

My research

My research is about the strong architect-led town planning in Helsinki as well as its materialisation as the new inner city (Jätkäsaari, Hernesaari, Kalasatama etc.), other new districts intended to be distinctly urban (Kruunuvuorenranta, Kuninkaantammi etc.) and urban corridors such as those resulting from the ‘boulevardisation’ of access roads. The research problem is what the obstacles are to achieving important objectives that (at least nominally) appear to be generally agreed upon. Today, in any case according to town planners, the means to these and other ends is precisely planning principles of a decidedly urban kind. In analysing the realised environment and plans, I pay more careful attention than what is common in social scientific studies to dimensioning, morphological and functional traits, while in investigating the planning organisation, its practices and structural conditions helping to produce such environmental properties, the approach is obviously social scientific. In that sense, the research is transdisciplinary.

The research question and the problem of ‘post’ versus ‘realist’ views

My main concern, justifying the research question, is that planning, as a cog in a societal big wheel, reinforces or at least does not sufficiently counteract unsustainable societal tendencies. Neither does it optimally promote socially well-working environments and individual well-being despite the huge investments in the built environment, the realisation of which it is partly responsible for. The evidence for the partially deficient functioning of town planning is that emissions of greenhouse gasses from traffic and housing have been increasing rather than decreasing for decades, and with few signs of any radical shift despite rising awareness of the problem and its consequences. Neither are best practices for creating a liveable urban environment consistently implemented, although detailed studies on how to attain it have existed for more than half a century (at least since modernist planning principles thoroughly replaced more traditional planning and building that, in a sense, had produced such environments spontaneously).¹ It is important to realise that claiming this cannot be reduced to a political view but rather depends on empirical facts and a theoretical background understanding. True, one may question the validity of the scientific/professional views, at least those pertaining to the social, but as the findings as such have not, as far as I understand, been widely challenged (affecting the burden of proof), the questioning brings the discussion to a level not immediately threatening the respectability of the research question. Therefore, the problem at least seems to define an obvious and important case for scientific investigation. Thence the first, (in my view) apposite and concise or (according to my teachers) ‘highly unscientific’, working title of my research: ‘Why do Things go Wrong in Town Planning?’²

¹ Evident problems are oversized shopping centres at the cost of neighbourhood services, dead ground floors (often housing car parks), big building units and undifferentiated façades, and a fragmented urban structure (sometimes due to car parks or their access ramps) wasteful of space and blurring its status as semi-private or public.

² After this fatal neglect of scientific impression management, I wrote an article-length ‘apologia’ defending my problem formulation (leaving the teachers cold, though), which I shall not recirculate now. In any case, the research title is hardly decisive, although the phrasing allowedly suggests a view that is neither empiricist-scientific nor poststructuralist (the former doubtless attractive to those holding an impressionistic view of scientificity).

One might also reply that town planning is subordinated to political decision-making, rather than making up an external controlling body, its role therefore being the implementation of political decisions rather than taking political initiatives. Yet, unless it is reduced to a trivial formal statement with unclear relevance, the reply might amount to an unjustified shifting of responsibility (e.g. by planners) and does not necessarily represent a truthful picture of the division of power. In fact, there is a kind of dialectics or chicken-and-egg problem in the relation between formal decision-making and the drafting by officials: while politicians are ultimately responsible for the value and interest-based decisions about ends, the officials' preparation and implementation of decisions also exert control (if their position is sufficiently powerful to allow for it) in securing possible political alternatives to be in line with professional standards and, at least ideally, with overarching political decisions or declarations of intent, such as that of reducing the emission of greenhouse gasses. According to the self-understanding of town planners, their task is thus to take the viewpoint of 'the whole' or the public interest, while specialists and other actors involved (according to planners) look upon matters each from their limited perspective or with a view to furthering their special interests. In this respect, however, politics is actually divided, since from the viewpoint of promoting political ideals, what (officially, at least) is aimed at is what is good for society, or the public interest, whereas from the viewpoint of standing up for the interests of some groups, politics by definition (and in accordance with democratic principles) furthers special interests.

