Texture and Fixture: Understanding Urban Communication Geographies

André Jansson

Media and Communication Studies, Karlstad University, Sweden

andre.jansson@kau.se

The paper discusses the ambiguous character of spaces in-between the panoramic "concept city" and the immersive "thick city". It is argued, firstly, that the theoretical understanding of such intermediary urban spaces in general, and intermediary *communication geographies* in particular, has been underdeveloped in media studies. These spaces are crucial if we are to grasp the reproduction and change of cities – notably the interaction between images, representations and social practice. Secondly, it is argued that the concepts of *texture* and *fixture* are appropriate for a re-thinking of intermediary communication geographies. Texture refers to the communicative fabric of space – shaped as networks of/for circulation – symbolic as well as material in kind. Fixtures are the strong points in textural webs. They contribute to the reproduction of textures, while at the same time working as nodes of circulation. They appear as both hermeneutic loci (festivals, rituals, cultural scenes, etc) and more material infrastructural nodes (web servers, media buildings, outlets, etc), with no clear boundaries in-between them.

The concept city, the thick city – and the city in-between

Urban experience tends to alternate between two extremes. On the one hand, the city may be experienced as a sign or a panorama, through great abstraction or geographical distanciation. This is the city of architects, planners, branding professionals, aerial photographers and gazing sight-seers. We may call it the *concept city*. On the other hand, the city is an immersive cultural forest, a city of walkers, waiting to be explored and navigated. It is a city to be absorbed by, and to loose oneself within. We may call it the *thick city*.

Several theorists have argued that we, as urbanites, know much less about the spatial layers that mediate between the concept city and the thick city. Human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1974: Ch 13), for instance, holds that the polarization of these two levels corresponds to a phenomenological gap among city dwellers. While experts on their own street, and skilled in the imagery of the entire city, most people have just vague, or incoherent, understandings of intermediate levels, such as the geographies of neighbouring districts. Tuan (ibid: 192) goes as far as to argue that the two ends of the scale "express a common human propensity to dwell on two widely disparate levels of thought: high abstraction and direct responses" (see also Tuan 1977: Ch 12).

The same problem is addressed in Michel de Certeau's (1984: Ch VII) essay *Walking in the City*. In the opening of the text (ibid: 91) he describes what it is to see Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center:

> Beneath the haze stirred up by the winds, the urban island, a sea in the middle of the sea, lifts up the skyscrapers over Wall Street, sinks down at Greenwich, then rises again to the crests of Midtown, quietly passes over Central Park and finally undulates off into the distance beyond Harlem. A wave of verticals. Its agitation is momentarily arrested by vision. The gigantic mass is immobilized before the eyes. It is transformed into a texturology in which extremes coincide – extremes of ambition and degradation, brutal oppositions of races and styles, contrasts between yesterday's buildings, already transformed into trash cans, and today's urban irruptions that block out its space.

As we can see, ascending the World Trade Center involves (or involved) a double metamorphosis. The street walker is transfigured into a voyeur, who is now in control of the landscape. His or her multi-sensory experience of the bustling city scene is replaced by a totalizing gaze. The voyeur is not absorbed by, but measuring and reading the city. The city, in turn, transforms before the voyeur's eyes: it becomes an image, or even a text. And according to de Certeau, the ability to read and control, and to *own* the city, is a source of pleasure. It is an experience of security, even liberation, that the urban dweller may otherwise achieve only in the most familiar places of everyday life.

So what is in-between these levels? Where does the thick city end, and where does the concept city begin? To some extent this is a phenomenological question – especially if we follow Tuan's approach. The *vagueness* of intermediary urban spaces (see Miller 2006), and their boundaries (or lack thereof), might be understood merely as a socio-cognitive construct. However, the fact that we, as social subjects, have a tendency to bracket off intermediary spaces and processes, in order to make the world more comprehensible, does not mean that they are interesting only as perceived phenomena. On the contrary, I would argue, they are relevant to study, precisely because they constitute and condition a great deal of social life, while simultaneously escaping the classifying forces of cognitive mapping.

