

Session Proposal

**PERCEPTIVE MINDS AND AFFECTIVE BODIES IN URBAN ENVIRONMENT**

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One of the most challenging issues in the field of urban studies is the relationship between everyday lives of people inhabiting the built environment, and the large-scale social, economic, and political processes occurring in neighborhoods, districts, cities, regions, and the world at large. Focus on this issue is emerging across the field of relevant disciplines. Among the important developments is the recent acknowledgement in human geography of the importance of affect and meaning in urban life, the growing popularity of the notions of experience and creativity in urban economics and architecture, and the recognition of the importance of current and prospective users' perspectives in urban planning. Given the urgency of environmental crisis (particularly the threat of global warming and fossil fuel shortage) and the galloping urbanization, integrative perspectives are needed to assess the current status and future of built environments as well as prospects for creating sustainable and livable urban environments and communities.

This paper session is indented to create grounds for dialogue between different fields of research and practice starting from a person-centered perspective on urban living. Inhabiting the city involves the physical presence of bodies and minds in the city. As organisms, humans relate to environment. This relation to 'Umwelt', to the environment in the most basic and immediate sense, according to Jacob von Uexküll, is continuous, functional, and meaningful. It is also embodied. As organisms with bodies, humans sense the physical environment and operate upon it. As organisms with minds, humans make meanings of the environment – and communicate with and about these meanings. Perception and affect are thus both involved in the engagement of people with cities. It could be said that this engagement of minds and bodies with urban environments is the very essence of urban living. Diversity of cultures, infrastructures, physical settings, social, political, economic systems, conveys immense complexity to this engagement.

The challenge of understanding this engagement and the complex interplay between affect, meaning, and culture, and environmental settings and their affordances and capacities, requires approaching it from a multitude of perspectives. It is also important to recognize the dynamic and processual nature of engagement: to each activity there is a consequence, to each event there is a follow-up event. Personal experience develops on top of past experiences of and current encounters with the city. Engagement with buildings after they are constructed may differ from the outcome that the architects intended. Implementation of planning projects involves consideration of the actual use of the resulting environment by multitudes of peoples not necessarily identical to the ones envisaged initially. Thus, collaboration and dialogue is needed between psychology, architecture, planning, political science and other urban sciences.

Against this backdrop, the following questions are intended to guide the discussion:

- 1) What is the relevance of embodied engagement with the city for different disciplinary/theoretical frameworks?
- 2) Where does aesthetics come in? What does it mean to engage with the city aesthetically? What other ways are there?
- 3) What constitutes this engagement? What are the agentic/experiential dimensions of the person and of the environment?
- 4) How can we conceptualize the urban environment? In what sense does the city differ from the built environment? What, for our purposes, is the city? Is it detectable 'from below' (e.g. as a specific sign or a prompt or even a categorization device)?
- 5) What are the advantages of approaching architecture as performative and considering 'sense+feel+think+act'? How can this be related to the engagement of persons with architecture? What new phenomena can be discovered by including the performative dimension (projects/inhabitants' activity/etc) into consideration in addition to concrete and bricks? Where does this connect with urban environment at large?
- 6) What methodologies and methods are available/should be created to tap into this engagement? How can we detect and describe it?
- 7) Is 'experience' a sensible/productive notion to work with?
- 8) What are the different geographies and emerging properties stemming from the engagement of human beings with particular buildings, such as regenerated/redeveloped venues? How do the actual borders of such constructions with their external surroundings come to affect people's affects, behaviors and perceptions? What sorts of manifestations take place when urban and natural environments converge?
- 9) Overall, what are the different synergies that emerge from the interplay of scalar categorizations of the city (micro, meso and macro-level) and is it sensible to map such classifications? If so, for what purposes and where should limits be drawn?
- 10) What are the actual and potential outcomes of the concept of aesthetic engagement in terms of applicability within and across disciplines?
- 11) How does this translate into practical/applied concerns? What is the take home message from looking at persons engaging with the city? How can this aid moving from 'simple-minded space' to 'open-minded space' in practice as well as in theory?

We invite paper proposals (250 words maximum) for the session, which will involve four 20-minute presentations followed by a discussion. Please send those to the organizers by November 07, 2010:

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