Transformative Possibilities and Power of the Urban - TPPU

The city is often seen as a hub for the exchange of goods, services and ideas. The interaction between people generate new ideas based on density and diversity

The aim of TPPU is to go deeper into understanding the complex dynamics of the urban and give some directions on how to unleash this source for societal transformation

Background

We live in a time where societal challenges such as climate change and inequality are clear and most of the answers to how to address the challenges are well know. Yet we are painfully slow to take action.

TPPU understands the problem as the combination of **tunnel vision** - the fragmentation that prevents the whole to become more than the sum of the parts - and **powerlessness** - a feeling that blocks the motivation to take action
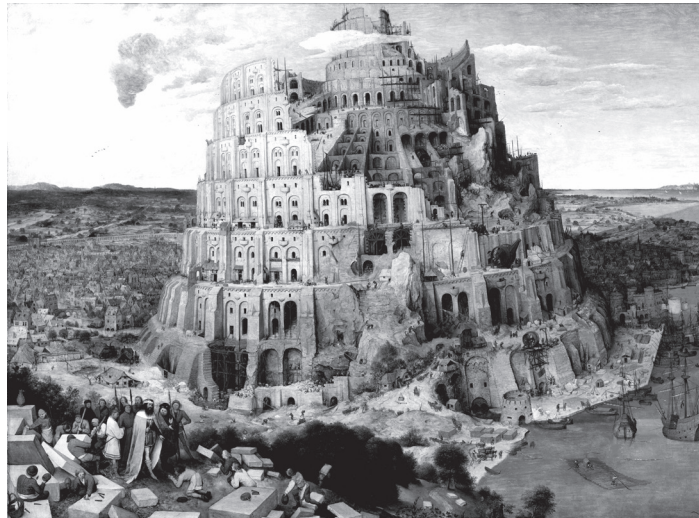
Breughel's The (great) tower of Babel painted in 1563. As a unified and monolingual city, the problem was (according to the Lord in Genesis 11:6): "now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do". The reaction is well known: The physical dispersion and making people unable to understand each other. This classic divide and rule in order to gain and maintain power has been practised to tame the urban in innumerable guises up to this day.

The core is a "**spatial imagination**" that is linked to public and socially produced spaces. By including all senses (beyond the visual and verbal) it allows a higher degree of openness, complexity and a broader spectrum of interaction with the surroundings and other people

A space of **radical openness** and complexity can leave words and concepts (pointing to the past) behind yet still include body language and a sensory experience of the social/political by being part of the socially produced space of the urban

This space has a possibility to be the starting point for societal transformation. Through a series of actions in time and space - **Active Space** (more details below) - we develop a common vocabulary to communicate the non verbal sensory experiences and operationalise them in a societal context.

Active Space - methods and results

The active space applies an integrated and transdisciplinary approach that includes the performing and visual arts, architecture, natural and social sciences and the arts of building and cooking.

Active Space has two complementary elements: a spatial (how the political and bodies are linked to spaces) and an educational element (learn to navigate and act in complex dynamics)

Using the methodology of Active Space, a positive feedback loop can be developed where learning competencies allows people to embrace and act (in, with and for) the complex dynamics of the socially produced public spaces (the urban) and nurture new ideas, networks and initiatives

This in turn can produce new spaces with a radical openness that combined with the right competencies unleash the transformative power of the urban - TPU - a situated active citizenship that constantly challenge and transform the status quo (of the political)

ACCITI, a 2 week workshop with focus on active citizenship for High school students in Venice, Italy, 2018. After one group of students explored the Lido area they found an underused park, near the beach, where their concrete interaction included building and placing - prototyping - a set of football goals that quickly changed the dynamics in the public space. One example of working "in, with and for" and producing public spaces.

Active Space - that will be explained in more detail below - is an overall methodology or productions with a set of actions that unfold over time in space.

Beginning with a sensory and intuitive - non verbal - exploration and use this to develop a common vocabulary, narratives and agenda. This agenda is then operationalised and contextualised in more abstract societal aspects

The productions and the results of Active Space are relevant for well known disciplines linked to the city: Urban planning, architecture etc.

But the transformative nature of Active Space can also be a source for new constellations beyond disciplines that we think of as urban

Productions where Active Space has been applied include so far:

Public Space Session - 4 hour public debate

Active Space Camp - 48 hour intensive workshop

Space Transformers - workshop for students

Performative presentation - a short presentation that explores spaces of possibilties

Active Space

Active Space has three components: Spaces, movements and situations. The movements drive a rhythm between an intuitively experienced body space and operational societal space - Socially produced spaces.

The goal is to go beyond the mechanisms that block something new to emerge: A state of tunnel vision that reduces the socially produced spaces - neighbourhoods, street corners, villages etc - to technocratic and abstract spaces. The overview here will be described in more detail

Spaces

Active space works with more intuitive or emotional elements to motivate and connect a movement towards a higher degree of abstration: a more focused, operational but also fragmented space.