This may be particularly true when it comes to *urban geographies of communication*. Every city integrates more or less patterned infrastructures and symbolic flows. These are essential to the (re)production of both the concept city and the thick city – but they are also more or less hidden, belonging to the urban back-stage, and/or taken for granted. Just think

about the cables and wires criss-crossing an ordinary city district, providing us with information we do not problematize until we are off-line. Or think about the socio-geographic logic according to which artistic scenes circulate cultural products and hermeneutic energies in a city. We know that these infrastructures and nodes exist, but we have just a vague understanding of how they are maintained. One may even argue that they become more significant, the less we notice them. Even though intermediary spaces, and *intermediary communication geographies*, are largely absent to our eyes and minds, they represent crucial sites of *socio-cultural reaction*. I am using the term "reaction" here in a biological or chemical manner, in order to stress the processes through which social, cultural, and material qualities blend together and form particular patterns. These symbolic-material patterns, in turn, I will call *textures*.

The problem I will address in this paper, then, is an epistemological one. How can we reach a better understanding of intermediary urban spaces? And how can we understand the (re)production of such spaces in an era of global communication? There is, or has been, I would assert, a tendency within media and communication studies to reproduce the phenomenological gap between the concept city and the thick city – to concentrate either upon global flows of information, or upon local appropriations (in urban areas or elsewhere). Through such a dualistic view – which has sometimes been superficially resolved through the concept of glocalization – a lot of interesting and meaningful relationships tend to slip away. This is paradoxical, since one might presume that it is precisely within these intermediary spaces that issues of mediation may prevail. Mediation represents what Johan Fornäs (2000) has termed "the crucial in between".

There are of course exceptions to the rule. For instance, the Swedish *Popular Passages* project (cf Becker et al 2001, 2002), which has analyzed the circulation of people, goods and media within and through a suburban shopping centre, has done a great deal to unveil the infrastructures and cultural logics that bind individual consumers to the communication geographies of the city. There are also other studies, which I will return to.

My point of departure is that intermediary communication geographies are crucial not only for the realization of global processes, but also for the stability and material fixity of urban culture. This is to say that they both enable globalization – defined as local experiences of globality – and provide a counterweight to such processes. They have a hidden function as place-makers in the city. On the one hand, they produce certain discernable paths and nodes that link the thick city to a broader urban context. On the other hand, they transfigure the concept city into more concrete sites of experience and social practice. As a way of understanding these processes, I will develop two concepts. The first concept, *texture*, has been used by for example Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre – but only in passing. I will define texture as "the communicative fabric of space" (see also Jansson 2006). The second concept, *fixture*, points to the symbolic and material nodes through which urban textures are both linked to global circuits, and anchored in local culture.

Texture

"The act of walking", Michel de Certeau (1984: 97) argues, "is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered". This parallel is built upon three criteria. First, walking is a process of *appropriation* of the urban topography, just as the speaker appropriates language. Secondly, it is the *acting-out* of the place, just as the speech act is an acting-out of language. Thirdly, the mobile character of walking implies *relations* among differentiated positions, just as verbal enunciation actualizes contracts between speakers. Walking, then, can be understood as "a space of enunciation" (ibid: 98). It is a space that emerges through the interplay between the possibilities provided by the urban system, and the selective actualization of these possibilities on behalf of pedestrians. It is a space of

both reproduction and change. Urban movements may on the one hand produce durable paths, and on the other hand subvert the dominant order:

> If it is true that *forests of gestures* are manifest in the streets, their movement cannot be captured in a picture, nor can the meaning of their movements be circumscribed in a text. Their rhetorical transplantation carries away and displaces the analytical, coherent, proper meanings of urbanism; it constitutes a "wandering of the semantic" produced by masses that make some parts of the city disappear and exaggerate others, distorting it, fragmenting it, and diverting it from its immobile order (ibid: 102, emphasis in original).