While I thus find both the responsibility of the town planning organisation (at least if strong enough) evident, the dysfunctionality of planning practices in relation to sustainability serious in principle, and the research interest thereby justified, one should not dramatise the situation as somehow exceptional or lay the blame on planning only.³ In a complex pluralistic society with necessary divisions of interest, the public interest (or what actors believe to be the public interest) is not easy to reach. This is so even in limiting cases, like that of mitigating climate change, in which the essential content of the public interest may be established rather confidently. The reason is that its various possible realisations always threaten the special interests of at least some groups or the 'acquired rights' of the majority, while incentives for action are missing due to game theoretical problems. Neither does the fact that goals are not wholly reached mean that they are not approached, or that the situation would be better without planning. In any case, such claims must allow for theoretical/analytical or empirical substantiation. For example, Marxists or green fundamentalists might assume capitalism or the 'system' to be ultimately responsible for the failures of town planning and planning itself therefore causally epiphenomenal. Scientifically, this may be acknowledged as a hypothesis to be taken seriously, but one in need of theoretical demonstration and empirical evidence.

Even if the research question may be regarded as acceptable, it should thus be noted that not any background philosophy or social scientific theory is unproblematically compatible with it. The straightforward way of formulating the problem to be investigated presupposes that there is genuine consensus in principle about main political and planning objectives and that the knowledge about the (alternative) means to achieve the ends can be recognised as valid. Agreement enabling rational, expert-guided (incremental) action is difficult to attain if there are radically different alternatives, e.g. ecological modernisation versus decentralisation and a

³ My perhaps emphatic way of stating the problem rather reflects the compact resistance it met with when first formulated from the then authoritative seminar audience, referred to above.

return to work-intensive agriculture for solving the environmental problem. As to (scientific) Marxism, although it allows for social scientific knowledge (its own), it excludes a common viewpoint with bourgeois science, as the latter, according to Marx, out of necessity produces distorted knowledge. Foucault, unlike the kind of dogmatic Marxist science mentioned, problematises the status of his own conceptions denying their objectivity, and circumspectly presents them as interpretations. Yet, a disqualification of 'social' urban design knowledge of a Gehlian kind might follow from his position, as being naïve or serving the normalisation of the users of urban space. Neither he nor his poststructuralist followers allow for consensual views either, save for what is imposed by hegemonic discourses and power/knowledge.

This at least is the interpretation I have favoured in my several presentations and article drafts. There might be more complex or interesting understandings. Instead of starting out from the presupposition that a common worry about the environmental crisis according to Foucault and poststructuralists would just be an ideological construct, one might rather assume them to take it for granted as a general background for more specific and therefore more interesting questions. If one would keep closely to a Foucauldian power/knowledge analysis of town planning, the result might be of a kind of basic research rather than providing clear-cut answers to questions posed from an unproblematised researcher's position serving planning and taking its own viewpoint as given, if only to a certain extent. Themes such as sustainability and the social aspect of planning might certainly be elucidated, although the internal 'logic' (including argumentative fallacies, discontinuities between words and deeds etc.) of actors' discursive and non-discursive practices would be in focus rather than their consistency with some yardstick imposed by the researcher's understanding of the problem. Also, confrontations between different understandings of actors in different power-positions would be investigated.

My viewpoint, however, is that one might suppose that the official picture of attaining sustainability, social functionality and other objectives by urbanity and the work of architects and other writers taking the aim of making the urban environment liveable by specific architectural or urban design solutions, might indeed be worth taking seriously. Obviously, from the researcher's viewpoint, it does not quite work. Yet, by a reconstructive effort, it might be made to work better, and shortcomings repaired analytically and by suggesting remedies not too far from town planners' own ideas and those presented in the literature.

