

CITYNESS. ROAMING THOUGHTS ABOUT MAKING AND EXPERIENCING CITYNESS

Saskia Sassen

Columbia University

Abstract The text problematizes the term «urbanity», as used in the West, and proposes the notion of «cityness» as a tool and as an intersection of differences which may open to something new, namely, other ways of appropriation of public spaces.

Keywords Cityness, urbanity, intersection, subjectivity.

Resumo

Cityness. Pensamentos errantes sobre construir e vivenciar o urbano.

O artigo problematiza o termo «urbanidade», tal como é usado no ocidente, e propõe a noção de *cityness* como uma ferramenta conceptual e como uma intersecção das diferenças que podem trazer algo de novo, como por exemplo, outras formas de apropriação dos espaços públicos.

Palavras-chave *Cityness*, urbanidade, intersecção, subjectividade.

Resumé

Cityness. Pensées errantes sur les manières de faire et expérimenter la cité/ville.

Le texte questionne le terme «urbanity», tel qu'il est dit dans l'occident et propose la notion de «cityness» comme instrument et intersectionnalité de différences que peuvent ouvrir a quelque chose de nouveau, à savoir, des divers chemins d'appropriation des espaces publics.

Mots-clés *Cityness*, urbanité, intersection, subjectivité.

«Je prends l'autobus quatre-vingt seize. J'ai rendez-vous au café Beaubourg avec un homme qui lit Art Press et Libération. Ou bien au cocktail d'un écrivain yiddish qui fait fureur. J'ai rendez-vous au Flore, au Cluny, à la tour Eiffel, devant le cinema Odéon avec deux femmes, au Collège International de Philosophie avec deux idées. J'ai rendez-vous à la Closerie. Et me voici, j'accours. Me voici en vie».

Françoise Collin, 2008, *On dirait une ville*¹

¹ Epígrafe da responsabilidade da Coordenação do Dossier.

The vast urban agglomerations rising across the world are often seen as lacking the features, quality, and sense of what we think of as urbanity. Yet, urbanity is perhaps too charged a term, charged with a Western sense of cosmopolitanism and of what public space is or should be. In fact, it may be part of our current history-in-the-making that we have yet to find a term that opens up the meaning of urbanity. The term *cityness* suggests the possibility that there are kinds of urbanity that do not fit into the definition developed in the West. So *cityness*, in a way, could be described as an instrument to capture something that otherwise might easily get lost: types of urbanity that are «non-western» or that in the West are novel and depart from traditional notions. We need to open up the discussion to a far broader range of urbanities.

In my work on global cities, I confront a parallel problematic in dealing with globality. Globality is often assumed to entail cosmopolitanism. However I posit that there are also non-cosmopolitan forms of the global and, further that these also need to be distinguished from familiar vernacular cosmopolitanisms.

The architect Ma Qing Yun argues that «the Chinese city does not need public space because it makes public spaces» (Urban Age, 2008). What we in the West might see as private or merely utilitarian, such as a bus shelter, in Shanghai at night becomes a public space when people set up tables to play cards. The notion of public space as developed in a Western European context will be of little help in reading key aspects of urbanity in Shanghai, or perhaps even Mexico City. Our concept of urbanity must be stripped of its currently overcharged meanings. In the process, I have identified a couple of categories that allow us to understand something about alternative kinds of urbanity.

In traditionally defined urbanity, multiple elements come together in the context of an urban aggregate and produce something that is more than the sum of its individual parts. The proliferation of urban agglomerations across the world – vast expanses of urban built space – seem to produce a formula, whereby the whole is *not* more than the sum of its parts. If these urban aggregates actually contain urbanities, these would be an obstacle to a unified notion of urbanity derived from the European experience. This in itself indicates we need to open up the meaning of urbanity to far broader range of empirical instances.