De Certeau's perspective illuminates, at the most fundamental level, the close interplay between space and communication, through which a city is produced. And the argument does not restrict itself to the act of walking. We may understand all kinds of spatial practice occurring in the city as a "wandering of the semantic", making the urban landscape thick of meaning, while at the same time impossible to fully represent. The bustling activity of the city cannot be translated, nor controlled. The only way to reach a sense of semantic control, as we saw, is through distanciation and abstraction, turning the city into a visual object. But the satisfaction generated from such a perspective, de Certeau (ibid: 93) contends, is based on "an oblivion and a misunderstanding of practices". The texturology of the panorama, or the concept city, is just a simulacrum.

It is not exactly clear what de Certeau means when he uses the terms *texture* and *texturology* – and he uses them only in the very opening of *Walking in the City*. It seems like they refer to the visible patterns of inscriptions and variations of the city's topography that emerge through distanciation. But at the same time de Certeau insists on comparing these abstract patterns with a text – let alone a "false" one. Hence, there is no clear distinction between text and texture (see also the critique in Reynolds and Fitzpatrick 1999). This, I think, reveals a limitation to de Certeau's view. The parallel between the city and language is brilliant in pointing out the communicative character of spatial practice, and the spatiality of communication. But it leaves out the material, sensory and emotional richness that exceeds the realm of speaking and thinking. To understand walking as a speech act is not to understand the full experience of walking. Nor is it to understand how certain spatial practices become attached to certain places and material infrastructures. In order to understand the "meaning of the city" we must think of it as something more than ongoing text-production. We may rather think of it in terms of *texture*.

The term texture derives from the Latin *textere*, meaning "to weave", and refers to both the thing woven (textile), and *the feel of the weave* (texture) (Adams et al 2001: xiii). Texture thus helps us get past not only the commonplace notion of space as a neutral container, but also the more culturalist bias towards space as a "wandering of the semantic". Through texture we can understand urban space in a way that captures its communicative density, but at the same time allows us to point out more durable socio-material structures. This is to say that texture directs our attention to durability and repetition (which does not imply stasis, however) rather than to ephemerality and flux. A similar view is suggested by Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space*:

> Paths are more important than the traffic they bear, because they are what endures in the form of the reticular patterns left by animals, both wild and domestic, and by people (in and around the houses of village or small town, as in the town's immediate environs). Always distinct and clearly indicated, such traces embody the 'values' assigned to particular routes: danger, safety, waiting, promise. This graphic aspect, which was obviously not apparent to the original 'actors' but which becomes quite clear with the aid of modern-day cartography, has more in common with a spider's web than with a drawing or plan. Could it be called a text, or a message? Possibly, but the analogy would

serve no particularly useful purpose, and it would make more sense to speak of texture rather than of texts in this connection. […] Time and space are not separable within a texture so conceived: space implies time, and vice versa (Lefebvre 1974/1991: 118).

Lefebvre departs from the observation that the repetition of practices produces meaningful paths and inscriptions that are at the same time material and potentially graphic. This is the very same observation that leads de Certeau to speak of the concept city – the city of cartographers and planners. But whereas de Certeau sees the illusiveness of such a perspective, Lefebvre sees an organic evolution of materialized meaning. Lefebvre does not link texture to visual abstraction and forgetting, which is a viewpoint closer to his understanding of *conceived space*, but to an intermediary realm of social structuration and sedimentation. In Lefebvre, texture thus closes the gap between the thick city and the concept city, rather than produces it. We can see this in a discussion of spatial architectonics:

> A spatial work (monument or architectural project) attains a complexity fundamentally different from the complexity of a text, whether prose or poetry. As I pointed out earlier, what we are concerned with here is not texts but texture. We already know that a texture is made up of a usually rather large space covered by networks or webs; monuments constitute the strong points, nexuses or anchors of such webs. The actions of social practice are expressible but not explicable through discourse; they are, precisely, *acted* – and not *read*. A monumental work, like a musical one, does not have a 'signified' (or 'signifieds'); rather, it has a horizon of meaning: a specific or indefinite multiplicity of meanings, a shifting hierarchy in which now one, now another meaning comes momentarily to the fore, by means of – and for the sake of – a particular action (ibid: 222).