Still, many aspects of the present research in fact reflect Foucauldian interests, although the perspective is different, more impatient of reaching directly useful knowledge, if you wish (an attitude, to be sure, that does not always pay off in science). I try partly to compensate for my 'superficial' stance by engaging different theoretical perspectives in a dialogue in Giddens's spirit. I thus find it interesting in principle to try to understand in what ways the background theory used affects what questions can be posed and what kind of answers obtained. Also, I do not think it is enough just to choose a theory and then consistently keep to it without justifying its use in relation to how the research object and the knowledge needed is conceived to begin with.

Pragmatism, power and conceptual confusion

A common trait in the three key notions of my research – ecological sustainability, 'social functionality' (or, to avoid social or architectural functionalist connotations: a socially well-

working urban environment) and urbanity – is conceptual confusion. Particularly the first notion is clearly developed for political uses to thematise an important global problem, with many ramifications, threatening humanity rather than as part of an academic analysis. Therefore, it is deliberately left open to allow different actors to join in with their own viewpoints and interests. The second notion has come about as a reaction to the inhumane urban environment produced by rapid urbanisation, industrialised building and modernist architectural ideology. From an oppositional position in the margins of science and, to some extent at least, of the architectural profession, the knowledge has not been able to assert itself as strongly as ‘hard science’. The status of the third notion is interesting since it is today strongly emphasised by the town planning institution and the practitioners. Still, it remains surprisingly vague, even what might be conceived as its core aspects being left undefined.

Although to some extent surprising, the conceptual confusion is comprehensible for several reasons, even in relation to urbanity. The relation to politics referred to in the case of sustainability might partly explain the vagueness of the other notions as well. Leaving some space for differing interpretations may secure the possibility of saving some implicit core meaning of it. As a slogan, it might be put to work for legitimising various projects. In relation to ‘power’ (strong actors and vaguer structures), a blurred notion enables flexible responses.

In relation to architect-led town planning, it is not uncommon for the professional understanding of planning goals and practices to be primarily tacit. If such knowledge is communicated, it might refer to aesthetic-architectural strivings unfathomable for lay people and do not as such serve as potential ‘boundary object’ sharable with other professions. From the architect’s viewpoint, there are enough boundary conditions obstructing free creativity without binding one’s hands more than necessary by self-imposed rules in relation to urbanity or ‘social functionality’ (the latter easily mixed up by architects with an environment of high architectural quality).

Now, sorting out conceptual confusion does not as such mean solving real-world problems. Rather, one might more probably explain the conceptual problems by referring to conflicts and differing views about planning objectives ‘out there’. Still, I think unclear key concepts do not make it easier to reach any goals, but might more probably form real obstacles in further diminishing the power of fragile social knowledge to set boundary conditions comparable with that of economic, technical and legal facts and rules.

What is important in relation to social knowledge and notions such as urbanity is that a certain necessary vagueness in their meaning as potentially generally agreed-upon does not empty them of meaning. In the absence of certain definitions or certain (scientific) results, that is, it does not follow that anything goes. Therefore, in what follows, my strategy is the same as in relation to ecological sustainability: to try to isolate some key meanings the importance of which is difficult to deny and then tentatively enrich the conceptual meaning with connotations that do not conflict with the most important ones.

Urbanity

That the concept of urbanity is unclear does thus not imply that it does not carry any meaning at all. For example, the word fills a cognitive function in everyday language. All users would agree that it has something to do with social, visual and functional intensity. Architecturally,

both narrow alleys lined with small-scale buildings and massive structures, at least if not devoid of people or activity, may be perceived as urban. In the margins, there is certainly ambiguity: is a Finnish forest suburb with scattered blocks of flats or a dense Central European village more urban? Such problems does not mean that people could not agree about clear cases.

