

A framework to grasp socio-territorial relationships: a conceptual path

Marluci Menezes, [0000-0001-7031-0053],

Laboratório Nacional de Engenharia Civil (LNEC), Lisbon, Portugal, marluci@lnec.pt

Abstract - This chapter proposes an introductory conceptual framework to better understand some aspects of everyday relations of people and spaces. From the perspective of anthropology of space, it first provides a reflection on issues that are important for understanding these relationships, to then, in a second step, address the relevance of walking as a method to trigger a sensitive path. This chapter aims to raise the interest for urban planning that is more attentive to the multidimensionality of socio-territorial relations. To explore the sensitiveness of urban space it is important to consider (a) the perspective of users in terms of symbolic dimensions, socio-spatial and cultural practices, and sense of happiness and well-being; (b) the articulation between behavioural dimensions, sociocultural dynamics and the environment; (c) the approximation of concepts and categories to understand space from the perspective of different disciplines.

Keywords - Attentiveness, socio-territorial relations, walking, urban planning.

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Resumo - Em modo iniciático, o presente capítulo propõe um itinerário sensível para captar determinados aspetos do quotidiano das relações sócio-territoriais. A partir de uma ótica da antropologia do espaço, primeiramente apresentam-se certos tópicos que se julga importante atender. Na sequência, discute-se a pertinência do uso caminhado da cidade como método no acionar de um itinerário sensível. O objetivo é sensibilizar para o interesse de um urbanismo mais atento à multidimensionalidade das relações sócio-territoriais. Desde uma ecologia sensível do espaço urbano, aqui importa considerar: (a) a perspetiva dos utilizadores do espaço ao nível das dimensões simbólicas, práticas sócio-espaciais e culturais, satisfação e sentimentos de bem-estar; (b) a articulação entre dimensões comportamentais, dinâmicas socioculturais e meio ambiente; (c) a aproximação de conceitos, categorias e noções de entendimento do espaço, e de diferentes áreas disciplinares.

Palavras-chave - Percepção, relações sócio-territoriais, caminhada, planeamento urbano.

INTRODUCTION

The unquestionable fact that space speaks in the plural (Bettanini, 1982) echoes with special emphasis when the subject is urban space. This plurality conveys a heterogeneity of meanings, elements, forms, practices, processes and relationships that are of interest to know and understand for urban planning. However, when it comes to the reflection about how to create or recreate urban space, such overlapping multidimensionality is not always considered. Understanding this multidimensionality is not an easy task, because it infers complexity, ambiguity, diversity, conflicts and, in many cases, divergences in understandings, needs and interests.

Across the multidimensional point of view, knowledge production and acting, there is the need for a dialogue among different disciplines and knowledge domains. This refers to the fundamental issue of adopting an inter/transdisciplinary perspective. Nevertheless, despite being aware that inter/transdisciplinarity is essential in urban planning, the present reflection does not directly highlight this issue, assuming it as intrinsic. Thus, in urban planning, it is important to be aware of socio-territorial problems, potential and needs. To achieve this, it is necessary to learn to be more sensitive to the variety of aspects and dynamics that shape the urban space. This derives from a sensitive everyday life perspective (Ferreira, 2016) or, as Thibaud (2010) advocates, from an urban ecology of the senses, which implies a sensory perception of urban space, and relates the physical aspects of space to the social experience made in/through it. The objective here would be “to capture, access, restore the aesthetic context (aesthesis), as a perception, through the senses, of the common urban experience” (Ferreira, 2016: 86). Therefore, it is essential to train our senses so that, gradually, we become more sensitive to the multiple aspects, relationships and processes that interact daily in space, and to the urban *ambiance* that is created in space. The concept of urban *ambiance* is understood here as being holistic and, in general terms, it involves the character and/or atmosphere of a place as captured by the individual, as a physical, social and cultural reality (Silva and Duarte, 2020; Thibaud, 2000, 2010, 2012; Ferreira, 2016).

To address a sensitive pathway to grasp the socio-territorial relationships in urban areas, in particular in public spaces, from the perspective of anthropology of space, it is relevant, first, to introduce some topics considered central. These topics are but a few examples of the richness and plurality that characterises space and are not intended to be exhaustive. The aim is to raise awareness to the importance of developing a pathway to approach socio-territorial relations, such that give dynamism to and strengthen:

- The perspective of users, considering different dimensions, such as symbolic, socio-spatial and cultural practices, and senses of happiness and well-being.
- The articulation between behavioural dimensions, sociocultural dynamics and the environment.

- The approximation of the concepts, categories and understandings of space, as well as different disciplines.

Subsequently, walking through the city as a (experimental) method is discussed as an opportunity to devise a conceptual path to grasp socio-territorial relationships.