Texture is here understood as an intermediary concept, bridging the dualities between material and symbolic spaces, and between social practices and more solid spatial preconditions. The webs that Lefebvre refers to may be either symbolic or material, or a combination of both. The crucial point is that their meanings emerge through social enactment. Meaningful textures are like a network of well-travelled paths, made-up not only through spatial practices themselves, but also through the circulation of goods and information, whose mobilities are, in turn, produced through an interplay between structure and agency.

By extension, Lefebvre's notion of texture (although not very elaborated by himself) enables us to see urban space anew, and to ask new questions. In particular, I see great potential here to develop the urban culturalist perspective recently proposed by Gaonkar and Povinelli (2003) in a special issue of *Public Culture*. What they advocate is a focus upon the *materialities of form* that emerge from, and carry, cultural flows, notably in cities, and make "things" recognizable. In accordance with this claim, I argue, texture is precisely the kind of concept that leads us to think about urban *circulation* and *transfiguration*, rather than meaning and translation (see ibid: 387).

This brings us back to the problematic issue of intermediary urban space, and its vagueness. If textures are to be understood as meaningful socio-material webs, can there be any other textures than those we see, or otherwise perceive through our senses? If some textures are recognizable only through spatial abstraction, can they still be understood as textures? My point here is that the very intermediary character of textures implies that they are not often seen, nor problematized, but taken for granted. Nevertheless, through structured sets of spatial resources and conventions they guide our social practices in ways that produce particular "cultures of circulation" (see Lee and LiPuma 2002). For instance, as Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) famously has argued, technological infrastructures not only enable certain forms of communication, but also imposes the adjustment of spatial practices according to the anticipated presence and influence of these media. In the mediatized city people expect others

to carry mobile telephones (turned on or off, depending on region) (Höflich 2005); public behaviour is managed according to the presence of surveillance technology (Graham 1999), and so on. However, new media do not produce new, independent textures. Rather, the newness of new media lies in their capacity to evoke a novel textural experience, making textures visible. As the cultural forms of new media are always an outcome of "remediation", their socio-spatial impact can be understood as "retexturation" – a process through which older forms of urban circulation are both rearticulated and transfigured.

This is to say that there is a social logic to the fact that intermediary textures operate largely unnoticed. We use them and feel them, but do not think very much of them. If we did, they would loose their intermediary character.

However, this is also a relative fact. There are for instance people whose profession it is to operate and maintain these textural webs and resources – people whose work the everyday citizen take for granted. To a great extent they occupy Erving Goffman's back regions. Just like there are janitors and scrub-women who have "a clear perception of the small doors that lead to the back regions of business buildings and are intimately familiar with the profane transportation system for secretly transporting dirty cleaning equipment, large stage props, and themselves" (Goffman 1959: 125), there are people who know where the telephone station is located in a neighbourhood, or how to find the fastest way between downtown newsstands. These people constitute the maintenance crew of intermediary communication geographies – and from their viewpoint the intermediary is both a visible and a thick space.

Fixture

Still, it seems a bit exaggerated that the practices organizing a bustling city could be uniformly characterized by their blindness. This is the view taken by Michel de Certeau (1984: 93) when he argues that city walkers make use of, and produce, spaces that cannot be seen, as long as the walkers do not transform themselves into voyeurs. If we borrow Lefebvre's terminology, however, intermediary spaces are not merely conceived spaces, but *lived spaces*. It is not only monuments who anchor the cultural networks of a city. There are many other determinants for how the movements of form take shape, and how people navigate their urban minds and bodies. And these *fixtures* must not too easily be reduced to conceptual entities. Rather, they evolve through sedimentation, binding the thick city and the concept city closer together.

Urban fixtures can be understood as the strong points in urban textures, or as the determinants of pathways in webs of circulation. These strong points always evolve through history, which is to say that they are recognized as parts of tradition or institutional life. They cannot be invented or invoked, but emerge through a "thickening of space through time" (cf Crang and Travlou 2001: 167f). We might say that urban fixtures emerge through a solidification of certain nodes within the thick city. On the one hand, these nodes produce and are produced through increased circulation of material and/or hermeneutic energies in and around certain places. In this way, they structure urban practices and movements in a way that make thick spaces comprehensible. On the other hand, by means of cultural recognition, their solidification underpins the composition of the concept city. Fixtures are in this latter sense important to the visual and cartographic understanding of the city as a social space.

