Reading space to ‘address’ spatial quality

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January 2011

The overall aim of the SPINDUS research project is the development of practical and pedagogical planning and design methodologies to assess, evaluate and implement spatial quality. Its strategic focus is on the broadening of the concept of spatial quality through an interdisciplinary (involving different research disciplines in a shared methodology) and transdisciplinary (involving different types of users) approach.

This document reflects the frame of reference that was developed in the first project year to read and discuss spatial quality across three different disciplines and even more user groups. It suggests a dialogue between two modes of reading space and spatial quality: a meta-theoretical approach – “How to read space, its uses and spatial quality” — and a Quick-scan of methods to assess spatial quality – “How to ‘address’ spatial quality?” The resulting reading grid will guide the research for all SPINDUS research tracks.
Introduction: what about spatial quality?

Planners imagine how to evoke “alternative futures about place qualities, their potentials and possibilities” (Healey 2010). Urban design develops sets of “ideas about how space should be organized, what forms it should take and what functions it should perform” and is a crucial tool in (re-)shaping urban space (Madanipour 2006). Community developers are increasingly interested in the relation between space and the bringing about of social innovation (Moulaert 2009). Space and place are common terms in strategic/institutional spatial planning, research by design/urban design, and social innovation. When we look into their meaning, however, questions emerge on the qualities and experiences these terms arouse in these disciplines.

Therefore, and with the aim of arriving at the assessment and reproduction of spatial quality from the perspective of use of space by different types of users, it is important to examine how these disciplines conceptualise space and use these conceptualizations in their respective methodologies. Combining, in an interdisciplinary way, theories and methods from the three fields, the concept of spatial quality will be broadened from a purely ‘adding up’ of different spatial quality preferences, estranged from their social context, to a relational definition that mobilises the integrative potential of a social innovation reading of space, research by design and strategic/institutional spatial planning.

This document moves from a meta-analytical framework for reading space to an analytical framework that addresses spatial quality based on the bringing together of:

(1) The commonalities and complementarities we found in terms of the analytical categories in the analysis of space in the strategic and institutional planning, urbanism and research by design and social innovation literature (Abdelwahab et al. 2011; Moulaert et al. 2011; Schreurs et al. 2011) with;

(2) The various dimensions and foci that different authors/consultants/agencies have used in the literature to address spatial quality (Miciukiewicz et al. 2010).

A meta-theoretical framework gives unity to the reading of the reproduction of space, its users and its qualities. A meta-framework is built on a shared ontology – involving an ethical positioning - and an agreement on the dimensions of complexity needed to analyse the part of reality that is examined (Moulaert 1987). ‘Sharing’ and ‘agreeing’ refer to the different theoretical traditions and research approaches that are involved and can have both an interdisciplinary and a transdisciplinary meaning (Social Polis, 2011, forthcoming).

To connect relevant dimensions of the analysis of spatial quality, the meta-analytical framework does two things. Firstly, it draws attention to the concepts and dimensions of space that various disciplines mobilise in their respective spatial analyses. Secondly, it relates users to the ways they deal with space. To address user-uses relations, we follow
Rapoport (1970) in his "study of spatial quality" and propose to give meaning to the spatial quality concept by connecting it to [the quality of] the use of space, the impact of human practice on and in space.

To this purpose, we need methods to identify the uses of spaces, the satisfaction they give to their users, the impact they have on other uses and spaces, now and in the future, and the way these impacts (satisfactions/ harms/ empowering capacities) can be assessed and improved.

We also need to understand how the transformation of space through a diversity of human and non-human practices takes place: the way space is lived, perceived, conceived (Lefebvre 1974). This is reflected in the diversity of ‘spaces’ referring to a wide range of human activities, mental as well as real. In line with Rapoport (1970) we support a socio-psychological approach to the use of space, thus recognizing cultural, artistic, social, natural, etc. spaces as both representations as well as spatial realities. Different moments or natures of spaces (social, environmental, built, ...) as recognized and influenced by humans and non-humans refer to different potential and effective uses of space.

How to read space, its uses and spatial quality?

A literature review on the conceptualisation of space in strategic spatial planning, research by design/urbanism and social innovation perspectives on the basis of eight criteria (social space, materiality, ownership of space, types of space, scale, nature and environment, representation of space, and ethics) has laid the ground for a meta-theoretical framework for the reading of space and spatial quality (Moulaert et al. 2010).

