Transdisciplinary Urbanism: Three experiences from Europe and Canada

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a b s t r a c t

The decreasing pace of urban development in economically-troubled Europe allows time for urban practitioners and actors to re-think planning action and its outcomes. In Canada where urban development seems unstoppable, contemplative breaks are as important. From the rubbles of recent environmental and economic crises around the world, in this article we discuss the emergence of a new theoretical approach in urban design and planning that is at the intersection of Socio-Spatial Research, Complexity Theories of Cities, and Urban Activism: Transdisciplinary Urbanism. We deploy three relevant, research projects we have been engaged with to analyze issues, challenges and limitations of Transdisciplinary Urbanism. The time frame of these interventions spans almost a decade.

Introduction

In a recent conference at the Bauhaus-University Weimar, French sociologist Alain Bourdin (2012) has problematized the disciplinary limits of ''urban studies'' and ''planning'' as separate fields of inquiry. According to him (Bourdin, 2012), while planning ''has not found its ways to innovate itself'', urban studies, on the other hand, has not engaged ''in finding solid concepts for the notions deriving from action'' (Bourdin, 2012). For Bourdin, the main limits of urban studies lie in the lack of interest of its scholars to create concrete tools to solve real, everyday urban problems as the opposite of merely contesting injustices.

In recent years, as the result of major economic crises around the world and growing awareness of the exploitation of the environment and climate change, disenchanted citizens have demanded to be more hands-on in deciding about and influencing their living environments, while public authorities retaliate by drawing lines of jurisdiction (Pask, 2010). In the field of architecture, some have advocated for a radical change aimed at expanding design practice into a ''socially and politically relevant field'' (Gamez & Rogers, 2008: 23). Here the idea is to develop a new architectural education curriculum to include public-service practice, similar to the long-established curricula in law and medicine (Fisher, 2008: 10–12).

At the same time, in the heterogeneous field of urban studies, many are starting to side with urban activists and artists to bring about the change that mainstream planning has failed to deliver. According to this view, public space has become the focus and location to organize artistic and cultural interventions that aim at questioning, amongst others, the current land use program, social and political injustice, and ultra-liberal privatizations of public commons (Hou, 2010: 7–11). However, many questions arise about the use of art in urban studies, such as, ''how the extensive critical theoretical work on urban space and processes of urbanization of recent decades [. . .] may further inform artistic practice, performance and intervention?'' (Pinder, 2008: 733).

In this context, we have sought to explore the potential of troubled, leftover, or Augéan ''non-places''[1] in Helsinki, Tallinn and Toronto with the help of inhabitants, informal users, local organizations, and artists. Working both in the field of urban studies, and having developed collaborations with various organizations (the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation of Germany, the University of Art and Design Helsinki, the City Institute, and SKETCH Working Arts in Toronto), we independently tried to incorporate elements of performative arts in our research to encourage and facilitate self-organized, multiple discourses that could help us unravel compelling socio-spatial issues. In the central railway station of Helsinki and an outdoor place in Toronto, temporary living rooms became cases for studying the dichotomy between public and private as well as to challenge certain socio-spatial exclusions against homeless queer youth in Toronto and minorities with ethnocultural backgrounds in

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[1] We refer to the analyses by Marc Augé (1995) of what he calls non-places.

Helsinki. In Tallinn, urban art interventions provoked people's imaginary and reactions towards the role of Russian-speaking minorities and socialist peripheries in Tallinn.

The common denominator of all three interventions is their attempt to reconcile, referring to Francois Dosse (1999), exact sciences, social sciences, and philosophy and advocate for a new transdisciplinary paradigm. The transdisciplinary framework envisioned in our three case studies is similar to that suggested by Gibbons et al. (1994) in their ''Mode 2'' of knowledge production, i.e. a dynamic framework in which multiple players combine empirical and theoretical knowledge to solve applied problems. Dosse (1999) notes that the social sciences are witnessing ''a genuine transformation'' where terms such as chaos, process, meaning, complexity, and self-organization are slowly replacing the classic concepts of structure, static, combinatory, and universal. In this new framework, Dosse claims that the task of the transdisciplin- ary-scholar is to clarify, rather than dissect, the ''judgments of fact'' from the ''judgments of value''.

We see Transdisciplinary Urbanism (TU) as a new, emerging methodological framework according to which social and action researchers, artists, animators, performers, activists, and local communities come together to study uncertainty, chance and open-endedness, and to transparently renegotiate power struc- tures in urban space. TU builds upon the social aspects of Urbanism; it connects different theories and practices, and crosses disciplines in order to study and improve everyday life. The disci- plinary crossovers entailed by such practices push inhabitants and professionals out from their comfort zones, encouraging co-opera-tion and co-creation in non-predetermined ways.

