiple media plays a distinct
role in this mapping, including film, photography and writing to record the
diversity and flux that marks inhabitation of place. Various digital and graphic
techniques further support this juxtaposition; this creative play affords a
simultaneous manipulation at both strategic and tactical levels, allowing various
permutations and possibilities to be revealed.

Palimpsest is the subject of an on-going investigation in the University of
Plymouth Master of Architecture design studio. This inquiry has three primary
aims: firstly, to explore the city as a multi-layered representation. Secondly, to
test the means by which we represent this construct. Thirdly, to frame discussion
for later project work (not discussed here). This exploration maps and tests how
the city’s different layers synthesise, overlap, touch, reflect, displace, and/or
erase each other. In one recent project sited in Riga, students investigated
specific neighbourhoods reflecting particular approaches towards city planning in
place at the time of their inception. These were examined within a framework of
ecological, political, socio-cultural and socio-economic layers. Two
neighbourhoods investigated are briefly discussed here. One study of the gridded
19th Century Jugendstil “new town”, revealed convergent and divergent strata of
cultural, economic, political and social forces, less strategically planned but no
less present within the current landscape. In some areas an overlapping of high
levels of car ownership and high car values, a predominance of Latvian and
English signage and even menus, and well-refurbished street facades was
identified. In other areas where Russian signage and text was found, fewer cars
and of lesser value were present, and the building frontages were in a noticeable
degree of disrepair. This condition not only reflected pro-Latvian government
strategic policies, but equally revealed the extent to which the underlying
intentions had permeated through even to non-government related actions and
spatial conditions. Another study of the medieval Old Town unearthed a similar
convergence of the cultural, economic and political. Most notable was a coalescing
of “tourist-friendly” shops, restaurants and bars, officially sanctioned by the
government tourist board, with “suggested” tourist routes. Seemingly omitted
from the authorised narrative were the inhabitants of Riga, whose connections
with the area were limited to acts of consumption (whether as buyers or sellers).
Together these conditions reveal a shift from a once-diversified city fabric to a
singular space of tourist, leisure and retail consumption, reflecting the city’s
long-term strategic agenda for the Old Town.
These two projects reveal an urban conception that embraces the simultaneous multiplicity present there. By bringing together distinct observations, and working with them through juxtaposition and a narrative framework, they prompt us to look again. Manoeuvring around any singular, reductive formal representation and attributed meaning, they direct our focus to the linkages between layers of time and place.

some cautionary and concluding notes

In positing palimpsest, what is proposed is not some unitary theory or ‘new meta-disciplinary category’ as Greig Crysler warns us against. (Crysler) Rather, it shares more in common with de Certeau’s notion of tactics, i.e., a calculated action in the context of a terrain that already exists, in which it is but just one of many different operations. (de Certeau) It is also critical to highlight that the working methodology proposed is not a positivist model. Echoing Marc Treib’s critique of Ian McHarg’s Design with Nature methods, analytical overlays might help to reveal certain criteria but they do not autonomously generate subsequent design strategies. (Treib) Nor is this approach intended to reveal some sense of an absolute truth. It recognises that any approach carries with it a certain bias; as Corner observes, ‘how one “images” the world literally conditions how reality is both conceptualized and shaped.’(Corner, 153)

Palimpsest does not mean to deny that the city is ultimately unmappable and unknowable as a totality, but rather that the city consists of a multiplicity of narratives, each composed of a range of performances, perspectives, processes and relationships. It acknowledges that these at times coalesce and at other times conflict in place. The intention is to explore how these layers relate, and the potential their convergences and divergences offer as site of design. Ultimately, it is not about defining some singular vision, but rather ‘the primary aim…is to pull out the positive threads which enable a more lively appreciation of the challenge of space.’ (Massey, 15)

references


Brown, Robert. “Connectivity in the Multi-Layered City: Towards the Sustainable City.”


Sassen, Saskia, a. “Rebuilding the Global City: Economy, Ethnicity and Space.” Ed.


[1] Actions refers to tactical operations and events in the everyday, carried out by agents (whether as individuals, institutions or organisations acting separately or communally) in the context of wider forces of contextual conditions and as influenced by structures of institutional legislation and policy or socio-cultural norms.