Zeitschrift: Trans : Publikationsreihe des Fachvereins der Studierenden am Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich

Herausgeber: Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich

Band: - (2017)

Heft: 31

Artikel: Involuntary critique

Autor: [s.n.]

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-918696

Involuntary Critique
GruppoTorto

Scrutiny over urban transformation is no longer restricted to authorities, artistic or intellectual production but can be triggered by a large group of people. It can be considered a historical change in which the crowd gains major importance.

The artists Lucie de Barbuat and Simon Brodbeck present throughout ‹Silent World›[1] (fig.a) a series of images of extreme emptiness and surreal reverie. Each image is created from cutting apart multiple stills from digital videos of the world's busiest intersections, avoiding the pixels that contain fragments of people. By draining the images from all traces of human life, Lucie & Simon drained the depicted public spaces from their most intrinsic component—the people themselves. By doing so, the artists conceived contemplative cityscapes, which are by no means mere urban utopias, but rather accurate depictions of a threatening future scenario. The concentration of people can determine the success or failure of a public space. Seeing usually crowded places in such empty conditions leaves us with a feeling of alienation up to the point that we can barely recognise them. It is therefore not surprising that representations of future urban interventions are commonly crowded with people.

The described alienating feeling can be linked in various ways to the increasing impact of the digital realm on our lives and our behaviour. Certainly, «cultures, places and spaces, are much more resistant, and (...) are thus not so easily abolished».[2] On the other hand, there are a significant number of activities (e.g. social integration, political debate[3]) which are shifting away from the physical public space to the digital realm. Even if tourist migrations might partially hide this imminent process of decline, citizens retreat more and more from public life. Are we facing a crisis of the public space due to collective renunciation?

In order to get to the heart of the matter, it is important to reconsider how the term of ‹public space› could be defined in the first place: its definition depends very much on which of its constituents (‹public› or ‹space›) we focus on. It is either the ‹public› part which implies the social sphere (as to say without society there is no public space) or the ‹space› part which presumes physical definition with buildings, objects, landscape etc. (without architecture there is no public space). Public space can be defined as the main conceptual component of the city, the most complex habitat of a species, as well as the most visible representation of material culture. Both described notions (‹public› and ‹space›) are heavily shaken by the new trends of technology and need to be reassessed.

Revolution without revolutionaries

As technology starts to embrace every aspect of our daily life, also the relationship between the citizen and the city changes radically. While only a few decades ago it was very difficult to collect useful information concerning the city (number of inhabitants, the quality of life, the social issues of particular neighbourhoods), nowadays, the same kind of information can be gathered in a few seconds and even be live-broadcasted by the citizens themselves.[4]

The technologies we are surrounded by are only a glimpse into an endless series of inventions and innovations: we are standing on the shoulders of giants such as the development of telecommunications, transportation and computers which started a long time ago. Among the more recent innovations we can identify the internet of things, artificial intelligence and the ascent of digital networks (clouds etc.). Though these are still too new to derive reliable predictions, it is, however, possible to trace two different tendencies that could dominate the future of our cities. The first follows the mentioned shift, whereby communication, exchange of goods, political manifestation, and other forms of exchange largely move into the virtual. Internet becomes «the public space of the 21st century»[5]. The second assumes a turning point in which public space retains its main functions and is enriched (punctually or area-wide) by digital technology via ‹smart› objects. The digital realm turns into a superimposed layer on top of the existing. In this way public space becomes ‹accessible› again, thanks to new gateways, which are based on the exchange of information. In contrast to former systems appearing physically in our environment (fig. b), the new gateways are completely invisible. The borders between the physical and digital worlds become increasingly blurred and ‹smart cities›

fig.a: Brodbeck & De Barbuat, ‹Madison square› from the series ‹Silent World›, Baryta print, 160x210cm, 2009

fig.b: ‹Stockholm Telephone Tower›, 1913, Courtesy Tekniska Museet

witness the genesis of ‹smart citizens›[6]. The two described tendencies would lead to completely different outcomes regarding the role of the planer: the first which assumes the retreat of activities from public space would lead to the entire loss of an important field of activity. The second, i.e. the superimposing of a new layer, would bring on the contrary new challenges as well as new tasks. As a result, we are confronted with a radical crossroads in the planning field that can turn out to be existential. In this way we can assert that the public space can only persist with the implementation of the digital.

