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Sam Griffiths

The Bartlett School of Graduate Studies
University College London (UCL)



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Forum: Temporality and ambiguity in spatial description: A response to points raised by Professor de Holanda [JOSS, Vol. 2 (2)]

Sam Griffiths

The Bartlett School of Graduate Studies
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I am grateful to Professor de Holanda for his considered thoughts (de Holanda, 2011) on my article 'Temporality in Hillier and Hanson's theory of spatial description' (Griffiths, 2011) and for giving me the opportunity to further reflect upon and clarify some points in my argument. The primary purpose of my article was to open a dialogue between Hillier and Hanson's theory of spatial description and historical epistemology. I set out to explore theoretically the question of *ambiguity* in spatial description, which arises when researching 'spatial' questions in urban history. Such research almost inevitably reveals the multiplicity of contexts in which spatial descriptions must be 'put to work' to be of value in the process of historical interpretation. Acknowledging the multiplicity of space in turn implicates the temporality (or temporal inscription-description) of space as being essential to conceiving a route out of an explanatory mode that is essentially syncretic and quite insensitive to the ambiguous, the contradictory and the particular in history. This explanatory mode means that it is difficult to use space syntax methodology to mediate between the cognitive-perceptual (in some senses the 'existential') time of 'movement', and the different ways in which social space become meaningful in symbolic-representational terms for different people in different periods of history and geographical places. A marked resistance in space syntax theory to articulating what I maintain is the inherent ambiguity of spatial description and is therefore, the source of incompatibility with historical epistemology that I sought to address.

My argument was that by revisiting Hillier and Hanson's emphasis on description retrieval *from spatio-temporal reality*, historical researchers might be helped to discover the relevance of this powerful theoretical idea beyond the particular

field of applied architectural research. Such an interdisciplinary engagement, I suggested, also raises interesting questions for space syntax theory more broadly. I am in complete agreement with Professor de Holanda that there is no *necessary* reason whatsoever why space syntax as a discipline should seek to engage mainstream historians but surely this does not amount to an interdict on such an endeavour? Like many in the space syntax community I have found to my frustration that the potential contribution of Hillier and Hanson to a wide range of knowledge domains is shackled by a lack of mutual comprehension that militates against constructive dialogue. Professor de Holanda argues that space syntax struggles to gain wider acceptance not because of its limitations, but because of its qualities (Holanda, 2011, p.285). Perhaps – but such an attitude seems rather insular, a reason to withdraw from inter- (and intra-) disciplinary debate rather than to engage further. My concern is that if space syntax does not succeed in reaching out to other disciplines with an interest in architectural space and take their criticisms (as well as the widely varying reasons for their interest) more seriously its audience will remain relatively restricted.

As an historian working in architectural research, my engagement with space syntax is not primarily about producing new spaces, predicting (or simulating) future events, nor developing evaluation tools for architectural projects. (Of course, I acknowledge these aspects of space syntax as core to the discipline, not least pedagogically). Rather I am concerned with the potential of Hillier and Hanson's theory of space for initiating a distinctive mode of historical enquiry; in other words for advancing historical knowledge that is not restricted to morphological history in itself but as

part of a broader conception of built environment history conceived in terms of social or cultural (i.e. human) history. By focusing on spatial description, my intention was to rehearse the essential value of this theory, partially as a corrective I admit, to the sustained emphasis on sophisticated computational representation in contemporary space syntax methodology. This emphasis has a *de facto* tendency to decontextualise and de-historicise inhabited space in the name of comparative analysis by detaching the spatial image 'event' from the socio-spatial process that produced it. Certainly, I dispute Soja's position (Soja, 2001) that Hillier and Hanson's main contribution lies only in theoretical grounding for a useful 'design tool'.

I understand why Professor de Holanda found my illustrated 'thought experiment' the most problematic aspect of my article. It was, I concede, something of a risk to draw any parallels with the generative model presented in the *Social Logic of Space*, and attempt to make my theoretical position accessible in these terms. Even so, I do not think I was claiming too much - indeed I went out of my way to state that the thought experiment was of illustrative rather than substantive value. I think it is asking a lot of a theoretical experiment of this nature to draw on a particular social *milieu* - although with Jane Jacobs' example of New Obsidian available to me perhaps I could have done better in this respect (Jacobs, 1969, p.18-31). Even so, it still seems to represent something of a misunderstanding of my theoretical purpose to assert that I have committed the 'fundamental sin' of excluding social context (de Holanda, 2011, p.283). Some sensitivity to the nuance of my argument is required here. The diagrams were intended to illustrate the intrinsically ambiguous (if not opaque) nature of space syntax representations with regard to questions of space-in-time - and in that sense are all about opening up contextual possibilities.

