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Ana Beatriz de Souza Esteves
Ana Gonçalves
Daniela Félix C. Martins
Denise Vianna Nunes
Fábio Tozi
Juliana Medeiros Paiva Schmitt
Marlise Sanchotene de Aguiar
Roberto Falanga
Rosângela Lunardelli Cavallazzi
Veronica Dimitrova
Victor Marchezini

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On imaginal building as an urban substrata

Ana Gonçalves
ICS, University of Lisbon (ana.goncalves@ics.ul.pt)

Abstract

Imaginaries have not only nurtured the entire history of the urban, they have saturated the lexicon ongoing in the everyday life of cities, but also have constituted one of the lines of urban research experiencing nowadays one of the most challenging and suggestive periods of development. However, such subjects took time to shake off the label of a slippery and non-canonical raw material to the extent that they propose the construction of new understandings of the city. Indeed, this focus conceives of the urban as a psycho-socio-ecological arena, unfinished and metamorphic, the effect of a successive chain of daily interactions between tangible and intangible processes and, as such, an irreducible complexity in constant construction and reform. It is this situated and dated entanglement, embedded and transitive (as intrinsically subjugated to space and time), that goes about shaping and moulding the physical and metaphysical figure of the city. This paper serves only as an abbreviated guide through the essential bibliography of the interlinking and overlapping themes related to the (re)production of a city and its urban imaginaries.

Introductory note

Urban imaginaries constitute a new front line in research within the domain of urban cultural studies. While this research realm gained in profile due to the inputs from interdisciplinary theoretical currents like phenomenology, existentialism, situationism, structuralism and psychoanalysis, which served to highlight the interdependence of the material, the sensorial, the psychological and the social as fundamental factors for reflection on cities across the extent of their historical and cultural complexity, only recently such an analytical approach definitively impacted on urban theory. This brief paper highlights and examines the resulting perspective.
Culturalisation, spatialisation and urbanisation of social theories

In carrying out this retrospective examination of the last three decades — a period in which cities have been subject to important centripetal and dilating trends, which only reinforce their position as key-scenarios for contemporary societies, in part fruit of the dissolution of the once preeminent role played by the nation-state in these political and academic arenas (Jameson 1988, 350; Le Galès 1999, 299; Appadurai 2003, 337; Soja 2010, 372) — it may be stated that a contagious and interwoven orientation of the social sciences towards the spatial, the urban, the cultural, and the discursive is very much to the fore. Two movements that singly emerged as from the 1960s, intensified and overlapped after the 1980s, and spread to practically all intellectual debates as from the mid-1990s — termed the cultural, linguistic and discursive turns in urban studies (Hastings 1999; Jacobs 1999; Collins 2000) and the spatial and urban turns in the humanities, the social sciences and the cultural studies (Warf e Arias, 2009; Soja, 2006) — have notably contributed towards these fields of knowledge becoming inherently self-adjusted, where not competitive, as well for the development and the vitality of a mutual domain of scientific practice and research that has been designated as urban cultural studies or the cultural study of cities (Le Galès 1999: 293).

Without an exclusive disciplinary field, the imaginary, symbolic, ideological and identity issues, which are local and translocal established (and hence simultaneously the roots and the fruits of localisms, regionalisms, nationalisms, cosmopolitanisms) — considered substantial components of the city —, appeal for a multidisciplinary and specific approach. Cross-referencing perspectives and transposing the conceptual borders of anthropology, political science, economics, philosophy, geography, history, linguistics, psychology, semiotics and sociology, beyond the ecumenical scopes of the sciences of language, cultural studies and urban studies, the sphere of urban cultural studies has contributed towards an integrated reading of the specific characteristics of the contemporary city, by emphasizing the relevance of the cultural facet and the imaginary and symbolic orders in construction, organisation, daily experience and meaning of urban spaces. In virtue of this diverse range of inputs, this field of knowledge has been labelled cross-border, multi-purpose, multidisciplinary and pluri-paradigmatic and pointed out as such as innovative as it is redundant, as dynamic as it is unstable and as circumscribed as it is numerous.

Consequently, the spatial and cultural imperatives, operating as intersecting axes of inquiry and analysis of the everyday experience of the city, have contributed towards fragmenting the sole topic of space that is nowadays deemed multidimensional and poly-locative — geometric, anthropological (Certeau 1990[1980]), physical, mental, social (Soja 1989), absolute, relative, relational
(Harvey 1973), conceptual, perceptual, experiential (Lefebvre 1974); linguistic, statistical, cartographic, pictorial, photographic, cinematic, fictional, sculptural, sonic, performative, etcetera — and to the usually designated as the culturalisation of analysis (Soja 1999) and urban spaces (Le Galès 1999). This phenomenon incorporates just as much reductionism, to the extent it relegates the economic, political, ideological, and social dimensions, as it does a holistic vision given that the cultural, in its systemic integrity, pervades the entirety of social life. It is assumed that there is no truly acultural reality, i.e. there is nowhere one in some way escapes from the particular systems of active and influential culture norms and conventions in any specific moment in any specific place.