Nevertheless, academic and practical needs necessitate some characterisation going beyond intuition or a mere ostensive definition. My suggestion is first of all to separate the architectural concept from the sociological. Also, it is useful to make a distinction between a crude architectural notion of urbanity, referring to a certain efficiency in land-use and the traffic system, as well as some synergy between functions, and a more developed notion. In what follows, I shall focus on the latter, taking the traditional European (inner city) urban environment as the exemplar of urbanity, with a suburban and rural opposite, naming it an 'urban basic structure'. Three hierarchies may then be constructed: First, one in terms of the importance or typicality of various architectural or urban design features on the level of the urban block or a street section. Second, one that orders different kinds of urban blocks or street sections in terms of the degree to which they contain urban features of the first category. Third, a categorisation of different urban environments depending on their centrality or types of urban blocks.

What features make for 'prototypical' urbanity? First, an enclosed street space, translating into perimeter blocks (or at least semi-perimeter blocks), is certainly one of them. Second, communicating rather than dead ground floors. This means primarily a functional or visual contact with what is going on inside and, if possible, many entrances and windows. If the function does not allow for this, architectural detailing may create visual intensity. In central areas of the city, communicating ground floors include shops, cafés and other comparable activities. Third, prototypical urbanity imply many plots or buildings in every perimeter block, adding to diversity and visual-functional intensity. Fourth, also supporting diversity and intensity, façades are differentiated (and 'relief-like' i.e. a surface that is not wholly even) with horizontal and vertical partitions, bays, balconies and the like.

Although perimeter blocks are certainly one of the most characteristic features of a traditional European inner city, there are definitely exceptions. One of the most important ones are free-standing public buildings. Even if Sitte disliked the solution, empirically it would be odd and normatively questionable to regard urban blocks with such a characteristic as non-urban. Yet, for analytical clarity one may separate such urban blocks from perimeter blocks. For example, the effect itself produced by separating an important building from the wall of more common buildings is dependent on the rule being followed (this effect is more difficult to produce in typically fragmented provincial Finnish cities than in Helsinki). Such semi-perimetral urban blocks thus define the second level in the urban block structure.

The third level is produced by for example functionalistic principles breaking up the urban structure locally. This might most naturally happen towards a park or the seaside, the rest of the urban block remaining intact. As long as such breaks are 'local enough' (such contextual circumstances make the notions slightly vague, which is not the same thing as meaningless), preferably preserving the street space of main streets intact, they do not make the urban environment un-urban. One point is that breaks against the principles should somehow be architecturally justified from an urban-design viewpoint rather than just be caused by an architect's (from the viewpoint of urban design) idiosyncratic ideas for his or her plot. This again, admit-

tedly, makes for a blurring between the notions of urbanity and architectural quality. However, one should note that these possible problems appear in the margins of the former notion.

Finally, what is needed is a clearer conceptualisation and hierarchy of urbanity on the district level, one attempted by New Urbanists with their Transect scheme. I think the idea behind it is useful; yet, their model is quite strict, causing unnecessary opposition. Without being able here to present a convincing alternative interpretation, I think many notions in use should be given more precise meanings in the professional vocabulary. One might distinguish between at least the city core (central business district), characterised by housing missing almost completely; the centre, with businesses and public functions in practically all ground floors; the inner city, with secondary and tertiary centres et cetera. GIS analyses might be used to get more precise data to compare with impressionistic or urban design-based observation.

The conceptual apparatus is not wholly created *aus Liebe zur Kunst* but is intended to serve an analysis of the new inner city areas in Helsinki and to be able to discuss intended and unintended differences in relation to the traditional city in a less intuitive way with town planner-architects. The idea of a basic urban structure as here introduced has in fact been tried out on a couple of town planners and found 'highly interesting', as well as on a real urban design project for the centre of the small archipelago town of Pargas. The framework is still intuitive (certainly informed by *some* reading). Its function is to enable a viewpoint from which to engage in a serious literature study.