In this paper, we contextualize this view and discuss TU also by leveraging the experience and knowledge of working in Finland, Estonia and Canada. The multiplicity and recursivity of urban discourses and the lack of a framework to deal with fluctuating urban demands have been the starting point of three projects that we developed, between 2005 and 2014, in Helsinki, Tallinn, and Toronto. Before 2008, both Finland and Estonia were expanding economies, with Finland being a hub of the ICT industry, and Estonian GDP growing at a rate of 7% annually. On the one side of the Gulf of Finland, the city planning department of Helsinki boasted self-confidently over the future of urban development in the capital region (Rizzo, 2008: 125), busily organizing international competitions to redevelop its inner harbors and to provide a fashionable vision to the newly created ''Greater Helsinki''. On the other side, Estonian business organizations were advocating ultra liberalism, privatization of State-owned urban stock, and deregulation of planning. In Canada the situation has been one of boom (OECD, 2014), especially in Toronto, a city with a robust economy with transnational links (approximately half of its population is foreign born), and a dynamic public sphere, albeit with social inequalities and evident socio-spatial polarization (Boudreau, Keil, & Douglas, 2009; Hulchanski, 2010; Galanakis, 2013).

In this paper, our aims are to: clarify the theoretical and methodological baselines of TU (Section 'Transdisciplinary Urbanism'); analyse aims, tools and results of three independent, transdisciplinary interventions (Section 'Transdisciplinary Urbanism in practice: Connecting theory with empirical data'); and discuss the relevance and issues of such interventions for TU, also highlighting limitations and unresolved aspects (Section 'Discussion and Conclusions').

Transdisciplinary Urbanism

Background

Recently, urban scholars have begun to discuss the growing popularity of transdisciplinary modes of knowledge production in architecture and urban planning, highlighting three major, recur-rent elements i.e. integration between theory and practice, ethical concerns, and the ''importance of experimental, designerly modes of inquiry'' (Doucet & Janssens, 2011: 2). For Doucet and Janssens (2011: 1) transdisciplinary modes of knowledge production are characterized by hybridization, i.e. the loss of dependency from a specific disciplinary compartment. Després, Vachon, and Fortin (2011: 34) add that ''transdisciplinary research includes at once what stands between disciplines, across disciplines and beyond any discipline''. Transdisciplinarity is about the articulations, rather than the relations, between disciplines: ''the whole is more than the sum of its parts'' (Ramadier, 2004: 432).

Indeed, the exponential growth of both web-based interaction tools, physical sites where knowledge is created, and the recombination of extremely specialized fields in new knowledge entities have facilitated the emergence of a new form of knowledge production that Gibbons et al. (1994) have labeled ''Mode 2''. As the opposite of ''Mode 1'', in which knowledge is eminently a contribution to compartmentalized disciplines, Mode 2 of knowledge production is characterized by transdisciplinarity, i.e. working within an evolving and dynamic framework in which empirical and theoretical knowledge are combined and where multiple play- ers (e.g., universities, research agencies, informal agencies, private firms, NGOs, etc.) contribute to the creation of such knowledge (Gibbons et al., 1994: 5–6).

Transdisciplinarity can also be seen as an evolution of multi- and inter-disciplinarity. However, unlike these latter, transdisciplinarity does not seek to solve the paradoxes generated by the endless dissection of knowledge in smaller disciplinary units. Rather than aiming to the ''unity of knowledge'' (Ramadier, 2004: 431), by acknowledging the inherent complexity of the subject, transdisciplinarity directs to master the paradoxes. Building upon this, within Transdisciplinary Urbanism (TU), urban studies and design provide the theoretical and empirical foundation to conduct proactive (but not pre-determined) investigation of the effects of change in urban space becomes possible. TU researchers and the many actors working and living in the city work within the dynamic framework that is represented by contemporary polities, this latter shaped by unpredictable, constructive and destructive cycles (Holling & Gunderson, 2002: 34).

Intersections I: Transdisciplinary and Social–Spatial Research

TU concerns socio-spatial issues of multi-layered urban phe-nomena. Our approach is inspired by known methods of research in everyday life notably by De Certeau (1988), De Certeau, Giard, and Mayol (1998), as well as Lefebvre's (1991) analysis of con-ceived, perceived and experienced space. In addition ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967) with its focus on the field of study and its actors includes research principles relevant to what Hoggart, Lees, and Davies (2002) discuss as action research, i.e. when researchers intervene and bring change into the field of their study. With TU thus we recognize that urban research does not need to be only and always reflective; researchers may also aspire to bring social change. Research without such a quest for change, although valuable, is not necessarily impartial or socially relevant.

The grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) offers another insightful perspective on the relationship between the researcher and the researched. When practicing TU, urban inter-ventions guide researchers to theories that assist the critical understanding of the field and its stakeholders, and of the theories themselves. With this in mind, TU aims to generate ''theory that fits the data,'' rather than ''data to fit the theory'' (Layder, 1996: 45). While the aim of urban research may not be to develop grounded theory, it is part of our contribution to knowledge to link

theorized practice and theory in practice, as this may shed more light on socio-spatial phenomena.

Intersections II: Transdisciplinary and complexity

Planning for a diversity of people – e.g., in multicultural Toronto, ethnically-homogenous Helsinki, and Russian-segregated Tallinn – requires dealing with our fear of socio-spatial change, being proactive and intentional, as well as open-ended. Complexity Theories of Cities (CTC) show that we cannot deal with cities without acknowledging their out-of-balance, chaotic and intrinsically interrelated state. Central to this idea is the concept of evolution (de Roo, 2010: 29) in which cities are not ''stable entities but [affected by] a progressive process'' that leads to ''highly complex, chaotic situations that are highly unpredictable and susceptible to intervening interactions''. This means that we need to incorporate this complexity in planning theory and acknowledge its evolutionary tendency from straightforwardness (e.g., top-down rational planning) to more complexity (e.g., transdisciplinary planning).

In our view, TU and CTC have a common denominator: the acknowledgment of the importance of grass-roots perspectives regarding urban change and ultimately of city complexity. Sandercock (2003: 112) writes about the sense of loss and fear we experience when ''others'' seem to invade and take over ''our'' space. Currently, socio-economic and political negotiations occur within a framework defined by among other factors diversity and global movements. These are important factors for challenging social, political and cultural norms. This is by no means self-evident and easy, or new. In recent years, Europe's debt and unemployment crises have reinvigorated xenophobic populist movements against new immigrants.

Intersections III: Transdisciplinarity and Urban Activism

The need to bring change in the way neo-liberal cities are constructed has also been advocated by a variety of urban actors such as artists, non-governmental organization (NGO) and local associations, also labeled with the term Urban Activists. The various formal and informal appropriations of public spaces, occurring globally, are telling. From the first inspiring Space Hijackers' interventions in London contesting space privatization (see the ''Guerrilla Benching'' in the City of London and the ''Circle Lane Party'' in the Underground), to the ''Park(ing)'' intervention in San Francisco by Rebar, to the social TV broadcasted by the Stalker Group in the periphery of Rome, and PLATFORM's ''90%CRUDE'' sound walk intervention in the City of London (Pinder, 2008: 731–732), various artists, urban activists, architecture practitio- ners, and social workers have joined forces to re-imagine cities' public space. The fact that various stakeholders organize interven- tions to re-define urban space makes the study of such phenom- ena, and of their potential for community engagement and sustainable development, pressing.

Interestingly, urban activists' struggles share a common characteristic with the previous-century class struggle movements, i.e. their preference for public space as a stage for their causes. However, we should bear in mind that the public space of our 21st century globalized metropolises is the result of very different processes when we compare cities located in the Global North to those in the Global South. First of all, within the Western realm, if we look at the genesis of most public spaces in Europe, we find out that while the idea of public space suggests ''democracy, openness, and publicity of debate'', contemporary western cities' public space is mostly the result of pre-democratic efforts to demonstrate their military power and to control social life (Hou, 2010: 2). The recent repression of pro-democracy movements in Asia (see Hong Kong in 2014) and anti-greed movements in North America (see

Occupy Wall Street) and Europe (see the Indignados) have resurfaced the ancient repressive logics behind such spaces. Moreover, if we compare cities of the North with those in the Global South, we find that the very idea of public space in some Asian polities (as different as UAE and China) has never existed (Hogan et al., 2012: 62). In cities located in emerging markets of the South, public space—with public defined as ''as urban social interaction with strangers and casual acquaintances rather than as state ownership of land'' (Hogan et al., 2012: 61)—is developed by corporations that seek either to multiply developments' returns with megaprojects (Shatkin, 2000: also, see the cases, amongst others, of the Kuala Lumpur City Centre and the Burj Khalifa complex in Dubai), or to sell a synthetic freedom to inhabitants who can afford to escape the rules of authoritarian governments, such as in the case of the Hamra Oasis Village Compound in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia (this latter bombed by anti-Western terrorist groups in 2003).

Transdisciplinary Urbanism in practice: Connecting theory with empirical data

Changes in our living environments, while fear inducing, are often necessary, therefore, we propose that, when possible, we better simulate and explore changes through the medium of Urban Artistic Interventions (UAIs), before such changes become irreversible and costly. What we aim at with UAIs is to stage alternative scenarios that are not related to the present but rather emerge from societal, political, and technological driving forces and interact with and study how people react with and appropriate them. One way to highlight the latter is through scenario planning techniques (Schwartz, 1996: see Tallinn's interventions in this paper). Communal and individual past dependences and informal ways of doing things, as well as formal historical developments influence UAIs, as context-based aspects come into play. The previous as well as non-linear processes that emerge through praxis create windows of opportunities for change to occur in non-predetermined ways.