It is within this context that, and after all these years, under the asymmetric pulls and pushing of different and divergent trends in thinking — anti-positivism, neo-Marxism, post-structuralism, post-modernism —, the academic focus has converged around the intangible dimension (in the sense of not being immediately available for human sensorial comprehension) of the city, which affects the generality of the psycho-socio-cultural processes that intermediate between the urban subject and their environment. This new orientation enhances the research around the social devices through which it organises and prescribes the operational range of morphemes and emblems that actively participate in the constitution of the urb. This, correspondingly, throws into focus the discursive acts and expressive manifestations and especially those taking place in the public sphere.

Stemming from this perceptible turn towards the binding of the spatial and the cultural, emerged a range of tropes — e.g. cityscapes, urban mindscapes (Soja 2000 e 2006), geographic imagination (Harvey 1990, Gregory 1994), cognitive mapping, spatial figuration (Jameson 1988) —, displaying sensitive affiliations and mutually overlapping, that considerably expand our understanding of the imaginary building of the city and its symbolical manifestations.

The impregnation and immanence of urban imaginaries

Imaginary construction is endemic to human action and as such transversally impregnates societies. Paradoxically, this issue has only later received an oscillating level of theoretical and empirical recognition. The justification fairly derives from its disseminated, polysemic, heterodox and immaterial profile, which is as frequently mentioned as at the origin of both the aversions and the attractions exercised as a motive for scientific thought.

While inherently not a conventional object, the imaginary is omitted or rare in studies through to the transition from the 19th to the 20th century due to how the western philosophic tradition had been built upon a rational dogmatism that propagated iconoclastic distrust, condemning the imaginary order to the subconscious, to the wild, the impulse, the sensorial, the frivolous,
the whimsical, the illusionary, the relative, the manipulable, in order to force its exclusion from the logical routine of knowledge and to consign its input exclusively to the scope of religions, traditions and arts.

Among the authors who have, gradually, engaged in this subject, emerging from diverse disciplinary branches — in particular from the subfields of symbolic anthropology, of philosophy of the mind, of the history of the imaginary, of the psychology of the imagination, and of the sociology of knowledge —, no generic vision prevailed to suitably describe and grasp the multiple facets of the phenomenon. Hence, each author built up a specific approach that resulted in a variety of uses, positions and connotations (negative, neutral, positive) about the relationships between imaginary, symbolic and empirical orders. Thus, the imaginary ipso facto has been constituted as an umbrella category, overarchinig worldviews, representations, images, memories, myths, fictions, fantasies, phantasmagoria, dystopias, utopias. Indeed, this full plethora of mental layers, certainly bound up with materiality, frequently adopts complex cultural forms to unfold, such as arts, rituals, performative and recreational practices.

Although the imaginaries have nurtured the entire history of the urban, as Néstor García Canclini pointed out (1997, 89), have saturated the lexicon ongoing in a city’s daily life, as Michel de Certeau underlined (1980[1974], 33), and have constituted one of the urban research approaches that has experienced the most challenging and suggestive development in recent decades, such subjects took time to shake off the label of a slippery and non-canonical raw material to the extent that they propose the construction of new understandings of the city, suggesting the dematerialisation of the urban and uncovering the hidden and unstable subterraneans of spatial subjectivities.

What stands out with the affirmation of urban imaginaries is the idea of cutting with the monolithic, undifferentiated and peremptory vision of the city, which is in some way detectable in earlier speculations on the urban phenomenon: the city was described as a functional holistic system — even if broad, dense and sociologically heterogeneous —, bounded by firm and perceptible borders, generating a characteristic way of life (defined by celerity, anonymity, indifference, civility, sophistication and emancipation), functioning as an entrepot of concrete relationships (of antagonism, sustentation, interchange or alienation) with the country, the nation-state and the outer world, where was implicit an evolutionary linearity (whose aim was gradual civilizational progress), despite the ongoing competition, tumult and social inequalities inherent to such environments.

This conception has in the meanwhile been switched wholesale with its reverse: the urb and its heteronymous multiplicity now refer predominantly to a hypertrophic extension that has gathered density and length due to its own vital course. A major part of current reflections on the city rest upon the observation of some of its more paradoxical aspects, symptoms of
the co-occurrence of contradictory realities, which contribute to perceiving urban centres as loci of multitude and solitude, tribalism and atomism, cosmopolitanism and communitarianism, gentrification and suburbanisation, regeneration and degradation, bureaucracy and flexibility, prosperity and precariousness, consumerism and indigence, inclusion and exclusion, solidarity and conflict, civic mobilisation and social segregation, networks of effervescent interaction (whether physical or virtual) and disaffection, eco-militancy and environmental degradation, creativity and standardisation, innovation and patrimonialisation/museofication, grand events and daily routines.