To calibrate the meta-framework, we follow Rapoport (1970) in his attempt to distinguish between different types of space according to the complexity of human subjectivity, socius and spatial practice in the analysis of uses of space. But we situate this within our relational approach to space. As Abdelwahab et al. 2011 put it: “Space and spatial quality are produced as a result of “collective place-shaping efforts” (Healey, 2008:3) that involve various human and non-human actants in different relations of power through subjectivation, organisation, and practices of signification (Hillier, 2009) playing roles in complex interrelations and multiple space-time relational dynamics (Healey, 2006).”

The uses of space thus receive meaning through the different interactions with space for particular and collective purposes. Basic dimensions of this meta-analytical positioning and taking into account the readings of space in strategic and institutional planning, urbanism and research by design, and social innovation involve:

1. Space is relational, its uses are relational and therefore reflections on space qualities as well.
2. A relational approach within social space necessarily involves an ethical dimension. Relations between humans—individually and collectively—and between human and non-human actants, refer to shared but also contested ethics in the form of values and codes of communication and cooperation. The ethics that are guiding the theoretical and methodological advancements in this spatial-relational approach may be referred to as “spatial justice”. The concept emphasises the spatiality of justice and injustice (Soja 2010) and implies that the relations between space and societies play an essential role in understanding social injustices and to reflect on interventions that aim to reduce them.

3. The relational approach takes on board modernist insights on the role of power structures and relations as significant drivers of the use of space. It therefore also focuses on countervailing and alternative social forces that feed new insights in the use of space while connecting them to the historical and geographical contexts in which they were developed.

4. The uses of space are to be read according to the different types of [interaction with] space identified in this literature survey. They refer to the social, cultural, physical, biological, ... [dimensions of] spaces that are interconnected and that − depending on the focus of the analysis of spatial quality - could be analysed as ‘actants’ within nature-society interactions. Different types of agency and activity within their interrelatedness should be acknowledged. Reading spatial qualities according to the different actants and types of interaction with space also takes into account different modes of experience of space (sensorimotor, tactile, visual, conceptual) and aims to understand how users feel about space and place.

5. The relational approach includes a multi-scalar perspective, as developed in the relational geography, multi-level governance and scalar politics literature. It is based on a multilayered and dynamic view on scale that sees places and sites within their particular relational networks and also implies the idea that spaces play different roles in variegating networks across time and space.

6. The assessment and improvement of spatial quality is a matter of collective learning, negotiation and action. This involves a transdisciplinary stance, an ethical judgment about social change and the need for development of interactive methods to support assessment and improvement of spatial quality. As we argue below the social innovation perspective has the potential to materialise these, because it does not only ‘socialise’ space and its uses (unveils their social character) but also shows the way to make social relations more participative.

7. Sustainable development (3E model: economy, environment and equity)—with all its analytical and socio-political shortcomings—is a significant starting point for the ontology/ontogenesis of the meta-analytical framework. It holds the potential to criticize but also for changes in the use of space. However, it is used too often in a static way as a change – often hardly coherent - agenda, not as an engendered process of spatial transformation (Parra and Moulaert, 2010). How does development within and across particular spaces take place from the perspective of
sustainability? The predominance of human relationality in space and human responsibility for the sustainable reproduction of space puts social sustainability at the heart of the ontological positioning about spatial justice.

Obviously, these different readings of space also involve addressing different methodologies in the analysis of space to examine their inter- and transdisciplinary potential. Methods are crucial in determining spatial quality and should be recognized in all their diversity. Contemporary literature looking at space, spatial quality, place quality, sustainable development and construction, etc. for example brings on board a multitude of features of sustainability and spatial quality and shows the existence of a wide diversity of methods.

Spatial quality in the literature

A literature review of the major theoretical and operational contributions with various approaches to the concept of spatial quality shows that most publications do not define ‘spatial quality’ nor ‘quality’ in an explicit way (Miciukiewicz et al. 2010). Nevertheless concepts that might be incorporated in the reading of spatial quality were identified.

These concepts include ideas about “good city form” (Lynch 1984), “good design” (Sternberg 2000), “good architecture”, “urban quality” (Chapman and Larkham 1999; Trip 2007), “delight” (Wootton 1624) on the urbanism and research by design side; “planning performance” (Friedman 2004), “effective planning process”, “good planning process” (Conroy and Berke 2004), “quality planning” (Creedy et al. 2007), “place quality” (Healey 2004), and “experiential quality of urban environment” (Southworth 2003) or “livable city” (Southworth 2003) in planning; “spatial justice” (Soja 2010), “fulfillments of human needs” (Moulaert 2009) or “inclusive design” (Lang 1990) in the social innovation reading.

