



The Big Think: A new approach to the public realm (in London)

Thoughts & Responses on a Behavioural Approach to Planning by Liane Hartley

The basic premise is that I see cities and places as being social networks - and streets, spaces, parks, buildings are social media. To understand how a place works we need to understand the networks and flows within it and the activities, behaviours, decisions, actions that govern them.

For too long we have focussed on place and city as economic and physical entities. I am convinced that the future of the city and our understanding of its growth, potential and processes of change will be governed by more overt social drivers. I think we are moving into the age of the social city.

Urban studies, planning and cities need the same “behavioural turn” that has been seen in economics. We now appreciate the irrationality and wisdom of group and social behaviours and can see how this influences and is influenced by economics. However we draw a blank when we consider our built environment and how that too should be reflected by the everyday behaviours that drive how we use spaces and places.

Rather than being governed by rational classical economics; planning and development needs to take a more behavioural approach. I would go a step further and say that the way we experience urban space – how we physically and cognitively process our urban environment - is a fascinating yet uncharted territory (sorry!) and if we understood better how we process and visualise urban space we can surely design ones that make that experience, richer, more creative and more equitable.

The branches of psychogeography and phenomenology go some way to describe the unique relationship between urban space and behaviour/experience as it stands. I want to find a way of planning and designing in a psychologically driven way. Designing spaces to reflect how they are actually used and to generate more positive use.

How can we reconcile the everyday reality of living in a pace that is immediate, now and short term with the long laborious and lengthy time it takes to make a plan – that in turn affects every day life. Do we need real-time planning? Can we develop according to the behaviours we observe and identify with a place. How can we accommodate the macro in this.

In context of localism and communities seemingly being in an elevated role of decision-maker about place – would communities take a rational, classical economic approach to planning or would they be more flexible, informal and behavioural? We need to see a more **Community as Client** approach. Given the fact that communities are getting more involved, it would be interesting to understand the behaviours that prevail in the planning process driven by communities to see how much more or less resourceful, equitable, sustainable, civic and social the outcomes actually are.

With technology, social media and more open forms of communication, data and information about planning and what is happening in urban space at any given time by whom, when and why is more available – could we have the tools to plan our places more accurately according to how they are actually use and more meaningfully/authentically according to what people want to use them for? And the use of the term people is in its widest sense – not just professionals/politicians/usual suspects – but a richer understanding of the multiple perceptions, views and uses of space by the broad spectrum of people they represent.

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Comfortable chaos:

What we need at place level is “comfortable chaos” where planning and design retain a basic structure but this is allowed to flex and re-shape itself to suit the personality and social logic of a place. Like Howls Moving Castle. Transplanting what worked in Place A and embroidering it on Place B is not good enough. Place A has a different network, experience and everyday reality than place B.

We need to acknowledge the importance of mess – the unfettered, unplanned, unpredictable and idiosyncratic-ness in a place. This is what gives it its unique feel and identity. Implementing macro-level programmes and policies that do not respect the mess of a place and require them to shoehorn themselves into an alien and remote box do not work.



There needs to be space in a local approach to place that allows room for comfortable chaos and letting relevant and meaningful local interventions crystallise out of its mess.

I've been thinking a lot about an idea I call “Pre-Place”. This is the physical infrastructure, structures and paraphernalia that public and private sector deliver in a space that people create place out of through interaction, shared and personal experiences, and building emotional and functional attachments. The quality and intelligence of pre-place is key for enabling quality, exciting, innovative and useful places to be eventually crafted by people. The challenge is giving space and time for people to create place out of “pre-place” without the fear of losing control as built environment professionals. Are we ready to do this? Do we want to do this?

Behavioural Planning:

Planning is a behavioural discipline. It is concerned with behaviours in space. An approach to planning and designing cities that is behavioural led and that appreciates the experiences and everyday quality that can be generated by them.

Appreciating that the urban environment has specific effects on human behaviour and emotion is an established idea. So can we build cities along behavioural lines and grow urban life and experience as more than occasional note-worthy episodes with a bit of grey filler in between? A new benchmark for place is not award-winning spankery - but how good everyday milk-buying would be.

