Balancing quantitative analysis and social concern

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Rereading Julienne Hanson’s ‘Urban transformations: A history of design ideas’, published in URBAN DESIGN International in 2000, one is immediately reminded of Hanson’s versatile research work that apart from extensive studies on urban issues, also includes major contributions to the research on buildings, architectural history and design methodology, which all are distinctly present in ‘Urban transformations’. As a matter of fact, this article can to equal degrees be characterised as a piece of original architectural history, a contribution to analytical methodology, a broad and thorough empirical study of the social implications of housing estates in the UK, or as a critical reflection in design methodology. This is a pattern recognisable in many articles by Hanson, why one is also reminded of the unfortunate fact that there are several such broad and well-investigated themes of hers that so far have not been realised in full-length books.

However, what at the end stands out is Hanson’s hallmark, a combination of meticulous empirical care and a deep social concern. A clear demonstration of social concern can be observed in her statement: ‘What is worrying, though, is that the new morphologies were aimed at precisely those people who were least equipped, socially, to cope with the lifestyle changes that were demanded by a shift from an “all neighbours” to a “no neighbours” spatial model’ (Hanson, 2000, p.116). We can compare this observation with another one based on rigorous analytical evidence to support her assessment: ‘Meanwhile, many more bounded spaces interpose themselves between the spaces with front doors, raising the ‘no-neighbours score’ from just above 1 (the absolute minimum) to nearly 2.5’ (ibid., p.107). The ‘no neighbours score’ captures the mean depth of the convex system from the dwelling entrances (ibid., p.104), and is one of six measures used by Hanson in her analysis. These measures and the interface maps are used to capture the urban transformation in Somers Town, a small Inner London area, from the street layout to housing estates, and from the traditional pattern of ordinary working people that was centred on streets to one that separates and reduces physical contact among neighbours. In this way, reading the work of Hanson is a constant reminder of how important it is to have not only a precise map of the object under study (empirical care), but also a compass that helps to draw out routes to the direction towards which we are heading (social concern).

The aim and ability to balance detailed quantitative analysis with interpretations against a background of broader social theory is of course what one would like to see in all research on such an empirically complex and inherently social subject as cities, but for many reasons this is far from the case. What we have been able to witness over the last decades is rather a divergence into what, for want of better words, can be characterised as quantitative and qualitative studies of cities, a distinction that runs straight through more familiar categorisations such as human geography and urban sociology. On the one hand, we find studies where cities, as the tremendous mines of data they have become, are used to generate datasets that in an impressive manner can capture communication flows and mobilities, as, for instance, in the many studies to come out of Carlo Ratti’s SENSEable City Laboratory or support new computer-aided modes of urban modelling, as we have seen evolve over the years at Mike Batty’s Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis. At the same time, the social content in such studies often seems to be overly abstracted.

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On the other hand, we find an increasing amount of studies where cities, as the socio-political landscapes they have always been, are explored to make interpretations about their social injustices and inherent power relations, as, for example, in the deeply influential work by Doreen Massey and Edward Soja developed over the last decade (e.g. Massey, 2005; Soja, 2000). However, in the work of these authors explanatory proof is often limited or even argued to be besides the point. This should by no means be interpreted as criticism as the research programmes juxtaposed here have very different aims and, certainly, so to speak, are designed to generate different forms of knowledge. What is rather disconcerting is, that given current global challenges in urban development, such research strands remain to such a degree unconnected and more often than not fail to inform each other. In this context, a text like Hanson’s ‘Urban transformations’, which shows proof of how such differing knowledge forms can be made to support rather than compete with each other, stand out as a model and an inspiration.

‘Urban transformations’ is a study that can be taken as point of departure for the arguably growing, cleft between what can be called quantitative analysis and social concern in research on the city, the very thing Hanson has proved can be diligently balanced. In the end, it leads to the conclusion that one of Hanson’s critical legacies for the field of space syntax and beyond is to sustain the balancing act between the spatial sciences and the social sciences in the development of a distinct field of research, which we can see is critically missing even in disciplines that are far more established than architecture. In human geography her work can be said to fill the decisive position of a ‘geometry of social systems’ and in urban sociology the since long lost pillar of ‘social morphology’. As such, space syntax and Hanson’s major contributions to its development go far beyond the field itself.

Space syntax, as an example of what could be accomplished by the development of alternative geometric descriptions, such as an anthropocentric or cognitive geometry, could contribute to the closing of the gaps within allied fields. Space syntax provides a type of descriptive language of space that could open for communication between these two diverging knowledge forms. As a key example of such an aim for, and contribution to, a broader academic communication, Julienne Hanson’s opus goes way beyond space syntax into the general study of cities, a field characterised by the fact that what in the end matters spatially, socially and intellectually in urban research has been best formulated by female writers. After re-reading ‘Urban transformations’, one is reminded how principal among these writers are: Jane Jacobs, Francoise Choay and Julienne Hanson.

References