One of the most striking aspects of the second scenario is that scrutiny over urban transformation is no longer restricted to authorities, artistic or intellectual production but can be triggered by a large group of people. It can be considered a historical change in which the crowd gains major importance. By disclosing our behaviour, we voice critique by the simplest actions and choices: choosing one parking lot instead of another, sitting on a bench, riding the bike to work, etc. By choosing and reacting to the environment, the act of living turns itself into an involuntary critique of the city. Surely there has always been a certain degree of such critique. The main difference is that the critique is nowadays accessible throughout endless dataflow.

In order to understand the meaning of the expression ‹involuntary critique›, it is crucial to have a closer look at the term ‹critique› itself. Coming from Ancient Greek word ‹krino›, it stands for ‹to sort›, or ‹to separate›, also translated as ‹to decide›[7]. In this way ‹critique› can be related to a judgement succeeded by an act of decision. It can be argued that the act of such ‹decision› is the manifestation of ‹critique› itself and as such it does not require a precise receiver or a particular system of evaluation. The reception of such ‹critique› by the possibilities of digital networks allows for an increase in power on behalf of citizens and thus induces a slow transformation of the city. Surely, on one hand, the process of evaluation is necessary to sort out inaccuracies and false assumptions, as well as to devise concrete strategies and develop political agendas. On the other hand, the evaluation process is unable to constitute ‹critique› per se, but relies on acting performers.

Users or consumers?

At this point of time the amount of collected data is immense and keeps growing constantly. Therefore it is not only the question of who is willing to interpret ‹big data›, but who is actually able to deal with them. In the last decade large media firms managed to develop a dominant position in data evaluation and started to develop commercial schemes: whilst smartphones have already become a notorious, widespread tool of data collection, Google released an innovative product in

fig.c: Banksy, ‹One Nation Under CCTV›, Graffiti, London 2008

2012[8], called ‹Google Glass›. The use of the new product offers a good example of the mechanisms that lead to commercial application of involuntary critique. The concept behind this wearable device is quite simple: you no longer need a screen to access the digital world. The reality becomes the screen: right when you turn on your Google Glass, the digital world is directly imposed on your visual field and you can interact with it, both in a digital and a physical way. Throughout different apps you can access cloud services such as photos, calendar, contacts, maps, emails, text messaging—just to name a few. By the provided camera and audio input, calls can be turned into so called ‹hangouts›, which use screen sharing and geo-localisation.[9] Subsequently, an algorithm searches for recurring patterns and preferences. On this base, users will receive commercial suggestions on all their cloud connected devices and data are turned into a profitable source for advertising business.

The sheer amount of information coming from the most private sphere of the performing individual is so extensive that The Telegraph described Google Glass as «Orwellian surveillance with fluffier branding», specifying that, «You don't own the data, you don't control the data and you definitely don't know what happens to the data. Put another way—what would you say if instead of it being Google Glass, it was Government Glass?»[10] The described controversy about privacy (fig. c) took on a whole new dynamic in which users of Glass were insulted as ‹Glassholes›[11] and threatened in broad daylight. It seems, indeed, that facing public life with a camera on eye level has exceeded the limits of acceptance. Indeed, in the beginning of 2015, only after a couple of years, sale was shut down for end-users.[12] The comeback in the professional market is deliberately avoiding to interference with public spaces and is currently in progress.

Functions like gathering and socializing are associated increasingly with commercial features. It is not surprising if London's first ‹Smart street›[13] was conceived in order to improve shopping experience and not the quality of their public space. Indeed people who walk on the energy-generating pavement are not rewarded with a real improvement in the quality of the space, but mostly with discounts at the stores they are just walking past. The mentioned examples show how companies mainly pursue commercial aims; due to economic and technical reasons it can be stated that involuntary critique is therefore mostly registered and used for financial purposes.