In a sociological account of urban culture Gerald Suttles (1984) argues that the understanding of culture would benefit from a material turn, which would imply that more attention was to be paid to the "cumulative texture" of local culture. Suttles' argument is that the durability of a city can be understood largely through the materialized expressions of its historical values and narratives. As examples of such expressions he mentions not only urban monuments and museum collections, but also more mundane expressions, such as street names, restaurants, local sports teams, and what people put on their car bumpers and T-shirts.

These objective artefacts, he argues, "give local culture much of its stability and continuing appeal" (ibid: 284). Through selective tradition, certain expressions will live on as a source of collective understanding. Others will fade away. Yet other cultural elements, once regarded as quite ordinary and undistinguished, will be transfigured into more enduring values or narratives.

What Suttles refers to as a "cumulative texture" may just as well be termed fixture. The kind of sedimentation he outlines is best understood as the spatial production of collective memory and belonging. Such processes always involve a solidifying reaction between material, symbolic and imaginary aspects (see also Borer 2006). The notion of fixture leads us further to an understanding of intermediary space as a realm of socio-cultural dialectic – a realm in which organic solidification at a certain point is turned into abstraction. Memories of the local past are reproduced and fixed through materializations within the urban fabric – named monuments, buildings, streets, public centres, etc. Or they are re-enacted through rituals, festivals, and events, attached to certain recognizable time-spaces.

The strength of these fixtures depends upon the social relationship between naming and place-making, between concept and social life. In order to work as a node for circulation, this relationship must be widely recognized as meaningful to local identity. In addition, if it is to endure, the spatial marker must be anchored in a more general moral space. Therefore, as Yi-Fu Tuan has pointed out, there are only few spatial markers that can survive:

> The more specific and representational the object the less it is likely to survive: since the end of British imperialism in Egypt, the statues of Queen Victoria no longer command worlds but merely stand in the way of traffic. In the course of time, most public symbols lose their status as places and merely clutter up space (Tuan 1977: 164).

In spite of their time-biased nature, fixtures may thus come and go. Their structuring power both solidifies and dissolves over time. It takes enormous efforts to invoke new urban fixtures at the conceptual level, through for example place-marketing, or what Tuan (1974, 1977) has described as boosterism (see also the classical writings of Wohl and Strauss 1958, Lynch 1960). While modern cities must create and nurture eligible symbols in order to become recognized in the global market-place, enduring place-values cannot be too alien to urban life forms. Place marketing always runs the risk of enhancing the gap between the concept city and the thick city.

This is a reminder that the thick city and the concept city must not be regarded as separate entities, but rather as two aspects of the continuous urban circulation of forms and meaning. An even clearer picture of this condition can be achieved if we consider what Will Straw (2005) calls the *pathways of cultural movement*, and especially his discussion of *scenes*. Analyzing urban cultural scenes is a way of opening and visualizing intermediary communication geographies. Possibly, we might understand scenes as a form of urban fixture. They link the thickness of cultural communities, or subcultures, to the fluid cosmopolitanism of urban life: As Straw (2002: 248) puts it: "To the former, it adds a sense of dynamism; to the latter, a recognition of the inner circles and weighty histories which give each seemingly fluid surface a secret order." This is to say that scenes, and in particular the particular nodal places through which they require a material form, mediate between the rapid turnover of cultural novelty and the sediments of cultural artefacts and values. On the one hand, they circulate meanings and link the city to global circuits. On the other hand, they produce patterns, or textures, to which local practices, itineraries and affinities become fixed.

Scenes are thus the perfect illustration of how fixtures, as nodes for material and hermeneutic energies, may enable globalization, while at the same time reproducing the city as a repository of memory. Characterized by their vagueness, embeddedness and elasticity,

they can still make us glimpse the social and material order of urban communication geographies.

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