UAIs are by no means new. One could argue that they have roots in the mid-20th century Situationists who foresaw the liberating qualities of ''situations'' in transforming mundane everyday spaces of consumption into places of play, desire, and exploration. Plant (2002) demonstrates how Situationists created temporary artistic ''situations'' to propose new possible social realities. Groth and Corijn (2005: 521) analyzing Urbanism in the post-Fordist city discuss the possibility inherent in urban, civil, and artistic interventions as platforms for informal actors to create ''possibilities for new ways of thinking'' in favor of a ''more 'complex' vision [. . .] around the need for uncontrolled, non-commodified places that are socially sustainable and capable of integrating a mix of socio-cultural, economic and political activities.'' While Groth and Corijn (2005) see interventions as possibilities for grass roots social actors to appropriate ''indeterminate'' urban spaces, we see UAIs as study tools for enquiring into urban phenomena and possible futures. UAIs have similarities with Situationistic ''situations'' as well as urban, civil, and artistic interventions in that they all share a certain quest for the anticipated and the ''not here yet''. In addition, within TU we encourage researchers of urban phenomena to methodically use UAIs as creative and generative study tools. Therefore, while we see the radical and empowering attributes of interventions, we also highlight their research potential.

The researcher who chooses to interact with her field and to realize an urban intervention generates possibilities for new data to emerge. She is not only a systematic observer; instead she brings change into urban space and then systematically gathers data regarding the interaction, appropriation, dialogue, destruction, chaos and/or indifference that her intervention brings about. The

Fig. 1. Olohuone. West Hall, Helsinki Railway Station. Source: Galanakis, picture taken in 2005.

researcher herself becomes an active agent within a network of other active agents. In addition, the original artificiality of her intervention leads the researcher to position herself in the field of her study more conscientiously. Therefore, UAIs can be methodological and concept-generating tools to conduct research in pragmatic as well as inspirational and creative ways within the complex urban contexts. In addition, UAIs engender the potential of revealing to us complexities as well as remarkably simple solutions to challenges since ''complexity thinking offers us an understanding and a (non-linear) rationale for dealing constructively with a reality that is full of non-linear change to which spatial processes and developments are exposed'' (de Roo & Rauws, 2012: 220). In dealing with various scales from the abstract notions of public and private to the micro gestures of participants interacting with it and with each other, our three cases are certainly ''complex systems'' like those early models applied to cities in the 70s and 80s (see Allen, 2012: 68).

In the next three sub-sections, we discuss three interventions in Europe and Canada in light of their potential relevance for the TU theory. The first intervention is set in culturally-homogeneous Finland (back in 2005). Three years later (in 2008), an international and interdisciplinary research group came up with a series of UAIs aimed at opening a wild array of windows of opportunities in border spaces in ethnically-polarized Tallinn, Estonia. Finally, in 2014 we helped a Canadian-based organization to re-use Olohuone to give voice to multicultural Toronto.

Space unjust: ''Olohuone'' in Helsinki

Background & aims

''Olohuone'' (Finnish for ''living room'') was an Urban Artistic Intervention (UAI) that stood in Helsinki Railway Station for one week in September 2005. It was the symbolic representation of a domestic environment brought out of context and offered to the public to use, and eventually appropriate (see Figs. 1 and 2).[2] The intervention was part of doctoral studies into the ways the design and management of urban public space discriminate against certain groups of users. The dichotomy between public and private was iden-

tified as one of the main discriminatory mechanisms in public space. Therefore, Olohuone was envisioned and realized as an intervention in the monumental public building of Helsinki Railway Station, and as a case study of the dichotomy between public and private. This intervention challenged certain socio-spatial norms creating an exceptional territory wherein certain people and behaviors were allowed (e.g., homeless people were welcome, and napping was facilitated with cushions and blankets). The principle aim was to study the interactions between the public and Olohuone as well as the negotiations between strangers who temporarily spent some time there.

Tools

Olohuone was an assemblage of second-hand furniture, various objects, and books offered to the public in order to enable its author to collect notes and photos, speak with participants and observe their interactions closely. As a complex system, Olohuone included many interacting elements and was a spatial and temporal as well as functional structure. It displaced a quasi-private place into a public service building and generated ''a new quality of macroscopic collective behavior'' (Portugali, Meyer, Stolk, & Tan, 2012: I). Now that Olohuone is a past example discussed in the literature and university classrooms, it still has generating power for new behaviors. The intercultural attributes of Olohuone were nuanced gestures such as media in various languages, Somali poetry chanted from a CD player, oriental carpets and so on. The crowd-control rope territorialized Olohuone and rendered it a ''special'' zone of possibilities wherein a sociality may take place that is different from the one allowed in ''prescribed'' public spaces. The author took notes and made countless photos during set daily visits and that material, together with his interactions with some of the guests, inspired and was given shape in scholarly articles and classroom discussions. Therefore, as an UAI, Olohuone was not only an investigative and generative tool to study the dichotomy between public and private, but it is also a continuous educational tool with considerable inspirational power.