To build with bits and bytes

The question that arises is whether there are other, non-commercial ways to deal with involuntary critique. How could urbanism and architecture benefit from its potential? Whilst most of the data is processed by big private companies, there are more and more

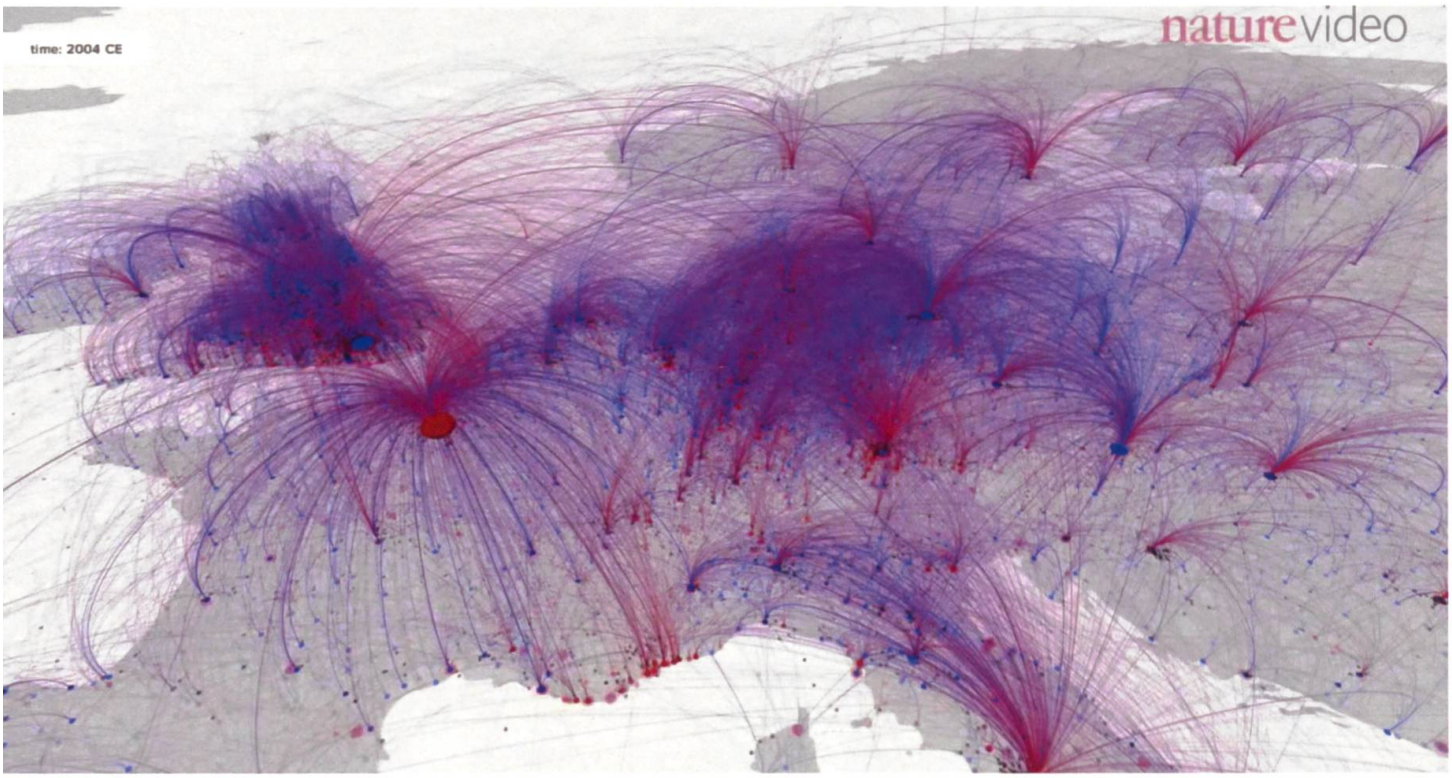

fig.d: Maximilian Schich, Mauro Martino with Nature Video, ‹Birth and Death›, Screenshot from ‹Charting Culture›, 2014

disciplines that gather involuntary critique following ‹public aims› and collective interest, among them town planning and welfare services.

One of the emerging applications is the creation of ‹Data Urbanism›[14] which is a new tool that is based on the visualisation of scientific data enriched by dynamic, user-emitted information. This approach allows, according to leading online platforms like ‹morphocode›[15], a «critical evaluation of active policies and city services by transforming otherwise hidden patterns into visual arguments». «Data we generate on a daily basis, either directly or as a by-product of our social activities» is taken as opportunity due to the fact that it «is often associated with contextual meta-information about location, usage and people». This underlines the potential of the link between people's choices taken as valuable critique. The way out of the difficult implications of privacy issues is hereby to turn individual data into anonymous group patterns. To achieve representative results, data urbanists clearly opt in favour of «making data visible, accessible and actionable».[16] With only a few parameters provided by user data, it is possible to come to intriguing conclusions about main urban factors. As such there is the work of Schich (et al.)[17] which points out the growth and decline of urban areas simply by tracing the birth and death date of ‹recorded people›[18]. Their results reflect the idea that the people's decision where to live is already a significant critique on the opportunities they aspire for. Throughout their written report and a video project (fig. d) entitled ‹Charting Culture›[19], Schich (et al.) have turned simple data into a «sociologists' and anthropologists' study [about] the growth and evolution of human culture.»[20]