Body Space: Non verbal, sensory and intuitive

Social Space: Language, social interaction

Societal Space: Technological, legal, economic

Body Space   Social Space   Societal Space

C   A

B   D

Situations

Movements

The movements drive the rhythm between exploring spaces of possibilities in bodyspace over developing a common vocabulary and agenda in social space and turn this into operational actions in societal space

A. Gameplay: Actions that unfold in time and space - exit the inertia of societal space

B. Exploring: Involving all senses to explore what is there and how does it feel

C. Agenda: Developing a common vocabulary and collaboration on an agenda.

D. Action: How to achieve the agenda involving the societal conditions for actions
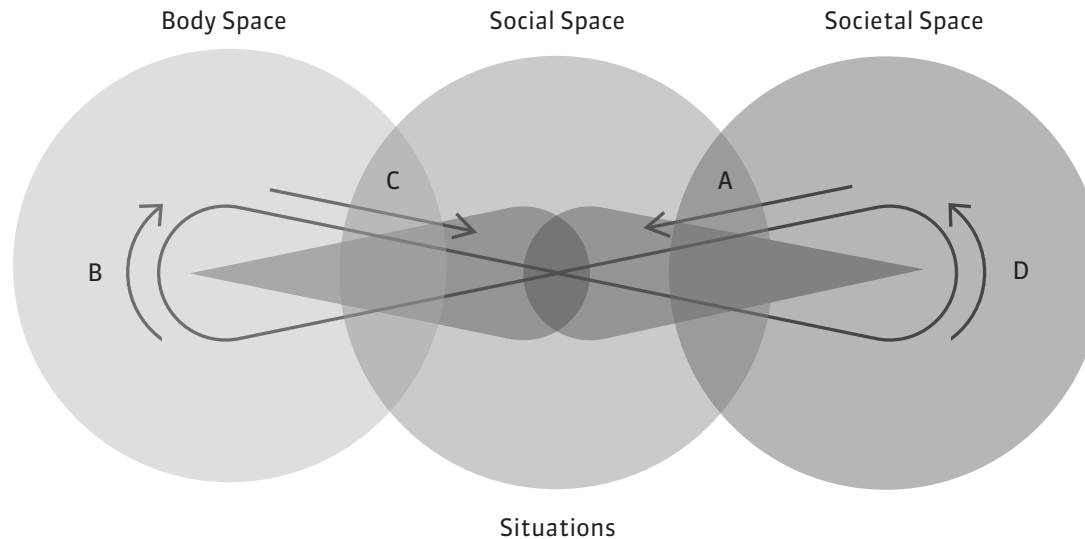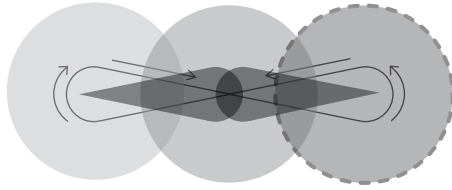
Situations

The rhythm between the (socially produced) spaces spark situations where new ideas, networks and initiatives can emerge.

These situations are both creations and simultaneously they create new movements and spaces that spark new situations and form a virtuous circle.

Societal Space

Societal Space is the most rational and operational space - without it no action on a larger scale. But it is also an abstract space that in itself tends to loose the capacity to navigate and act in a complex and dynamic context. This is what is understood as the problem of tunnel vision where the parts are unable to form a whole (that is more than the sum of the parts)

This tunnel vision is closely linked to an often irrational urge to control the situation and stay in power through divide and rule tactics. It tends to get "stuck in the groove" and the challenge is to break the inertia in ways that use the language of societal space critically and use it to move beyond the limits of this language

With modernism the urge to simplify the world - think of Mondrian for example with his strictly geometric shapes or primary colours - was taken to the next level. In cities the segregation in the US used redlining to split the population into black and white areas

Today metropolitan areas might be more racially diverse but gentrification is creating a new (political/polarising) divide between the resourceful centres and poorer peripheries

Pruitt-Igoe, St. Louis, USA - finished in 1954 and demolished in 1972. While it is easy to focus on the physical appearance of the failed social housing project, it is important to look at the thinking and conditions - the legal, economic, industrial mass production, institutional discrimination, etc. - that is embodied in such buildings. (As well as the failure of trying to solve problems by blowing physical structures up). The thinking is an example of divide and rule - mono functionality or sending the poor into the periphery of the city. In spite of trying to blow up problems, St. Louis is today still one of the most segregated cities in the USA

The present day embodiment of a polarising divide and rule can be traced back in a pattern of binaries of domination such as: Men dominating women, whites dominating black and perhaps less acknowledged, mind dominating body. The domination of science allows disconnected signifiers to keep floating

Today we might identify a new "class of abstraction": people who gain power in a disembodied world that can be ruled from from far away. The digital binary of ones and zeroes enables this neo colonial ruling from afar and carries the simplification to the extreme

The challenge today is to save the societal space from itself by breaking the inertia and make it part of a rhythm that contextualises the particular in the universal by linking the focused (tunnel) vision to an embodied peripheral perception.