To clarify this point further, my intention was to indicate how *any* space syntax representation implicitly reveals and conceals any number (possibly an infinite number) of temporal descriptions, which we might crudely conceive in terms of micro-discontinuities and irregularities, present because socially produced in (social) space at all (humanly) intelligible scales. While I certainly agree with Professor de Holanda that a spatial configuration in space syntax is fundamentally temporal in the cognitive-perceptual sense, its diachronic qualities have rarely been the object of theoretical scrutiny in the historical sense that I intend. One reason for this, I have argued, is because diachrony is ultimately a source (and a consequence) of ambiguity in how people situated in time and space *inhabit* time and space. Historical time simply does not arise as an epistemological problem in this sense, if one restricts oneself to questions of morphological evolution (as Professor de Holanda largely does), since the externalised perspective of the observer is less problematic for this kind of analysis. It follows from this, why an historical understanding of time-space description that also acknowledges the complex existential and symbolic possibilities for social life in particular times and places may itself be *externalised* by a too-reductive focus on configuration as representation.

Just as space syntax theory rejects philosophies that render space either as an inert, mechanistic background or as a subjectivist, transcendental category of knowledge, so my paper was an attempt to show that with regards to, time-in-space we are not yet free of the 'Man Environment Paradigm', resorting to phenomenological subjectivities or such longitudinal metrics (t1, t2 etc.) that hardly speak to the human experience of time as a social rather than a cognitive-psychological phenomenon (Hillier and Leaman, 1973). That is why I disagree with Professor Holanda's position that regards temporality in

rather dualistic terms as the interplay between an individual's 'apprehension' and a 'time-fixed' (i.e. timeless) architectural space - because it seems to perpetuate this same subjectivist-objectivist paradigm (de Holanda, 2011, p.284). The irony is that I agree with him that important aspects of historical time are *retrievable* from the structure of inhabited space (indeed, this was the key point of my article) but for me this raises fundamental questions about how we theorise both the 'structure' and its 'retrieval'. I find it inconsistent with admitting historical time-space as an aspect of *social* experience to argue that the architectural dimension somehow exists beyond time in a state of 'total and complete' synchrony - to me this sounds like the conflation of the ontological status of historical space with the representation of logical space in space syntax.

Finally, I do not quite understand Professor Holanda's comment that I did not acknowledge the tradition of space syntax research that approaches the urban landscape as a 'palimpsest' - I clearly did so (de Holanda, 2011, p.282; Griffiths, 2011, p.74). I would like to have gone further to note that notion of 'palimpsest' increasingly strikes me, theoretically speaking, as rather inadequate to articulate the complex interpenetration of time, space and material culture that I refer to as the 'intrinsic time' of lived experience. Coincidentally, while I was writing this response to Professor de Holanda, a point relevant to our discussion was made in a *TLS* review of a recent study of aerial landscape photography. The reviewer notes how the study's author reflects critically on the established academic tradition of viewing the 'landscape as palimpsest':

'...it is not unproblematic - focusing on the contiguity of remains from different pasts in the same space can lead us to neglect the sequential relationship through time' (Ford, 2012, p.30).

Yet if a series of snapshots can say something necessary about sequence, it does so at the

expense of externalising time and therefore suppressing the complex internal dynamics of historical causation - what Bentley calls *succession* (Bentley, 2006). This poses an interesting problem for historical studies of the built environment, particularly where the concern is to go beyond morphological history as such to address the role of morphology as part of a broader cultural history. My proposal in the article was that, in reflecting on the *irreversibility* of time in a physics-materialist sense informed by Prigogine and Stengers' work, there lies an opportunity for rethinking the processes of 'inscription' and 'description', 'practice' and 'affordance', through which humans become existentially situated in time-space (and which may or may not be 'irreversible' in representational terms). Such an approach to time-space description, I argued, was not ultimately incompatible with Hillier and Hanson's original theory.

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About the author:

Dr Sam Griffiths is Lecturer in Spatial Theory and Urban Morphology in UCL's Bartlett School of Graduate Studies. He read History at the University of Sheffield, International Relations at the LSE and completed his doctoral studies at the Bartlett in 2008. He is currently Course Director of the Bartlett's leading space syntax course, MSc Advanced Architectural Studies. Sam's research interests include the spatiality of the socio-cultural changes associated with the industrial revolution in Britain, space as an aspect of historical epistemology, suburban space and space syntax theory. Since 2011 he has been the Managing Editor of *Urban Design International*.