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Territoriology and the study of public place

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Introduction

The notion of territory has attracted increasing attention in several different disciplines during the last decade – perhaps mostly so in political geography (Elden 2010; Painter 2010; Antonsich 2011), but also in the social sciences more generally (Klauser 2016; Halvorsen 2019). In this chapter, we argue that urban design, and not least the study of public spaces, could benefit from familiarising ourselves with what we might call a territoriological perspective (Brighenti 2010a; Kärrholm 2012; Brighenti and Kärrholm 2020). The idea of territoriology, i.e. a more general and interdisciplinary approach to territorial phenomena, has a long history in research and goes back to at least the 1960s (Hediger 1961). In our version, we have sketched a more relational and neo-vitalistic approach aimed at understanding territorial productions as the outcome, always provisional and in-the-making, of imaginal and figurational forces of social life as they get incorporated into a set of materials. We have thus given emphasis to the complexity of territory-making acts and activities, which also seem to call for the development of a rich vocabulary of territorialising factors as well as a pluralistic approach to methodology.

Territoriality and urban design: a short introduction

The relation between the material formation of public space and its social use has a long history in the field of urban design, ranging from William H. Whyte's (2001[1980]) time-lapse studies of street life in 1970s-New York City, and Jan Gehl's (2011[1971]) early studies of Copenhagen, and on to more recent theoretical excursions into urban design such as Kim Dovey's (2016) assemblage perspective or Vikas Mehta's (2013) different takes on the sociality of public space. In urban design studies, focusing on socio-material associations, territoriality has however played a more limited role. The concept has historically been used in a quite conventional and restricted sense, seen either as a purely behavioural phenomenon (Newman 1973) or as a process of privatisation and property control (Habraken 1998). Territoriality and its relation to architecture and urban design was, in the wake of Oscar Newman's (1973) *Defensible space*, much debated during the 1970s and 1980s (Cupers 2020). Besides advocating

a hierarchical spatial structure of the neighbourhood (justified by the claim of a human need for territorial control), Newman's book also played an important role in establishing a behavioural understanding of territoriality as the dominant factor in the field of urban design. In fact, the view of territoriality as a basic human behaviour relating to personal control does to some extent still dominate the urban design discourse today (e.g. Mehta 2013; Rollwagen 2016). In the last decade or two we have, however, also seen a growing interest in territoriality going in an almost opposite direction, i.e. a view on territorialisation not as an isolated process of privatisation, but as a fruitful way of addressing the complexity of public space. Rather than focusing on the control of space by this or that actor alone, it looks both at how each territory is (by necessity) constituted by a heterogeneous variety of different parties, and at how these territorialisations then in turn relate to each other and co-exist and reform in different ways. In studies of public spaces and events, from riverbanks (Brighenti and Mattiucci 2012), through playgrounds (Magnusson 2016), local events (Citroni 2017), squares (Kärrholm 2005, 2017), to tree-worship (Keswani 2017), street football (Paiva and Cachinho 2022) and the establishment of informal pathways (Paramita and Schneider 2018), we have thus seen a more practice-oriented take on territories, focusing on their ongoing and interrelated production in empirical, situated contexts. Other studies along these lines include investigations into the territorialisation of public space by retail (Kärrholm 2012), as well as specific studies of urban parks (Cheetham et al. 2018), graffiti (Brighenti 2010b), pop-up retail (Shi et al. 2019) and studies of agonistic street spaces in Hanoi (Manfredini and Ta 2017). Altogether, these studies share the approach of discussing the territoriality of urban places beyond singular dichotomisations such as inclusion-exclusion, public-private or formal-informal, focusing instead on different living and formative relations, both within and beyond a specific territorial production. As we shall see, this approach also comes with some meaningful methodological consequences.

A territoriological approach: methodological notations

Territories are often (albeit not always) related to place, and indeed public places are often especially rich in terms of territorial productions. In fact, at centrally located squares and streets, we can often find and trace a palimpsest of different territories and territorial orders. Different persons, vehicles, stores, cafés, etc., claim different spaces, either instantly, rhythmically, or for longer slots, producing associations between different spaces, practices, and meanings. Some of these territorialisations are subtle and low-key, others are visible and of utmost importance, and some are a combination of both. For instance, properly understanding the territorial boundary between the pavement and the road, can be a matter of life and death. The built environment – through kerbs, walls, lines, paving, markers and doors – plays an important role in the territorial productions of the urban landscape, shaping and stabilising territorial effects.