The wide variety of dimensions provided by various authors addressing spatial quality directly, or indirectly (e.g. diversity of structures, quality of materials, human scale, spatial diversity, cultural diversity, social diversity, accessibility, pollution, etc.), points to the importance of the recognition of a wide diversity of perspectives and methods to read and address spatial quality. Some classifications or typologies of features of spatial quality are more comprehensive (e.g. Lynch, 1984), other less (e.g. Venturi, 1997), but no attempts have been made to situate them within a meta-framework in the sense we explained before.

The overview also shows that the selection of elements that are relevant to spatial quality depends on the research or action questions, the actors involved, etc. but that almost all approaches assess both physical and social qualities. The assessment of qualities of spaces is not based upon values intrinsic to objects (and idealizations of these objects), but upon experiential value of these objects, which is identified by
perceiving, thinking, feeling subjects whose socio-subjective perceptions are relational. Selected features of spatial quality depend on the nature of the experienced objects, cultural, class, racial and gendered identities and spatial competences of experiencing subjects.

Rapoport (1970) stresses the importance of a diversity of approaches in the study of spatial quality, although he underlines the importance of multidimensional, multimodal approaches. Here holism can help us. Holism is exactly about the provision of analytical frameworks that show directions to connect relevant elements (ranging from very abstract to very concrete) in the understanding of a very complex reality, which cannot be understood with either just one theory, or by a juxtaposition of a number of theories, but which need the help of a meta-analytical framework to select and connect different theories.

‘Addressing’ spatial quality

The challenge of addressing spatial quality is to qualify the relations between space(s) and its (their) users or their spatial praxis. Working with a meta-framework according to the seven dimensions explained above limits the risk of losing the interdependencies between different dimensions of space, its uses and users, but it does hold the risk to end up with too abstract arguments. The meta-framework defends diversity in approaching spatial quality, but is rather abstract in the way it tends to assign macro-labels to uses and users, or to ‘name’ the role of nature and construction in comparison with social practices, etc.

The literature review of the major contributions to the reading of spatial quality introduces concreteness into this encompassing abstraction. It brings on board particular readings of spatial quality, refers to specific theories, or even specific spaces or cases, and hence offers opportunities to become more concrete in addressing spatial quality.

Table 1 cross-ventilates the dimensions of our relational ‘meta-reading’ of space, with selected specific analyses of spatial quality (with its relevant dimensions, actors involved in defining, assessing, and implementing spatial quality). The table indicates the type of questions that have to be addressed for each of the seven dimensions to research the relations between space(s) and spatial practice. It is intended to serve as a preamble to, and an organisational framework for, empirical research and will stimulate dialogue and the development of a common language among planners, architects, urbanists, policy-makers, and bottom-up initiatives to collaborate in enhancing spatial quality. For SPINDUS itself, it offers the meta-language, ontology and major relational modes that should guide the experiences of spatial quality assessment and improvement within the different work-packages.
Table 1: Organisational framework for addressing spatial quality in empirical research (inspired by the empirical concerns as provided by Abdelwahab’s adaptation of Canter 1997 (SPINDUS D2.1.1, 2010))

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Aspects of design: Dimensions of place (function, space, form)</th>
<th>Aspects of planning: Dimensions of the planning process (...)</th>
<th>Aspects of social innovation: Dimensions of territorial development (...)</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Space is relational, its uses are relational and therefore reflections on space qualities as well</td>
<td>Get insights in different uses by users: What uses exist? How are they identified (e.g. is it different for expert defined versus user defined?)? How are they regulated? How is dealt with controversies (e.g. intersection between property, zoning regulations)? How does the urban regeneration affect those? What uses are institutionalized (how? Why?) Which uses are absent/ types of interaction with space are absent? How are different users/uses accommodated in the planning process? Which uses are excluded?</td>
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<td>2. A relational approach within social space necessarily involves an ethical dimension. The ethics that are guiding the theoretical and methodological advancements may be referred to as “spatial justice” Relations between humans and non-human actants – individually and collectively – refer to the production and appropriation of shared values and codes of communication. These are socially produced.</td>
<td>What users, values and meanings are mediating between uses and users? How is social importance of a place reflected in the proposed intervention? How is (socially produced) symbolic importance/identity of a place reflected in the proposed intervention? How is cultural importance of a place reflected in the proposed intervention? What (social, environmental, economic and political) values about space are guiding principles? How does it affect form? Planning process? Visions? Functions? What/whose values are not taken into account? (Why? Those that do not fit decision makers value frame? Those that conflict with financial profit? With giving space to marginalised users?)</td>
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<td>3. The relational approach takes on board modernist insights on the role of power structures and relations as significant drivers of the use of space.</td>
<td>How are the uses of space regulated? Why is that so? How does this count for different uses in terms of equity, democracy, diversity, sustainability?</td>
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<td>4. The uses of space are to be read according to the different types of [interaction with] space identified in this literature survey. They refer to the social, cultural, physical, biological, ... [dimensions of] spaces that are interconnected and that depending on the focus of the analysis of spatial quality could be analysed as ‘actants’ within nature-society interactions.</td>
<td>Space of activities: system of activities and system of settings How do systems of activities and systems of settings communicate? How do interventions shape that communication? (This assumes that we look at systems of activities rather than at single activities) Why do they unfold as they do? Why certain activities and not others come to be regulated? And what consequences has this in terms of social inclusion/access/exclusion (e.g. looking at space as property) How does the intervention settle/unsettle (property and other) relations? How does design/planning accommodate for different space ownership? For mental health? What [previously invisible] claims become visible when taking into account the diversity of aspect of different types of interaction with space? How does the intervention impact on sense of place/ sense of belonging?</td>
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<td>5. The relational approach includes a multi-scalar perspective.</td>
<td>How does a system of activities stimulate the formation of distant relationships? Of local relationships? Of Intermediate relationships? How does a system of settings stimulate/impede the formation of distant relationships? Of local relationships? Of Intermediate relationships?</td>
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</table>
How does form stimulate/impede the formation of distant relationships? Of local relationships? Of Intermediate relationships?
How does design process/planning process stimulate/impede the formation of distant relationships? Of local relationships? Of Intermediate relationships?
What does it mean to put values and meanings in a multi-scalar perspective? Are local values effectively represented in regional policy?

