The Role of Visual Representations in Urban Planning

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Visual representations in its all different forms help us to understand our cities, make it available for analysis. They help us to make useful conceptual shortcuts in our understanding in order to have a glimpse of "what's happening" in our cities.

This research focuses on visuals as representations of cities. These visuals may be a single spatial representation as a map or a sketch, or it may be in form of a visual metaphor (for example Blue Banana, European Bunch of Grapes, London Green Belt, the finger model of Copenhagen …etc.) or a complex set of images.

Throughout the history, urban planning discipline has looked at visual representations in various different ways, giving little to no attention at all (Jarvis 1994; Neuman 1996, 2000; Faludi 1996; Dühr 2007).

Since the notion of "planning through debate" (Healey, 1992) they are accepted as powerful communication tools which shape attention (Forester 1989) therefore shape the discourse (Kunzmann 1996; Healey 1997, 2006; Forester 1999). On the other hand, they are object to "treacherous selective vision" (Shields, 1996) which allows manipulations (Pickels 1992; Neuman 1996; Harvey 1996). It is recognized that they may focus on certain parts while inevitably neglecting others (Harvey 1996). Since the visual representations of spaces like cartographical maps are not accepted as objective and scientifically informed instruments only, they as well are object to communicative distortions (Dühr, 2007). That's why it is believed by some theoreticians that it is probably better to abstain visual representations (Eeten and Roe, 2000) because they can lead to serious conflict (Zonneveld, 2000) through their biased perspective of reality (Crampton, 2001).

Despite the recognized useful consensus building purpose of representations; growing chaos, complexity and fuzzy reasoning hinders the effective outcomes (Forester, 1999; Healey, 2007; Innes and Booher, 2010; Neuman, 2010). Growing complexity makes planning messier, their outcomes sketchier (Neuman, 2012) and their discourse more abstract. On the other hand how can we make planning interesting and understandable without using visual representations (Zech, 2013)?

Nevertheless discourse helps finding meaning in complexity and it can create unquestioned knowledge that requires unconventional creative thinking. Visual representations in its all different forms help us to understand the urban complexity.

The web has become a new opinion space today, a virtual but de facto public space (Shields, 2013). It is re-wiring our way of thinking, how we perceive our cities and how we respond to changes.

But we face a great challenge, besides the obvious complexity of our cities; there is the "big data" phenomenon. We are producing an enormous diversity of data, from governments to city councils to institutions. It is getting incredibly difficult to make sense of all these data, how to analyse it, how to see through it, how to communicate it, how to visualize it.

The open-ness of the virtual public space makes cities more inclusive, enabling its citizen and different organizations to actively take part in it. Open data initiatives and institutions are actively encouraging their 'smart' citizens to use the urban data and make meaning out of it.

Urban needs to be represented collectively, not only from certain perspectives or in certain forms. If we can have a glimpse of what's happening, then we might have a better chance to intervene, to plan, to design and sometimes to resist (Mitchell, 1996).

To empirically analyse this hypothesis UCIT (www.ucit.or.at) is created, it is an open source API consisting of open source solutions, except the data-set used. Here, the purpose was to make urban data interesting to the media and public, just by creating an application which has a bit of an unconventional way of showing urban data with its time-space character, showing the City of Vienna from a different perspective. We need to re-examine the city, keep it open to further critical analysis and showing the urban data in different ways from different perspectives may lead to reveal unquestioned knowledge and creative thinking.

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