Results

Although the intervention was not a community art project as such it did, however, create communal feelings to those who participated and through micro-appropriations, people made it theirs (Galanakis, 2011). People who would not normally interact found

Fig. 2. Olohuone. West Hall, Helsinki Railway Station. Source: Galanakis, picture taken in 2005.

themselves in proximity. Some took the opportunity to communicate or acknowledge each other's existence even through a mere look (Galanakis, 2011: 124). Olohuone yielded data, such as diary notes and photographic documentation that were discussed in a doctoral dissertation and a scholarly article. Some visitors related their impressions in person and a couple sent theirs as emails. The testimonies of people indicate that even temporarily, Olohuone expanded the social space of the station (Galanakis, 2008: 315). In this way, a window of opportunity was created with Olohuone, where an organized system was framed to become a self-organized system. Olohuone was designed and realized to its last detail; however, placing Olohuone within the station and allowing the public to interact with and appropriate it created pos- sibilities for self-organization (De Roo & Rauws, 2012: 215–216). Participants became stakeholders, and the setting became a platform for expected and unexpected path dependences to emerge. Many participants eagerly appropriated Olohuone (napping, eating, just being, taking off their shoes, studying, bookcrossers engaging with the public, chatting, etc.), some took it for granted and thought of it as something expectable, and a few found Olohuone a place of idleness. Since 2005 students from various disciplines and backgrounds have found Olohuone an interesting example of practice in urban research that is easy to relate to. Students have been particularly interested in the intercultural dialog that took place in Olohuone. Olohuone demonstrates that researchers who study urban phenomena and space need to create opportunities to systematically investigate the everyday life of diverse people. In shaping the physical space of the city, then, urban researchers and practitioners together with other experts and the grass roots must also address social space in all its com- plexity and messiness. Therein lays the challenge of embracing diversity: to immerse ourselves in the poetry and complexity of the everyday.

Border cities in the Baltic Sea: ''Archipelago interventions'' in Tallinn

Background & aims

In 2008, an international group of planners, architects, artists and urbanists was brought together by the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation to explore the complex dynamics of transnational urbanism in the Baltic Sea Region. The research tested the notion of an integrated regional identity formation as desired by region makers to determine whether this model or alternate emergent forms better describe the situation of the Helsinki-Tallinn Region. The research team dealt with this task by engaging local stakeholders, region makers, local inhabitants, and temporary visitors to explore views, aspirations, and networks in the two Baltic cities. The cross border impacts as well as the historical preconditions manifest in the urban fabric of Tallinn were interpreted by deploying the ''Archipelago'' metaphor (Rizzo, 2009a: 50), i.e. a city (Tallinn) made of unfinished and physically and socially separated fragments as the opposite to the Scandinavian, welfare city such as Helsinki. In this model the city centre of Tallinn, with its tourists, shopping complexes, hotels, and casinos, is the dominant island, while the socialist periphery is made of segregated islands/enclaves for the sizeable Russian speaking minority (about a third of the total inhabitants). In addition, the Archipelago model allowed drawing attention to the abandoned or underused space (once allocated for collective infrastructures such as railways, workers' communal housing, and so forth, that have lost their rationale in neo-liberal Tallinn), separating the urban islands (Rizzo, 2009b: 35).

Tools

In 2008, a series of UAIs were organized in the ''in-between space'', to reflect upon diversity and urban fragmentation in neo-liberal Tallinn. The interventions, deployed by the Bauhaus group in collaboration with a local NGO (Uus Maailm), aimed at opening temporary windows of opportunities to reimagine urban Tallinn. One of such public performances (''Wind-up'') helped exploring the potentials of in-between space for recreational uses and as a place for informal meetings (Fig. 3). Through temporary structures installed in the uncertain spaces of the city harbor, the group wanted to show that alternative uses for undeveloped areas are possible. In the very centre of Tallinn, in an area between the old city and a modernist business district of ''Viru Keskus'', a UAI was staged to materialize the physical and psychological borders between the acknowledged past (that of medieval Reval, the ancient name of Tallinn) and the rejected socialist one (Fig. 4). In a subsequent project in the evening, a projection regarding real estate speculation in Uus Maailm (in English ''New World'') community started a lively discussion questioning the resilience of future city development and whose city it is to develop.