6. The assessment and improvement of spatial quality is a matter of collective learning, negotiation and action.

How effective/ineffective are the design and planning processes as processes of collective learning? Did they make use of different types of expertise?
In what ways have different users shaped planning/design processes? How is user interactivity fostered in the urban regeneration intervention (e.g. grassroots organization through the transformation of an neighbourhood park)
How is reflection upon the relation values and development priorities organized?

7. Sustainable development (3E model) with all its analytical and socio-political shortcomings is a significant starting point for the ontology/ontogenesis within this meta-analytical perspective. However, given the relational approach, a central place should be given to social sustainability.

… different aspects of [the genesis of] a sustainable uses-mix (in space and time)
By definition, a relational view on space and system view (system of activities and system of settings) looks at interdependency. What happens in one part of the system influences what happens elsewhere. This view is adopted to study the 3Es of sustainability
How resilient is the space?

The table shows that the assessment of spatial quality requires both reflection upon products and processes. To answer the questions in this table, empirical categories will have to be developed. Devices that map concepts onto empirical reality could be explored as methodological tools to translate concepts of the meta-analytical framework into empirical categories. Here we think at methods such as Carmona and Sieh's (2008) comprehensive holistic assessment of spatial quality: Asset-based community development ABCD in community development analysis; Integrated Area Development analysis (Moulaert, 2000); facet theory (Canter 1997); and participatory planning and design methods such as the Project for Public Spaces (PPS) or the collaborative place-making approach (Healey 1998).

These categories will have to respect the dimensions of the analytical framework but at the same time accounts for the reality of particular cases. Accessibility and linkages; Uses and activities; Comfort and image; and Sociability, as developed in the PPS method are examples of such empirical categories. Environmental quality, or the building of socio-territorial capital others. These categories should also allow to interpret qualities in a dynamic way. Qualities change over time. The danger is that 'linkages' are not analytically powerful enough to cover the interdependencies within the interrelational dynamics; and that the PPS should be amended from structural-institutional perspective, as is done in the Agency, Structure, Institutions, Discourse (ASID) approach (Moulaert and Jessop 2011).

Furthermore, and related, the reflexivity of Table 1 will have to be improved by identifying the roles of different actors in the spatial quality reading, assessment and
improvement initiatives. A transdisciplinary exercise of spatial quality assessment and transformation—SPINDUS’ goal—requires to go beyond the description of the role of actors (stakeholders, policy-makers, activists, ...). They have to be brought on board as actors in what planners, designers, and researchers do to avoid the ‘specialist’ or ‘expert trap’. It abandons the elitist reading of change agency and privileges, employing bottom-up participation, collaborative planning, and research by design as emancipation vehicles. A user oriented approach to spatial quality is thus about the improvement of relations between agents in space, including social innovation in governance (e.g. the construction of consultation and participation groups). But it refers as well to the physical, material, and spatial-organizational aspects. The meta-framework can also serve as a watchdog of these relations between different types of actors.

References:


Wootton, H. (1624) Comoditie, firmeness and delight.