This rhythm will be an organising and signifying proces that ensures a constant challenge to the status quo - the power of politics and language. From the exact (quantitative) sciences we will move over qualitative methods to a "situated science"

Social Space
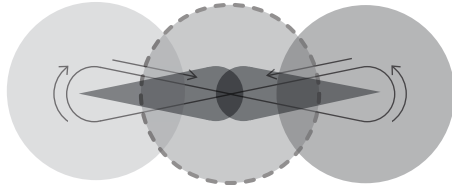
Social space is where a powerfull type of spatialized and collective imagination can be found. It draws on the combination of verbal and non verbal communication and especially the public and socially produced space where the maximum openness (not reduced by language yet) can be found yet the social is implicit and thus this imagination can be the source for societal transformation.

We find many methods of how to get new ideas such as in the tech companies that develop their interior spatial layout to encourage unplanned collaborations or use idea generation processes in specially designed workshops spaces. This will off course never reach the complexity of the public and socially produced spaces of the urban.

We are here now - The pandemic has shown us that there are certain forms of interaction that simple works best in face to face situations: complex negotiations and how to collectively create new ideas, networks and initiatives.

This is in hindsight common sense and a central element of Social space: The most dynamic and complex interaction between people is closely linked to the idea of Peripheral Perception. The broad sensory spectrum: Peripheral vision, sound, smell, touch etc. boosts communication/collaboration - including the non verbal - both between persons (gestures, sounds etc) but also the environment

Street stage - Opbyggerne - the builders up. An occupation of a street near the ramparts (and Christiania) in Copenhagen 2008. People could grab some materials and just begin building as a spontanious and social production of space. The low thresholds for participating and open atmosphere made this a summer festival where the spatial interventions in parallel with a simple organisation showed a glimpse of a transformative (social) space.

Naming the world together - It is the space where the abstraction and language of societal space is being deconstructed. At this point language is used to give instructions on how to go beyond language in the non verbal explorations in body space. It is also the space that produces a common vocabulary - naming the world - giving new meaning to existing concepts or inventing new ones.

If the energy, power and motivation finds the source in body space - the feeling of openness and possibilities then Social Space can be seen as the space where competencies such as communication and collaboration maks us able to act on this feeling and use the energy for a movement with a direction

Body Space
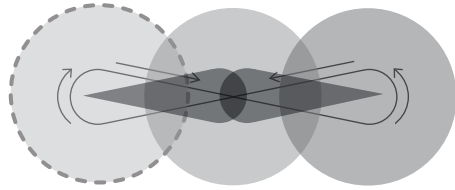
Power of (body) presence. While social and societal spaces can be represented/described with various degrees of abstraction - quantitative (societal) or qualitative (social) - Body space is situated and exist only when "we are here now"

Presence is simultaneously active (changing space by simply being there - "voting with our feet") and passive (experiencing space with all senses) that interact and inform each other: Sensing the change being made by our presence and vice versa. It is important to connect presence to the political - a phenomenology of the political.

Spaces of Possibilities. The peripheral perception includes Spaces of Possibilities: A political sensation of (radical) openness. It supplements the other more physical senses: If certain spaces makes you feel free and motivates you to act. This feeling - sensory/intuitive/political motivation/driver - is the source of energy that drives the movements of Active Space.

The girl from Volga viewed with no instructions for 3 minutes - Alfred Yarbus 1967. Record of cyclic fixation behaviour - eye movements that bring the fovea to locations selected by peripheral vision. Tunnel vision - also know as Peripheral Visual Field Loss (PFVL) is limiting the capacity to choose where to focus. While this example is focused on vision only we will extend this to also include hearing and other senses - Peripheral perception. As such this points us to the body - its senses and neurological functions - as essential for a rhythm between the focused and fixed vision and the overview that allows us to navigate and act in complexity.

Transformative Spaces. This is a non verbal yet political - Transformative Space: A radical openness allows for both letting go of reductive (existing/old) concepts/language yet still be in a socially produced space. This allows for embracing complexity and creates situations for new forms of societal organisation to emerge - historic examples such as commons and democracy in ancient Greece but more recently the Municipalist Movement with base in Barcelona is an example of this.

We can see now how urban areas with a higher degree of (radical) openness for many reasons - flight to the suburbs or industrial, harbour or military areas being abandoned - have given rise to new urban cultures that still have an impact. One example is the Greenwich Village in New York at the time of Jane Jacobs. The plans for demolition of the neighbourhood that we know from her writing also meant that a new openness emerged - cheaper rents especially - that attracted people to this openness. Kreuzberg in Berlin had similar plans for demolition before it turned into a subculture dynamo and identity of that city. These iconic neighbourhoods or cities of openness and experimentation also contains a cautionary tale. Especially unchecked economic dynamics and gentrification tends to cannibalise the qualities that emerged