SPACE USE, APPROPRIATION, DELIMITATION AND PERCEPTION

Observing everyday micro-geographies of use and appropriation of space contributes to the understanding of the relationship between individuals/groups, their behaviours and practices, physical and functional resources, and the sociocultural and symbolic resources in a given spatial context (Barker et al., 1973; Wicker, 1979; Rapoport, 1980; Low, 2000, 2000a). These aspects also help to detect the propensity of socio-spatial contexts to become vandalised, segregated, excluded, or associated with a sense of insecurity. Such observation helps to identify socio-territorial continuities and discontinuities, to understand socio-spatial behaviours and practices in terms of needs, control, culture, experiences and meanings in the course of daily life, and at times which are characterised by their circular movement, often related to ephemeral experiences or more constant meanings (for example: rituals, parties and celebrations). In this observation, it is important to recognise the characteristics of those who use and appropriate urban space, their points of view and the meanings they attribute to the space. Thus, the relationships between everyday micro-geographies of use and appropriation of space, spaces (indoor/outdoor, public/private, semi-public/semi-private), social behaviours and the physical environment are central to the understanding of the lived space.

The organised, used, and appropriated space is a represented space; observing space helps to identify a social reality (Lévy and Segaud, 1983; Ferrara, 1993). An organised space – with forms, limits, orientation and direction – as a represented space is a communication vehicle. This reflects on the other hand, a capacity for environmental perception, on the part of individuals, which contributes to the construction of a mental configuration – an image – that serves as information, psychic-spatial reformulation and reflection. The analysis of images and representations of space allows us to establish a set of associations that help us to better grasp the relationship between space, culture and society.

In understanding these dynamics, it is also important to identify the rationale behind building limits and borders. A boundary can be a demarcation line, as seen in defining political and administrative boundaries. Nevertheless, from a sociocultural perspective, the idea of limit emerges as a symbolic and interstitial landmark. Understanding the ways in which individuals and groups construct, destroy or reinforce certain boundaries is important in a socio-territorial analysis. It is also vital to identify the relationships between internal and external spaces, dynamics of inclusion and exclusion (Sibley, 1997). Moreover, the space delimitation process introduces logics of differentiation in the socio-spatial organisation, and in the

representations elaborated on the different socio-spatial orders. This is because limits and borders serve to mark differences, distinctions and contrasts (Low, 2000; Menezes, 2004). A liminal space is ambiguous, and it can be a space of comfort and security, of a leisurely transition between spheres of space, or between one social setting and another. However, it can also be a space of anxiety and transgression, of segregation and exclusion (Sibley, 1997). Being attentive to the processes of social and spatial demarcation helps us to address the relationships between what “is” and what “is not” – danger, threat, insecurity – between “near” and “distant”, between “us”, “them” and the “others” (Menezes, 2004).

THE METHOD IS SIMPLE: WALKING AS A TACTIC APPROACH

When walking, a “tactile apprehension” of the urban space takes place (Certeau, 1990). This provides a “tactile approximation” (Lima, 2013) of the social, spatial and cultural logics that manifest themselves in the urban territory. For Schultz (2016), the act of walking also enables an approximation of study, design and planning problems. This is because this act deals with a much richer initiative than the mere extrapolation of studying problems from sitting at a table.

In urban planning, the act of walking to put into action a sensitive perception of urban ambiances can be considered a “method and source of information for critical reflection” (Lima, 2013: 203). A method that, according to Solnit’s (2001), is not an analytical act, as it is improvised; Schultz (2016) calls this experimental.

Walking is one of the most ordinary and simple ways of exploring landscapes. However, applied to design practice, it must be refined as an experimental method supporting a complex creative process of gathering knowledge, generating ideas, and reflecting and sharing findings immediately on site. (Schultz, 2016: 136)

For Schultz (2016), the act of walking as an experimental method is related to the firmness and long duration of the elements that characterise the act – “strain, rhythm and intensive perception”. These elements enable three modes framed by the method: (i) discovery mode – related to the engagement of those who investigate in the territory, giving rise to an intensive perception; (ii) flow mode – one that stimulates intuition; (iii) reflective mode – supportive support for the organisation of ideas. In one of the experiences of applying the method, the author refers to the use of the idea of game, where anyone who was going to walk could follow the following rules:

1) Walk the whole day; 2) Choose a direction rather than “the right path”; 3) Experiment with following beaten tracks and with crossing the terrain by following a straight line; 4) Walk alone most of the time, at least for half of your journey; 5) Start a conversation with people you encounter on the way; 6) Observe places with all their scents, flavours, views and textures; 7) Open up to the landscape. Play walking. (Schultz, 2016: 137).

