Planning for Vital Cities

Mapping the city vitality by drifting*: intuition and digress*

In recent years, before the covid-19 pandemics and the climate awareness making me more conscious about air travel, I used to travel quite a bit abroad for work, mainly international conferences. Selecting the target destinations for conferences or visits was a somewhat random process, based mainly on substance, but later also weighted by curiosity to see places that are not famous touristic scenes. Consequently, instead of London or Bersin, I was lucky to visit many interesting, smaller European cities like Bamberg or Portsmouth I knew nothing about. This was interesting enough; in addition, my aim always was to get lost in the city: taking some extra time to head to the venue or hotel, and intentionally *nonplanning* my mapless route, wandering just following my instinct and local people. It was a nice way to build a (sometimes quite disturbed) mental map of the city – very accurate, full of surprises, but sometimes completely irrelevant for place finding.

The atmosphere was a key: some places appeared fascinating, some shanty, suspicious, or cosy, oddly familiar, drawing or pulling the wanderer. Some surprising places appeared to form a point of attraction and have a certain buzz, which was clearly perceivable but hard to pinpoint exactly. Yielding the popular landmarks these spots could stood out from their quiet surroundings for vitality and liveliness, people coming and going, range of shops, kiosks or bars drawing customers. This method of *drifting*, as the avantgard art group Situationist Internation called it in the late 1950s, offers a new, anarchistic perspective to learn to know the underlying shredded nature of the city atmosphere, helping to see it in a totally new way. It made we wonder why some places are vivid, sparkly and vital, while others lay dormant, sometimes despite the high-quality architecture and other massive investments. As an architect, I often asked myself, what makes places vital, and how to encourage that?

What is urban vitality?

We are social animals. Almost all of us, even the most introverted ones, need a certain - varying - amount of social interaction for their wellbeing. We exist in the relations to others. Such social nature of humans has led us to build communities, towns, and increasingly greater cities. Cities are the most magnificent collective endeavor of the humankind. Urban inhabitants enjoy provably of higher level of living standards, prosperity, cultural stimulation, and innovations. Benefits of living in cities often overpower the downsizes of sometimes congested or unsafety environment, resulting in expansion of cities often referred to as *planetary urbanization*.

For urban planning and development, the primary aim is naturally to make cities a better place for people. In order to do so, planning intends to strategically guide various, interrelated phenomena of urban life from mobility and urban economics to social issues, morphology and quality of physical and spatial environment. The goal is often referred to as *vital cities*. But what do we mean by that?

Vitality might appear as a multifaceted, sometimes even obscure term. In urban context it however usually refers to experienced liveliness of the environment, promoted by commercial and entertainment opportunities, and heterogeneous pedestrian population. Moreover, urban vitality is associated with dense urban settings, functions and users, and their diversity. The reason we want to promote vitality in urban planning is that it greatly benefits the city and its users: vitality increases pedestrian flows that foster social interactions, generates new business and services, and improves safety on the streets. In addition, overall, the vital cities, and vital areas in a city, are fascinating and surprising places that provide more affordances for different people.

However, vitality cannot be attached to a place by command-and-control, but it emerges from the local circumstances, which can be promoted and guided – or hindered in case we are not careful. In emergence of urban vitality, both morphological features of the built area and urban activities play an important role. These features are intertwined: urban form, particularly certain building, block and street typologies enable and attract different uses, which contribute to urban *formation* by means of new or altered buildings, fill-ins, additions, or demotions, in a circular manner. Constant flows of people, goods and information are essential in this process: steered by the morphology, they also produce lively places that attract social interaction, new businesses or production, and create dynamics necessary for vivid urban life. Hence, the 'vitality ingredients' we often study are urban form, urban activities, mobility, and quality of space and place.

The more (different) the merrier: diversity is essential

It is often considered that diversity is one of the key factors in and prerequisite for urban vitality. Social diversity, inviting people of different age, gender, ethnicity, education, socio-economic background, and so on, to claim urban spaces entangles with the question of inclusion: for whom are the cities built? Making cities for all users is essential in urban planning. However regarding urban vitality it is not so much about building social cohesion or stronger communities. Contrarily, according to studies social cohesion is not correlating with vitality indicators, neighborhood density and land use mix. Rather, many authors argue for other crucial features typical only of urban life.