Fig. 3. PlayTallinn, Urban Art Intervention Week: ''Wind-up''. Source: Rizzo et al. (2008).

Fig. 4. PlayTallinn, Urban Art Intervention Week: ''Porta de Viru''. Source: Rizzo et al. (2008).

Results

Tallinn urban art interventions were highly interactive and intuitive, opening up windows of opportunities (De Roo & Rauws, 2012) to engage with the complex web of formal and informal networks (Nilsson, 2010: 69) in the city. Dozens of people participated in the many interventions scattered around the city (from the harbors to the urban periphery). Inhabitants and visitors were surprised to see unlikely structures throughout the city and their reflections upon issues that are seldom discussed in local forums and media were perhaps our major finding. Results were recorded with videos, pictures and postcards that were later analyzed in our lab in Dessau, Germany. The material was discussed in two academic articles (Rizzo, 2009a, 2009b), one local design journal (Jonsson et al., 2008), and in a graphic monograph for the general public (Rizzo et al., 2008). In a city that is rapidly converging to the model of privatized and segregated Western city (Ruoppila, 2007), where citizens behave more as individual consumers rather than as an engaged community, we found promising opportunities

for resistance and critical thinking in Tallinn's inhabitants. Also, this intensive (one year) project, although carried out by foreigners, helped strengthen the links between NGOs and the local academic community. For the first time, these networks were able to work side by side although nobody knew a priori the results and benefits from such efforts. Tallinn's Academy of Arts seems to have registered the benefits of such a transdisciplinary and collaborative approach, debating its implications in a series of yearly-organized ''urban studies days''.

''My Public Living Room'': a public art project in Toronto

Background & aims

The results yielded from the realization of Olohuone at the Helsinki Railway Station in 2005 provoked the desire to create a similar intervention in a different context. With the help of SKETCH Working Arts, a community organization specialized in planning and carrying out projects that address issues of homelessness,
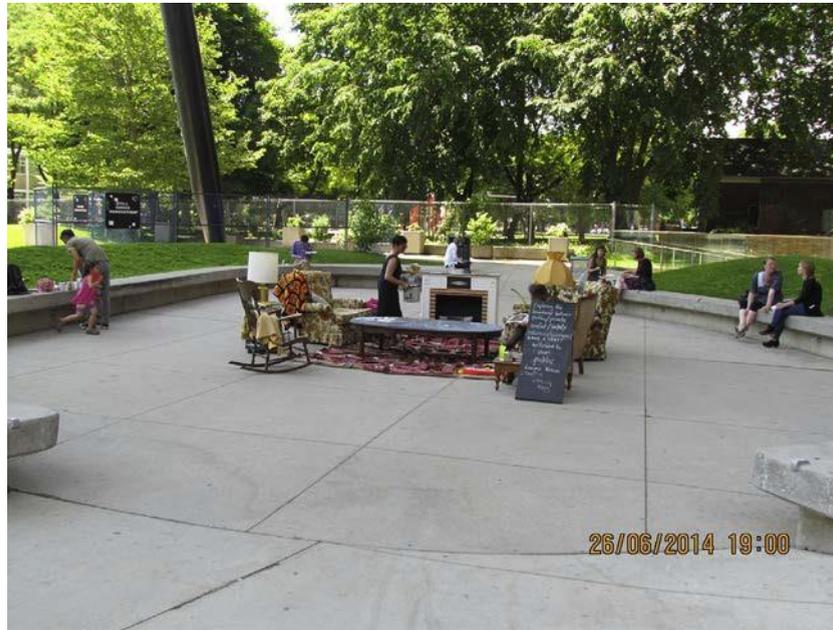
Fig. 5. ''My Public Living Room''. Detail of the sofa of the intervention. Source: Galanakis, picture taken in 2014.

youth empowerment, community engagement, and artistic expression,[3] ''My Public Living Room'' (MPLR) project was realized in Toronto in June, 2014. By realizing an UAI in a public place in Toronto, SKETCH aimed at both raising public awareness regarding homeless youth in Toronto and training the collaborating youth in delivering social art projects. The working group consisted of three young people (two women and one man) – all aspiring artists and cultural producers and members of visible minorities – as well as an artist, a youth worker, and a researcher. Eventually, of the three young participants, only one identified herself as a transient person. This was a realization that most homeless and/or street-involved youth live uncertain lives, often unable to make long-term commitments. As June 2014 was also the month of World Pride held in Toronto, all the members of the group recognized that this concurrence presented an opportunity that could not be missed. Hence, the topic of queer youth homelessness became central.[4] The research component of the MPLR project involved interviewing the three young members of the working group, keeping a research diary, and documenting the final intervention.