I would propose the term *cityness* to capture these potentially enormously varied types of urbanity. The key condition for *cityness* is, then, not so much some European-style urbanity but the intersection of differences that actually produces something new; whether good or bad, this intersection is consequential. A very practical and subjective example comes from London, a city inhabited by many different types of Muslim groups; the notion of «Muslim woman» is actually multi-faceted: Muslim women from Bangladesh intersect with Muslim

women from Turkey, from India, from Pakistan, from Africa or the Middle East. Something happens in this intersection of differences even within what we might think of as a very narrowly defined group. Cities contain multiple such examples. Indeed, the concept of cityness must accommodate these intersections which begin to constitute a form of subjectivity and may or may not be translatable into an immediate tangible outcome.

Another more practical example can be found in Midtown Manhattan. Midtown Manhattan architecture sends out signals of neutrality, precision, engineering. But if you are actually there at lunch time, the visual experience is conjoined by the experience of the smell of grilled meat coming from immigrant vendors. A juxtaposition of two different conditions is taking place – but not necessarily of two autonomous worlds, each existing on its own terms. The people who are eating at those vendors at noon are not only the tourists and the secretaries but also the professionals who may not have time for a power lunch every workday. They inhabit a high-speed work space, and there will be days when grabbing a sausage from the vendor on the street is the most fast-speed option. Here we have, then, the intersection of two high-speed velocities even though each is produced in enormously diverse settings. The intersection of two such different worlds which produces a third space is an instance of cityness, but not quite in its western notion of urbanity even when it happens in a western city. We could multiply these examples endlessly but what matters here is «the notion of intersection and its capacity to make a novel condition» (Sassen, 2010:21).

These examples point to an order, albeit not that which corresponds to the formal logic of planners. These juxtapositions may be following a fuzzy logic that enables a type of making not containable in the spaces of the formal plan. In this juxtaposition, «making» cityness becomes possible². Public space, not as a representation of what it ought to be, but public space in these of the activity of making it such, is one key vector into cityness. Many spaces can be designed as magnificent public-access spaces, but this not mean that they *are* public. An important distinction must be made between public space and a space with public access; the latter is not by itself or as a design, a space for poesis. The publicness of that space needs to be made – through the practices and the usages of people. Thus the bush shelter can be made into a temporary public space even if it is not designed as such. This also means that public spaces can seem chaotic. If there is, in fact, some order underlying chaotic-looking spaces, it is a fuzzy logic type of order; this way of looking at such chaos opens up to the possibility for interventions that have to do with making public space. Again, I think many of the

² I am thinking here of the Greek sense of making whole, the Greek verb *poiein* translates as «making» or «creating».

megacities that lack well-designed spaces easily recognized or coded as public, are a case in point. There are multiple ways in which space is used and remarked as public through those material practices in these cities; some of these are easily legible as public, but many are not. I am intrigued by what I see from the outside and want to dig into these spaces – even though it may appear as if there cannot be any «making» in them. A proposition that has guided my own work is that «the excluded also make history, and the space of the city helps us see this making of history in a way that other situations do not» (Sassen, 2008: chapter 6).

Large state-of-the-art corporate office buildings in these cities, often built by foreign architects, may well contain some aspects of history-in-the-making. Who knows what all is or could be happening within them – the making of new economies and the making of new poverties (Sassen, 2010). The emergent critique of many of these built-environments should go beyond the architecture – even when much of it is very attractive. The possibility of transforming, of the partial re-makings of these buildings, or parts of them, especially the interior spaces, is beginning to happen and we do not yet know how far it can go. Buildings can be morphed by usage. One example is Chicago, a city of historic landmarked high-rise office buildings built in the early 1900s. Twenty-three office buildings in downtown Chicago have now been transformed into great housing, some with interior parks, child-care centers, and multiple amenities. So even those structures that once seemed so rigid and appeared to have only a single function can now be morphed into something else.