Another relevant example of Data Urbanism as a tool to benefit from involuntary critique is the project of the Danish architect Jan Gehl who in 1993 began to assess the quality of public space and public life in Melbourne.[21] The study was reassessed in 2005 and another decade later, in 2015. Throughout this long period of time his team was able to point out the success of urban strategies in Melbourne which aimed at «long-term commitment to increasing the levels of pedestrian accessibility.»[22] The more data is available from acting individuals in the city, the more precise is the evaluation. Data Urbanism represents in general a valuable example which fosters the public aim and can devise a chance for urban planning guidelines.

From ‹act› to ‹enact›

Dealing with possible applications of involuntary critique leads inevitably to the question whether ‹critique› needs consciousness and intention in order to become an effective tool for urban transformation. What would happen if involuntary critique was turned into deliberate choice—shifting from the notion of ‹act› to ‹enact›?

The consequence would generally be that citizens would feel more responsible for their environment[23] i.e. they are more aware of issues around them and they start thinking about pros and cons of top-down decisions. Throughout the possibility of expressing critique without big effort, citizens could give voice to their needs and desires. Engagement hereby plays an important role since «meeting the desires of communities can only happen when citizens are engaged in the shaping of their cities.»[24] The idea to implement participatory mechanisms in the city is surely not new. Architects and urban planners from the 60s and 70s (fig. e) put this topic at the top of their agenda and pushed the idea to its theoretical limits. The novelty about it is