Tools

Inspired by the Olohuone intervention in Helsinki, the working group decided on creating a ''living room'' out of second hand furniture and objects. The participants intervened on these fixtures by screen printing, gluing, painting, weaving, cutting and sewing. The group decided that the theme of the intervention would have to do with the feelings of comfort vs. discomfort as a reminder of the uncomfortable discussions and outings queer youth have to face in family living rooms. The ''living room'' of the intervention seemed comfortable and cozy, but on closer inspection the interventions had rendered it uncomfortable: pieces of small stuffed toy fish were sticking out of the sofa like spikes (Fig. 5); a fireplace with tongue-in-cheek images of Canadian national identity; a big coffee-table that doubled as blackboard where people and participants communicated messages and asked provoking questions,

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[3] For more on SKETCH Working Arts please visit http://sketch.ca/.

[4] For more on the issue see for example http://www.homelesshub.ca/solutions/population-specific/lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender-transsexual-queer-question- ing-and-2 accessed December 07, 2014.

and the list goes on. The undercurrent questions dealt with discrimination against youth who, while encouraged to be themselves often end up homeless when they identify as queer, and against homeless people in general, who are treated as social miasma.

Results

The MPLR project lasted a month and involved approximately 40 h of workshop sessions, after which the team put together an intervention that was placed in a public place in Toronto for 5 h every day from the 24th until the 26th of June 2014. The project and the resulting intervention brought research data, a temporary change in a public place in the city where the intervention was placed, and made a difference for the youth who participated in the project.

The preliminary research results are quite interesting. In the case of Olohuone, members of the public at the Helsinki Railway station did not think much before jumping over the crowd control ropes and occupying the sofas and armchairs. The public in Toronto hesitated to use MPLR. It is possible that Toronto's multicultural citizenry could not have a singular understanding of MPLR. In the case of Olohuone, the public in Helsinki (as well as Finnish society) is comparatively more ethnically homogeneous than that of Toronto and there is a strong sense of entitlement to use a service on offer. This may have to do with the strong role the Finnish welfare state has played in creating a legacy of entitlement and expectations (see also Castells & Himanen, 2002). In multicultural Toronto, visitors had nuanced understandings of how to appropriate something like MPLR (see also Caidi & Allard, 2005). In addition, MPLR was on public display for a total of approximately 15 h spread over a period of three days, while Olohuone was publicly accessible for approximately 160 h, over a total of eight days.

SKETCH used their network with the Ontario College of Art and Design (OCAD) and got permission to place the intervention outdoors at an elliptical concrete plateau in Butterfield Park next to OCAD (Fig. 6). Eventually, the location proved to be a rather quiet public place. Therefore, the critical mass of people, such as the crowds circulating in Helsinki Railway Station, was unattainable. More importantly though, from the interviews conducted within the research component of MPLR it is evident that the three young group-members learned a great deal participating in this project

Fig. 6. ''My Public Living Room'' on the 26th of June 2014, the last day of the public display. Source: Galanakis, picture taken in 2014.

and the installation. It was exciting for them to interact with the public and witness expressions, gestures, body language, and experience in first-hand how it was to encourage public engagement, and civic conversations in public space (see Hracs & Massam, 2008).

Discussion and Conclusions

Inspired by recent experiences in the fields of urban complexity, activism, and action research, in this article we have explored the potentials of public space in Helsinki, Tallinn and Toronto with the participation of inhabitants, informal users, local organizations, artists, and urban planners. Our personal background encouraged us to adopt a transdisciplinary research approach (Doucet & Janssens, 2011; Ramadier, 2004) to study our areas, by integrating three major discourses: Social–Spatial Research, Complexity Theories of Cities, and Urban Activism. We also argued that Transdisciplinary Urbanism (TU) underpins a new way of knowledge production that has been labeled by Gibbons et al. (1994) ''Mode 2'', i.e. knowledge produced by multiple research agencies/players, within an evolving and dynamic framework, in which empirical data and theory are combined. The fields chosen and the linkages made are indicative of our understandings of cities and urban studies that are evolving and open-ended.

We deployed Urban Artistic Interventions (UAIs) in Tallinn, Helsinki and Toronto as a tool to contest social norms and to openly renegotiate power structures in public space (Zukin, 1995: 20, 279). All three projects provided settings where ''Otherness'' and foreignness, admittedly in a naively straightforward way, were acknowledged and welcomed. Framing opportunities for dialog to occur was a worthwhile endeavor that created opportunities for even a temporary shift of perspective and yielded results beyond our expectations. we found that the immersion in the poetry and complexity of the everyday was a groundbreaking research experience. However, it should be noticed that UAIs (within TU) and Urban Activism differ in the research component. In all three cases we presented there was a common aim to study the changes brought forward by the UAIs. The UAIs were not the goal in themselves, even if for some of the stakeholders it might have been so. We deployed UAIs as tools to bring and study change.