The “walk as a method of discovery and informally woven relationships and events in the city’s territories” (Fortuna, 2019: 8), enables a “tactile approximation” (Lima, 2013) to the particularities of the territories, approaching the possibility of implementing a closer perspective and from within, as represented by the ethnographic method (Magnani, 2002; Menezes, 2019). In addition, with regard to urban discipline, it can contribute to inverting more conventional perspectives, from above and outside (Bereinstein Jacques, 2008). If the required sensitivity entails paying attention to our senses – sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste – the techniques and tools for collecting information and recording it are wide-ranging and varied – establishing an informal conversation with space users, taking notes, drawing, making diagrams and maps, making visual records, organisation charts and diagrams; apps, a notebook, a camera and video, etc. should be used for this purpose.

WALKING AS AN ACT THAT CONTRIBUTES TO SENSORY IMMERSION IN THE TERRITORY

The act of walking plays an important role in urban mobility, being potentially available to everyone, as are the opportunities it creates as an act of roaming, thus enabling wandering, relating, feeling, knowing, experiencing, reflecting (etc.). The importance of walking resonates with the importance of creating more and better conditions so that it can be done with quality, comfort and safety, which is the order of the day in our cities. However, when the role of walking is introduced here in the construction of a sensitive itinerary to capture the particularities of the territory, we are not really referring to creating urban conditions to enable walking. Here, the qualities enhanced by walking itself are seen as beneficial, in which the slow pace, firmness, effort and rhythm provide opportunities to establish more and more connections, immersed in the city’s territories. But then again, the challenge here is how to take advantage of this possibility of immersive connection so that, from the act of walking, a sensitive itinerary begins to capture the socio-territorial relationships in everyday life.

Let’s see, then. When walking, we come across people, how they relate to each other and with the physical environment that surrounds them; but also with bodies, clothing, sounds and noises, smells and flavours, behaviours, practices, needs, potentials, micro-geographies of use and appropriation of space (Marchal and Stébé, 2011), and the constitution of micro-territorialities (Fortuna, 2012). However, deepening knowledge about socio-territorial dynamics requires a broad and demanding theoretical and methodological framework, dedicating time to the study and analysis of observed phenomena, of which the journey is, above all, a support. This is because, for example, it is important to know the complexity with which the interactive relationship between people and spaces is manifested, and how this relationship affects behavioural frameworks, constituting urban environments (Carr et al., 1992; Duarte and Pinheiro, 2019), thus taking an integrated approach

that includes the natural and physical qualities of the space, the people who use it, their cultural and demographic backgrounds and underlying socio-economic status. Moreover, this also considers that these aspects cover the contexts of the development of settings, the existing structures in the area, the history of the place and the inherent socio-cultural traditions.

The act of walking allows for the creation of an intense and sensitive perception of people's territorial experience, supporting the inceptive nature of this integrated approach. Here, walking as an experimental method of discovery, flow and reflection, following the reasoning of Schultz (2016), enables us to better capture particularities and find questions, but also new ideas, which, from another perspective, helps to counter certain trends in the urban discipline – in a more conventional or even current perspective, such as certain approaches adopted in line with what is conventionally designated as smart cities. That is, the act of walking as a method, by tactically approaching urban space, helps us to invert trends that address social life with an emphasis on counting numbers, identifying the type of people and uses of space. It also assists in overturning more architectural approaches, which privilege the description of physical and morphological-type characteristics; or even offset the adoption of macro-approaches, from the outside and above.

FINAL NOTES

The goal of this chapter was to contribute to the development of more sensitive approaches to foster a deeper understanding of socio-territorial relationships in the urban space. It was conceived as a preliminary step to address the multidimensionality which characterises the connection between space, culture and society. The act of walking is suggested as an experimental method to sharpen the senses to grasp the plurality of these relationships.

It is, however, essential to consider a more operative, dynamic and participatory technical and methodological perspective when addressing urban issues. In order to ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of these objectives, socio-spatial analyses should be:

- **Dynamic** – in order to avoid the production of static and/or immutable images and characterizations of the contexts of involvement and scope of the dynamics of action and urban intervention.
- **Interactive** – in order to promote an articulated reading between different analytical points of view (architectural/urbanistic, socio-anthropological, historical, economic, archaeological, technological, sanitary and health-related, and so on). It is important to provide an interrelated reading of the dimensions and dynamics that constitute and are constituted in a given context of analysis. This promotes a better knowledge of social, spatial, cultural, functional, institutional and operational issues, as well as the definition of more integrated and interactive measures and actions.

- **Participatory** – in order to foster the integration of the reasoning of social actors and the knowledge of their propositions in the placemaking and planning process.

The tactile approximation of the territory as provided by the act of walking enables us to be more sensitive to the different aspects that influence our own territorial experience, as well as that of other people. This enables us to gradually create a more integrated and multidimensional understanding of the various aspects that affect socio-territorial relationships. This is a starting point considered essential to define pathways that contribute to a better city.

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