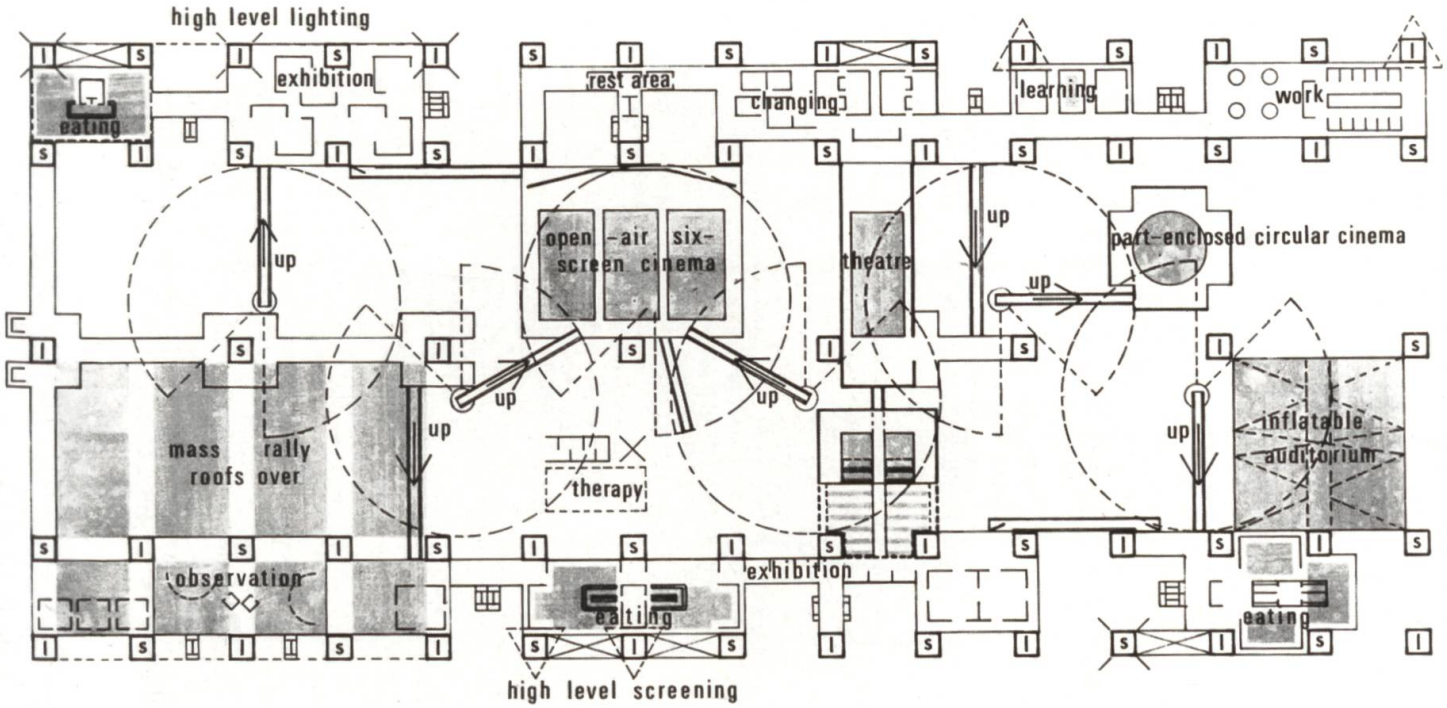

fig.e: Cedric Price, ‹Fun Palace›, 1961

the possibility of individuals to interact via modern mobile devices in broader digital networks. The ultimate step would be hereby the idea to translate critique into architectural and urban programmes. The question is how is it possible to achieve this with the new means of the digital age?

At this point we set foot on unknown territory where we need to pursue more speculative concepts. Generally we can see a potential for the emergence of voluntary critique in the combination of the two tendencies: ‹Big Data Collection› and ‹Participatory Planning›. Both exist but do not work together. The aim would be to take the immediacy and efficiency of the first and bring it together with the commitment and engagement of the second.

The described combination could arise from reinforcing awareness on the side of the performing individual and from developing suitable evaluation tools. To move from involuntary to voluntary critique, people's consciousness is needed. Only people with a sharpened awareness could be regarded as actively engaged. The evaluation of the critique is by far the biggest part of the challenge. There is the technical part in which appropriate systems need to be available for processing the Big Data. Moreover, there must be a meta-process, a sort of ‹evaluation of the evaluation› which ensures the right framework. The reason for granting a critical instance is that behaviour patterns cannot be considered a ‹volonté generale›[25].

In the not too distant future the ‹Internet of Things› will be just a reminiscence of the past. The ‹Internet of Living Things›[26] will have gained far more importance. Individuals deliberately choose to record their daily acts within automatic feedback-recognising systems (e.g. voice, eye-movement recognition). In this way the above mentioned act of choosing one particular parking lot instead of another, is turned into a ‹judgemental statement›. The collected and processed information could be further shared and discussed in common platforms. Planners enter into the digital discussion and can benefit from the processed information. In consequence, the IoLT starts having not only digital but physical impact on streets, squares and parks. Public space would thus regain a collective value newly accessed by digital means, eventually being enriched by them.

As planners we witness a striking impact of the digital not only in our lives but also in our field of profession: public space, as we are used to perceive it, is radically changing, This can be regarded as an important opportunity rather than a setback: apart from commercial endeavours which suggest an impoverishment of the public space, we can see a big opportunity to work with involuntary critique of citizens through digital networks. The potential lies on the one hand in the pursuit of public interest and on the other hand in the application to urbanism. The design and management of public space itself ends up gaining further value. We believe that this value is reinforced in the moment when performing individuals become more conscious of their involuntary critique turning into a deliberate, collaborative choice. These considerations lead us to think about new ways of interaction for citizens via digital tools. It must be carefully handled in order not to fall into ‹demagogic› use of people's opinions. What makes a participatory design valuable, besides the planning results, is probably the effect of the process itself, that is, citizens' interest, engagement and action. It can be argued, therefore, that digital means could trigger a behavioural change which redefines public space both in its social as well as territorial dimension.

In Saint-Exupéry's ‹The Little Prince› we learn an important lesson about responsibility which applies also to the involvement of citizens in public space: As the fox said to the Little Prince «People have forgotten this truth. But you mustn't forget it. You become responsible forever for what you've tamed. You're responsible for your rose.» That is to say, that involvement has to be bound to effort and dedication which goes beyond mere expression of opinion.

The digital world has plunged public space into an existential crisis but it could also be the key for its survival.

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