Be aware of nuances
Tonkiss, F. (2013), Cities by Design – The Social Life of Urban Form

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The word ‘nuance’ is absent from the index of Cities by Design – The Social Life of Urban Form, by Fran Tonkiss. Yet the word and the ideas it conveys, pervade the book in telling ways.

Georges Clemenceau once said, ‘war is too serious a matter to entrust to military men’. Mutatis mutandis, the backbone of Tonkiss’ book is the idea that city design is too serious a matter to entrust to architects, planners, specialists from whatever disciplinary origins... But this does not come in a normative way. She begins her work by writing: ‘City-making is a social process’, i.e. it is actually accomplished through the agency of thousands (or millions, for that matter) of social actors – an expression that often comes to the fore – of the most varied kind. This ‘diverse and often anonymous crew’ is constituted by ‘producers and traders, consumers and lenders; organizers, go-betweens and foot-soldiers; blow-ins and die-hards; householders and workers; children and old heads’. They do this in many ways: intentionally and unintentionally; through systematic knowledge and diffuse, tacit, unconscious social knowledge; legally and illegally; formally and informally; individually and collectively; as a bottom-up and as a top-down action process; through exceptional or innovating buildings and through unnoticeable ones that reproduce the status quo of the city’s ordinary fabric, and so forth.

However, the city is not simply a product of agents and of modes of agency: ‘just as such an approach seeks to socialize our understanding of city design, so a concern with urban form might help us grasp the materiality of social, economic and legal processes’. Tonkiss thus aligns herself with thinkers like Bill Hillier and space syntax rationale, by which space organisation is bom social, constituting as well as representing society (not that she has made this connection explicitly, see below).

When speaking of ‘materiality’, Tonkiss conveys the idea that city fabric is one of the ways by which those processes – social, economic, legal – become real in space and time. We can here recall Anthony Giddens’ ‘virtuous circle’: from thinking, theorising, hypothesising, expecting (on the one hand), to building, acting, making (on the other),
Book Review:
Cities by Design – The Social Life of Urban Form
de Holanda, F.

and then back, to re-thinking, re-theorising and so forth. We remake our thinking from the lessons of materialised practices. Approaching the circle at a particular point is rather a matter of convenience or (legitimate) choice than a matter of determining what ‘comes first’.

Tonkiss’ nuanced vision pushes the argument forward in illuminating ways, particularly when she points to ‘embodied’ practices even in unsuspected areas, as in urban infrastructure. It is not simply that infrastructure deployment in cities produces and reproduces conditions of living – read this as patterns of inequality – but that it may be actually constituted, in many instances, by real, living humans, particularly in conditions of poverty: ‘rickshaw and cart pullers (…), especially in Asian cities; (…) garbage pickers, manual scavengers (…) who sort, remove and recycle waste; (…) women waiting for and carrying water, or gathering and carrying wood and other fuel’. As in so many aspects of her book, Tonkiss discusses infrastructure as ‘design politics’: ‘infrastructure failures – those moments when submerged or background networks become visible as problems – are routinely political failures’.

Tonkiss is a sociologist, but it is surprising how she depicts, or at least emphasises, a social dimension in the work of authors usually taken to be more ‘visualist’ than ‘social’, i.e. those who explore ‘expressive’ rather than ‘practical’ aspects of city design. A telling example is Kevin Lynch, from the architectural discipline. He is well known for his contribution to the ‘image of the city’; but Tonkiss focuses on the nuances of his oeuvre that are more pertinent to the social dimensions of urban configuration – and, she shows, there have been many. Her quotation of Lynch’s preoccupation with the critical ‘interrelations between urban forms and human objectives’ repeats itself in many parts of the book. Admittedly, Tonkiss also discusses theorists like Jane Jacobs, Henri Lefebvre, Lewis Mumford, Bruno Latour, Rem Koolhaas, and so forth. But it is noticeable (and rewarding, one might say, at the risk of sounding corporately over-enthusiastic…), that Lynch is the most often quoted author in a sociologist’s book: the index shows entries in 29 pages, as compared to 17 on Mumford (who comes in second), 16 on Louis Wirth, 14 on Lefebvre, 7 on Jane Jacobs… a just tribute.

The book considers a number of key aspects regarding urban studies. As for the most general ones, Tonkiss dialogues with Louis Wirth, who wrote, perhaps, the classic text on the subject (her italics): ‘Urbanism as a way of life’. She discusses three main issues concerning cities: size, density, diversity.

She agrees that cities=‘big’ is a reasonable equation, but the point is discussing the pros and cons that come with size. In a world that became mostly ‘urban’ in the first decade of the twenty-first century, cities imply 1) higher levels of economic productivity, higher income, more economic opportunities, a greater degree of innovation etc.; but they may also imply 2) diseconomies of scale, overcrowding, congestion and pollution that tend ‘to be borne most heavily by the urban poor’. However, the answer to the question ‘how big is too big?’ is a complicated one: ‘the example of Tokyo, the largest city in the world, would suggest that “mega-cities” (…) are neither dysfunctional nor ungovernable simply as a matter of definition’.

When it comes to density, the discussion moves closer to problems of urban configuration (but not enough, see below) regardless of size. Again, there is no magic formula. Current discussions tend to praise compact schemes not only for environmental reasons but also for social ones: denser schemes favour social interaction. However, this depends on the extent to which cities are diverse (or otherwise): high density, but mono-functional housing schemes, far away from employment and services imply serious mobility problems, particularly for those who depend on public transport.
Among the three dimensions of variability, perhaps diversity is the key, and here Tonkiss follows Wirth closely, but adds and important comment: ‘the point about cities, pace Wirth, is not simply that they contain a lot of people and that they tend to pack them tightly, but that they support and intensify social, economic and cultural heterogeneity’. Rather, ‘designing for diversity’, as it were, does not simply mean prescribing ‘mixed uses’, but – and here again comes a political dimension – leaving undefined grounds for improvisation in ‘interstitial and unplanned spaces’ (she quotes examples across the world). ‘Cityness’ also means availability of space for unpredicted social practices.

‘Cityness’, however – or urbanity, for that matter – implies a ‘link’ (almost literally…) which is missing in Tonkiss’ approach, one which ‘stiches together’ size, density and diversity: spatial configuration. Cities may be dense (e.g. Dubai), may be varied (e.g. Atlanta), may be big (e.g. Brasilia), or may even have all attributes together (e.g. Rio de Janeiro in its new developments to the west, in Barra da Tijuca). None of those, however, present cityness – or urbanity – because of the way in which size, density and diversity are configured spatially. Huge towers plus no-man lands in between (Dubai), introverted activities and blind façades facing public open spaces (Atlanta), dispersion (Brasilia), gated schemes regardless of land use (Rio), all suffer from serious configurational attributes that prevent the classic Wirth categories from working properly.

Accordingly, we are struck by the absence of Bill Hillier’s writings from the bibliography, or any reference to space syntax studies. After all, the social life of urban form – a close correlate to the social logic of (urban) space – is at the very core of Fran Tonkiss’ book. Which, notwithstanding the ‘missing link’, is born a classic in urban sociology, and should be read as such.