Random encounters means that on the streets of big cities we meet all kinds of people, not just those we like or want to meet or those we previously know from our community. Random encounters are what make cities interesting for contemporary flaneur(ess) enjoying watching passers-by, but they also generate new ideas, creativity and innovations emerging from different people's interaction. Furthermore, in the crowd of the metropolis one is able to retain their anonymity (in the ear of digital supervision, at least still partially) and can be liberated from the perhaps restraining eyes of their community and narrow societal control of those in a small village. However, echoing legendary urbanist Jane Jacobs, in lively cities there are always '*eyes on the street*' – other urban dwellers or passers-by keeping an eye on what happens.

Regarding economics, Historically, cities exist for social interaction, but first and foremost, for commerce. Trading and business have always been key in survival of cities. For vitality, functionally diverse environment generates flows of people, who then make the business profitable. Economic diversity is a cornerstone of science of economic geography, particularly so-called agglomeration economics. The functionally diverse urban region is more robust in case of global economic turbulence, and it attracts companies for business opportunities and saved costs, but also for a large work pool and skilled workers. People are drawn to these metropolitan areas by rich working, education, and leisure opportunities. In urban planning, after several decades of unsuccessful rationalistic ethos in planning, manifested by decentralization, functional segregation and building car-dependent suburbs, mixed-use environments are finally back on the planners desk.

Planning for urban vitality

Since vitality is something that emerges as an intrinsic feature of urban life and corporeal, morphological settings promoting it, planning for vitality means naturally more than allocating functions or predicting demographics. First of all, it is necessary to recognize the manifestations of vitality in the city: which districts of the city are lively, which has potential to become such, and how do we support the very features that make them vital instead of disturbing this autonomous nature? This becomes especially hard since no two places or neighborhoods share the same identity – vital areas are each vital in their own ways. While experiencing and for example drifting described above could be appropriate, subjective methods to map the city, methodologically more is needed for professional planning and scientific urban research.

Jane Jacobs, albeit not being an urban designer nor an architect but a journalist, suggested very insightful and simple indicators that usually correlate with urban vitality of urban space. Her ingredients for vital environments were density, diversity of uses and buildings (particularly ages of buildings), and small block size. Putting them in context with our subjective experience in cities, they appear fairly intuitive and clever. Dense urban structure – typical for traditional cities - usually correlates with density in population, services, and variety of cultural amenities, and such places often appear buzzling. Buildings of different style and age refer also to difference in their condition, correlating with price; Jacobs argued that heterogeneity of firms and other actors (different industries and firm sizes; embryonic, growing, mature firms; 3rd/4th sector actors and so on) increases the attractivity of the place for diverse users and customers, increasing flows of people. The street corners are the most accessible place in a traditional city consisting of urban blocks, and often most lively places overall. Jacobs suggests that the more street corners, the more 'good' business locations, and people walking by, there are.

While these indicators suggested already in early 1960s are still fairly valid, as measurements they are relatively static in nature due to the limited methods of that time. In the digitalized cities of today, we can ask whether it could be possible to complement these with more dynamic data and methods, to reach novel indicators capable of reflecting not only changes in monthly or yearly bases, but perhaps track weekly, daily, or even hourly patterns in urban dynamics? Big data and geodesign, and various means of data analytics assisted by AI and machine learning provide tools for completely new understanding of such activity pulses in the city.

Currently, in the Academy of Architecture and Urban Studies, we are building a methodological tool kit for urban planners and developers that would assist them to recognize existing vital places and their unique identities, and identify potentially vital places for further development. The aim is to discover gentle tools, methods, and policies that would not disturb the unique ecosystem of the place, but could find targeted tactics or policies resembling 'urban acupuncture' to allow them to grow to their full potential. These maneuvers would not be uniform, but emerging from local (district, neighborhood, or streetscape) circumstances. Supporting vitality of areas is also in line with fashionable 'x-minutes city' -theme; however it is much more. While the 15-minutes city shrinks the urban life to gentrified (even unrealistic and boring) home-(home)office-grocery store -triangle, urban vitality -project would similarly support local lifestyle, but in addition considers the very essence of large cities as spaces of random encounters and innumerous affordances of urban life across the cityscape. In this endeavor, sustainable mobility is the key. Flows are essential for urban life. We need to make the travel-chains safe, smooth, low-emission and easy to use, to provide an enabling framework for liveliness to emerge. That is prerequisite for urban vitality.

Related literature classics:

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