Cities are parallel universes; they exist in our minds as well as “out there”. The purpose of planning should be to make real the connections between them. And this is where it falls apart. Because planning isn't real. It is an art of the abstract. It is a form of version control; used to impose a single, official and usually narrow view of what and who the city is for over other, alternative and informal views. Whilst everyday life and urban reality goes on, the grid of planning floats above in abstract, bearing no resemblance to the networks, flows, actions, reactions, mess of the world below.

It's the detail, the experience and the behaviour of places that can only be appreciated at a micro level but this is exactly what gets left out of plans. They draw imaginary lines around even more imaginary perceptions of place and the richness and complexity of actually experiencing and being in that place and what works get lost.



Scenius & Tech City:

"TechCity" is David Cameron's vision for a hub in east London which could rival Silicon Valley. The concept builds on the existing hive of tech creativity and innovation based in Shoreditch. Elizabeth Varley CEO of TechHub, quotes "what businesses themselves say they want is access to affordable space, good broadband and technology support but more importantly, opportunities to network and share ideas and good coffee!" See www.techhub.com

Creatives are well known for pioneering new futures for city parts rendered downtrodden, forgotten and made redundant by the prevailing market preferences that shifted away from it. Their energy, ideas and networks breathe new life into a place, helping to reinvent it by reactivating old strengths and bringing much needed injections of people and money.

A critical mass builds up before it catches the eye of mainstream prevailing market preferences again, but not before the place has ascribed itself a new *raison d'être*. The return of the market brings with it a levelling and sanitising urge to bring the area back into its fold. But the transition can often push out the very people, ideas and energy that brought it back to life. No matter, as the area is self-sustaining again and the pioneers move on to the next place that is ripe for reinvention.

This cycle is already being seen in and around the Silicon Roundabout and poses a challenge for the capacity of the area to continue providing a vital and fertile incubation ground for micro-start ups. The density, granularity and messiness of Shoreditch is key to its success in generating successful ideas through creative collaboration. They are allowed to mingle and merge until a spark catches and it grows into something really good. Brian Eno calls this phenomenon where about information spillover and collaborative spaces leading towards lightning in a bottle as "Scenius" in his recent article in the Financial Times <http://tinyurl.com/6kus2p9>

We need to ensure that the existing quality of scenius in Shoreditch is enhanced and not compromised by the TechCity initiative so that it continues to generate and grow good ideas. This means providing an environment that is conducive to idea and information spillover – for both micro and established businesses. These people are attracted to certain places; shared spaces and environments that in turn attract other like-minded people and help them share facilities, tastes and activities. It builds through an accretion of experience and success building on top of each other, attracting and sticking to a place. Place is where these attributes collide.

The answer is not to try and manufacture scenius places, but accelerate the process of sharing by scenius actors in these scenius places; support and connect the people and ideas bit and leave the spatial economics bit alone. This is a radical approach to regeneration which has seemed addicted to building stuff and not paying enough attention to the stuff that goes on inside? Time to do that.



The planning profession has a massive opportunity to participate in this if we recognise that we are not just about planning buildings but the magic cauldron that helps grow scenius places and lets successful ideas take off. This means taking a fresh look and reappraising what we consider to be assets and the cultural and creative value inherent in them. Some of the things people choose to value will surprise us and challenge our preconceived notions of what should and should not be in public space. Is this because we have grown accustomed to public space being full of instructions, information and guidance instead of a rich mix of experience, emotion and questions – things that prompt us to experience urban space and not just move through it like sheep?

Councils across the UK, Europe and the US are re-examining their attitudes to formal and informal uses of space; embracing uses and activities that open our eyes to new ways of experiencing and appreciating urban space.

Some quotes:

“I shall be writing how cities work in real life, because this is the only way to learn what principles of planning can promote social & economic vitality in cities and what practices deaden them.” (Jane Jacobs, 1961)

“Psychogeography is the point at which psychology and geography collide, a means of exploring the behavioural impact of urban place.” (Guy Debord, 1950)

“Living in cities is an art, and we need the vocabulary of art to describe the peculiar relationship between man and material that exists in urban living. The city as we imagine it, of illusion, myth, and nightmare, is as real as the hard city one can locate on maps in statistics.” (Jonathan Raban 1974)

“What is a city, but the people; true the people are the city.” (Coriolanus III)