In our experience, many instances of Urban Activism can be analyzed and researched ex-post. However, in this article we refer to interventions in which the research component was an integral part of the project from the beginning.

Within the transdisciplinary framework envisioned in this paper, we found many commonalities between the three interventions. Looking at the intersections we have discussed in section 'Transdisciplinary Urbanism', one of the interesting outcomes in our interventions was the way participants appropriated, used, and self-organized in a temporary ''situation''. Moreover, all of the case studies were collaborative projects initiated either directly by the authors (as in the case of Helsinki) or by third parties in collaboration with the authors. Although the collaborators who took part in these projects had very different backgrounds (from the arts, social sciences, grassroot movements), they were all joined by the interest to challenge the current status quo (e.g., the welfare-city in Helsinki, the private-city in Tallinn, the postcolonial-city in Toronto) and open windows of opportunities for change. Another element in common between these projects was the temporary appropriation of public space for the purpose of studying/ interacting with people. The generative power of our interventions rests on the impact it had on its participants and if and how they may decide one day to take action by sharing photos they took of the settings, creating something inspired by it, talking about it to people who didn't experience it, or writing about it.

In our intervention in the city of Tallinn the ''Different'' and the ''Other'' became a starting point for a brighter and self-conscious future for the main ethnic groups (Estonians and Russian Speaking) inhabiting the Estonian capital, opposing the common, welfare-oriented urban planning practice (so often adopted in neighboring Scandinavian countries) of neutralizing differences. In Helsinki, Olohuone ventured in waters calm by default. In the supposedly homogeneous Finnish society, multiculturalism is a concept that still rings foreign while interculturalism has not caught up. The situation changes as Finland has been increasingly transformed into a receiving country for immigrants. However, as Juva and Jaya (2008) demonstrate, a strong sense of Finnishness connotes society and a sense of belonging. My Public Living Room took place in one of the most multicultural—albeit not unproblematic—cities in the west, Toronto.

Finally, in the remainder of this section we focus on the issues and challenges of TU, highlighting the importance of investigating its rich potential further. To begin with, we must briefly refer to the way TU advances transdisciplinarity in urban studies. In order to do this, we refer to Ramadier's (2004) critical and constructive elaboration on the pitfalls of transdisciplinarity. Ramadier does not discuss the political aspect of transdisciplinarity; however, he hints at it, as the almost irreversible difficulty researchers have to face. We, on the other hand, conceive TU as a methodological framework to welcome conflictual elements and paradoxes. We see their ambiguity as a constructive element of complexity that we anticipate because uncertainty and complexity are typical properties of cities. Our understanding of transdisciplinarity is holistically political with the most anarchical sense of the term.

TU can be employed to conduct research as well as to promote public awareness on social issues. The dichotomy between public and private proved to be an excellent starting point to artistically comment on issues that surpass dichotomies and encompass all human conditions (see Arendt, 1998). The potential of TU may be evident to many stakeholders who perceive city space as a dynamic terrain of multiple, shifting power struggles. Stakeholders who perceive the city as a terrain in need of a rigorous application of order and control will not be able to appreciate TU. We have earlier in this article explained the promising applications of TU in conducting urban research. However, what about informing the usual modus operandi of the practitioners who build cities? How could we convince them to experiment and engage with grassroots before they impose their ideas of common good? Overcoming this obstacle is one of the biggest limitations of this study.

Furthermore, we have advocated context-based empirical research to unravel complex systems knowing that the possible outcomes are context-dependent and may have little universal value. At the same time, the examples of ''Olohuone'' and ''My Public Living Room'' demonstrate that repetition and variations can yield study-worthy results, anywhere and anytime. Such processes of learning and knowledge production may be more fertile in fields in which the ephemeral can be a validation of professionalism too. Moreover, tactical interventions that are not embedded in the statutory planning system have very little power over planning bureaucracies. This was evident in Finland, a country where traditionally state agencies and government technocracies hold much power. On the other hand, interventions create the rare chance to channel collective frustrations towards exploring a more just future. This was the case of Tallinn, a city that has several times in the recent past witnessed dramatic changes.[5]

Admittedly TU has some scale limitations. The UAIs in the three projects we presented here were small scale interventions, and this we consider an advantage because we could document the microscale of social interaction. Could UAIs be orchestrated on a scale and in areas as large as to be of use to urban planning? This is a potential that we have not explored yet, but that is certainly worth investigating. We hope that in the future we will be able to instigate and/or participate in larger scale UAIs within more complex systems. Transdisciplinary Urbanism is a collaborative work in progress.

Acknowledgments

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[5] We refer to a few major events in Estonian history: post-WWI independence from the Russian empire, Soviet occupation in WWII, 1990s independence and economic liberalization, 2004 accession to NATO, and 2011 switch to the Euro currency.

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