Beyond a city's potential for space-morphing, I am thinking of Bogota's Enrique Peñalosa's notion of «the long street that can become an extended linear public space» (Burdett and Sudjic, 2008:10). This is another example of unlikely spaces where cityness can occur. It does not correspond to our notion of public space, the piazza, the centre ville, New York's Central Park, or even the boulevard and the «*passeggiata*». It is too long and lacks ceremonial markers. In fact, it is an instance of cityness but in a format we do not easily associate with our notions of urbanity. A different example comes from Frank Duffy's notions of networked office buildings: a networked space that is multi-sited and remains articulated with real place. In my work also, I have found that spaces that operate partly in territory and partly in electronic space can actually be part of the constitution of place, even though they do so in very different ways from the usual placeness of place.

Today's glamour zones in global cities co-exist with multiple other experiences of space. Mostly, when I exit the global hyperspace in a global city, I am immediately in the thick fabric of streets and neighborhoods. I walk 30 meters and I am in another world. I cannot help but wonder whether these two worlds are connected. We may experience these two worlds as very different, one belonging to the past – an earlier economic or technological era marked by back-

wardness – and the other marked by all that is the new, the advanced. Yet the former might actually be part of the infrastructure for the advanced sector rather than belong to a different world. I sought to illustrate this earlier with the hurried financial trader and the vendor selling sausages.

Can these inequalities and fragmentations reach thresholds so high they become destructive of cityness? «The one issue that cuts across all the differences among cities is the widening of the gaps between the rich and the poor, and the gaps between the different worlds that inhabit these cities» (Sassen, 2010:24). Diversity, differences, gaps are not in themselves the problem – it is when they cross certain thresholds that their valence turns negative for cityness. Certain inequalities might be reaching that critical threshold in cities such as New York, Shanghai, London, Paris, and so many other globalizing cities. The key dynamic is, in my reading, that crossing particular thresholds of inequality and spatial fragmentation dilutes the dynamics whereby the intersection of differences can be productive – it will keep differences from producing the civic, one of the highest forms of this dynamic. This is partly an empirical question given the many particular ways in which cities negotiate these conditions.

The particularities of each city become especially significant if we are trying to strip urbanity from its Western forms and contents. I use the notion of cityness as a tool to detect urbanities that may be constituted in very different ways. Cityness can reside in a long line. It can reside in what might look to the Western eye like urban sprawl, either horizontal or high-rise sprawl. The question is not only one of urban forms and design. The critical question becomes whether productive intersections can be made by people themselves – as illustrated by the nightly morphing of that bus shelter in Shanghai. If those intersections cannot happen, then cityness is lost.

What we might experience as a dash of anarchy, inefficiency, or disorder, may well be an indication of cityness in spaces and with contents we may not read as urbanity. Conceiving of cities as fuzzy logic systems opens up to the possibility of recoding much of what the Western-trained eye sees as negative for a city. There is making in the morphing of the bus shelter, and the aggregate of these types of makings amounts to the making of a piece of urbanity – into of urbanity; the mere fact that something can happen, that these intersections can be productive – when you try to strip it down from what is taken for granted, you see all kinds of possibilities for cityness to happen. Even those who have been relegated to very confining spaces can add to the collective project of making, thereby expanding the sites and the contents for cityness. It might just be that extremely inhospitable environments are as likely to push city residents into making cityness as an architect's beautifully designed public-access space. Cityness can be constituted even within a built environment that works against it.

References cited

- Burdett, Richard; Sudjic, Deyan (2008), *The Endless City: The Urban Age Project by the London School of Economics and Deutsche Bank's Alfred Herrhausen Society*, London, Phaidon Press.
- Sassen, Saskia (2008), *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages*, Princeton, Princeton University Press (2nd edition).
- Sassen, Saskia (2010), *Cities in a World Economy*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage/Pine Forge (4th Updated edition).
- Urban Age (2008), Shanghai, [on line] www.urban-age.net.

Saskia Sassen is the Robert S. Lynd Professor of Sociology and Member of The Committee on Global Thought, Columbia University. Her new books are *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton University Press 2006) and *A Sociology of Globalization* (W. W. Norton, 2007). Her books are translated into twenty-one languages, including two books in Portuguese. sjs2@columbia.edu

Artigo recebido em 15 de Abril de 2010 e aceite para publicação em 15 de Agosto de 2010.