The passage from one variant to another throws the dilemmatic, multifaceted, polysemic and dynamic urban nature into stark relief, which opens the field up to recognition of the interference of visions, rhetoric, semantic, semiotic and semiotic magmas in the elaboration, appropriation and projection of the various possibilities posed by urban agglomerates. The under-theorised and undervalued interfaces between ecological conditions and the everyday practices, urban experience and spatial representation, collective memory and sense of place, individual and social, any of these instances perceived as subordinate to the driving force of history, were displaced from the margins of social theory to become gradually reclaimed by contemporary urban studies.

In practice, this involves conceiving of the city as a psycho-socio-ecological arena, unfinished and metamorphic, the effect of a successive chain of daily interactions between tangible and intangible processes and thereby taking on an irreducible complexity, in constant construction and reform. In summary, the city becomes understood as a plot, ingeniously stitched, day after day, in both voluntary and involuntary fashions, by various urbanites (residents and sporadic or regular users). The city is after all composed of diverse and provisory surfaces, landscapes, buildings, arteries, institutions and individuals, whose gestures, trajectories, contacts, histories are conveyed and transmitted between each other and the desires and the conflicts that pierce each one of them combine to inherently encrypt the space. It is this interwoven, situated and dated network, enacted and transitive (as intrinsically subjugated to space and time), that shapes the physical and the metaphysical figure of the city and in turn this involves recognising it not only as a skeleton of bricks, concrete and tarmac but also home to a kaleidoscope of moods, auras and atmospheres.

As a sliced, incoherent, bubbling, mutating mass of processes and elements, and a superabundance of situations and facts, the city somatically affects individuals, unfurling impressions, giving full wings to imaginations. Physically or reflectively experimenting the miscellany and the cacophony of the volumes, forms, palettes, codes, symbols, signals, noises, rhythms, flows and smells that permeate the urb, city dwellers merge with the features inlaid into the urban landscape, vital components that inhabit and embody the city
to a point whereby the knowledge held about the city becomes broadly contextual, implied, partial, prone to shortcomings.

Furthermore, the city is sensorially immeasurable and unattainable. Approaching it always implies speculating on the excerpts *in absentia*. Only through the force of the imagination, symbolic management and the processing of the verbal equivalent can the vacuums be filled, the chaos be ordered, and the expanse be countered, simplifying the confusion, summarising the variety and, ultimately, simulating the completed whole. This thus means that the urban imaginary is a panacea for dealing with the extensiveness, the complexity, the contingencies and the nervous rhythms of the city. Hence, this implies the need to suggestively filter, condense and internalise the heritage of the memories of past experiences, the visual, perceptive and direct cognitive operations of daily urban life, the reflected images of local culture. As such, all these imaginaries come from the dynamic enrooting, the overlapping of hodiern and archaeological, factual and fictional, generic and intimate layers, and they are subject to the new possibilities for modelling and meaning and therefore equally subject to contestation and controversy. Indeed, it is crucial to recognise that visions of the city, as composite, are neither uniform nor complementary nor even necessarily compatible.

The urban imaginary refers precisely to mental, cognitive, aesthetic and affective maps that operate in the plurality of modes of being urban. In short, it refers to “the interpretative grids through which we think about, experience, evaluate, and decide to act in the places, spaces, and communities in which we live” (Soja 2000, 324). The concept is frequently put forward in the plural — the urban imaginaries — not only due to its processual, chameleonic and perishable formation, but through the negation of an essential, unique, exclusive, and uncontroversial mould.

Finally, the fabrication of imaginaries (and the geo-symbols that foster them) is no soothing operation, no free-exchange on a clean slate. On the contrary, it assumes some symbolic violence, legacies, sovereignties and it is commonly submitted to control. Authorities, markets, the media and audiences cultivate, underestimate or censure clichés about the city. As a consequence of this sieving, currents of thinking enter into the mainstream, horizons of meaning are trivialised, reiterating symbols and lexicons anchored in the core of a recognisable and distinctive local semantic that integrates, disintegrates, reintegrates the urban space, but which, above all, socially differentiates, categorises and codifies the flesh and stone amalgam that forms the city, and prescribes the lexicon, the mythemes, and the territorial markers in effect in any particular specific period in time.
Concluding note

In 1925, one of the renowned figures in the Chicago School, Robert Park, defined the city as a “state of mind” (1967[1925], 1), giving rise to an inexhaustible seam of urban dematerialisation. From this perspective, the city is above all else a multifaceted abstraction that is deified through a set of different representations, whether in harmony or in conflict. Such mental images circulate in the daily urban life throughout the most varied of circuits and to this end adopting multiple genres and configurations: city postcards, slang and street talk, tourism slogans, commemorative ceremonies, songs.

It was precisely with the objective of following in the wake of this other city, that is neither specific nor exclusive to the buildings and lines of communication and circulation of peoples and goods, conglomerates of residential units, with borders and limits with eventually different variables of acquiescence or non-determination, that I proposed this brief examination.

Bibliographical references


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