Looking at how urban design can act upon these territorial formations of an urban, everyday landscape of power, we need to study ongoing urban processes of territorialisation – But, how do we do that? In our own studies, we have used different techniques. Although most of our efforts have included classical ethnographical methods, such as observations, on-site interviews, walk-alongs and partaking in the different activities of our informants, we have also experimented with mixed-method approaches. In order to trace territorial productions, you need to follow specific situations, but you must also account for the ecology in which these situations sit. This means that we also need to account for the different temporal and spatial scales that a process of territorialisation draws from – and this cannot be done with

traditional ethnographical methods alone. We need to look beyond the here and now. In a study of an urban square, one of us thus followed up on a 35-year-old study, aiming to see how the usage and power relations of a specific square had changed over time (Kärrholm 2015, 2017). Following the older study meant photographing and counting people and objects, doing structured observations, classifying and clocking different activities and then comparing the results with the older study. Furthermore, it included studies of newspaper archives (tracking the changing discourse of the press over different decades), studies of how different shops and services changed (through information in old phone books and historical photos), and the historical study of urban statistics, plans and maps. All these different methods and techniques allowed for discussion of not only the territorial productions on the square now and then, but also how these productions related to changes in the morphology and demography of the city, down to the changing material culture and technology apparent in the everyday use of the square.

In another study (Brighenti and Kärrholm 2017; Citroni and Kärrholm 2019; Kärrholm and Wirdelöv 2019), we looked at the fragmentation of the public spaces of a neighbourhood during a period of almost 50 years. Here, longer interviews with long- and short-time residents were of the essence. We also worked with cognitive mapping, where the informants mapped what places they used, what names they gave to different subareas, their views on these areas, etc. Again, however, the real findings came from combining these interviews with other kinds of investigations, like the study of local newspapers, unstructured observation studies, participatory observations during neighbourhood events, etc. In short, it was only through the combination of different methods and techniques that the territorial transformation of public space and its use could be traced, and different territorialisations could be related to one another.

These examples are in no way exhaustive of the different methods and techniques we have used, and certainly not of the whole array of available methods and techniques. To follow the territory through its inherent territorialisation processes is tricky since their production depends both on things that people never can tell you (and that you somehow must observe or find out for yourself), and on things that you could never observe or deduce (but that you need to be told). Every study needs its own specific assemblage of methods and techniques, and how to craft these different method assemblages is important to keep as an open-ended and ongoing question (Law 2004). Rather than presenting a standard toolbox of methods or setting our own methods and techniques as a model (which they are not), we will here present four different themes that all lie at the core of a territoriological perspective, and give some methodological pointers in relation to each.

A time-space attitude

Territory has often been defined through space, but territorial production is in fact as much temporal as it is spatial: territories produce and stabilise certain time-spaces (Kärrholm 2017). Urban territories are often regulated both spatially and temporally: a pedestrian crossing might have a traffic light, a shop has opening hours, a parking space can have a parking metre, and benches can be designed for longer or shorter moments of comfort (where leaning benches is an example of the latter). Territories without formal temporal regulation often have a certain expected duration associated with their use, and this expectance is to some extent also stabilised by design, or integrated with the material aspects of our existence. A traffic cone tells us that it is a temporary occlusion, a smoking break has a certain expected duration connected to the approximate time that it takes to smoke a cigarette. Mobile phones

have affected the sociality of public space, and also the typical duration of a short break, i.e. the temporary claim of space, which is aligned with the duration of a call, a text or a quick photo shoot (Hatuka and Toch 2016). Furthermore, rhythms and territories often go hand in hand. Territories can be produced through repetitive actions: the bird keeps on singing to mark its territory, the museum guard patrols her rooms, and by keep coming back for a coffee and a sandwich, I confirm the existence of my favourite café. In fact, we can go as far as to suggest that all rhythms are territorial in some way or another (Brighenti and Kärrholm 2018), and materialities are as much riddled with time as with space. In this sense, the different rhythm-analytical methods – as, for example, assembled by Lyon (2019) – could be inspirational for a territorialologist, and so could the different techniques developed through the time-geography of Torsten Hägerstrand (2009). All rhythms are territorial in one way or another, and rhythms are always part of a territorialisation process. But there are other aspects too, and this takes us to the next point.

Relational but stable

Because territorial productions are relational and fluid, they depend on specific situations: a strip of grass can, for example, at least temporarily be transformed into a parking spot by the actions of a single disobedient driver. However, as mentioned, it is often through design or through recurrent and rhythmical use that territorial productions become salient and strong. For urban design, it is important to study how territories stabilize, and how different forms of stabilisation make use of materialities in different ways. Which territorialisations are we supporting through our design? And how are we doing it? Different territories depend on different modes of stabilisations: for us to rely on a bench (a territory clearly associated with sitting), it needs to be designed in relation to our body, and it needs to keep its own geometrical form and shape relatively stable over time. The territory is, in this case, made stable through the association of a shape and a body (or, through what Law [2002] has called ‘Euclidean stability’).

A parking lot also needs shape stability, but apart from that it also needs to maintain a quite complex network organisation of different actors, i.e. a ‘topological network’ stability (Law 2002), where the relations between cars, parking metres, signs, traffic guards, etc., are kept firm enough to sustain the activity of parking over time. A territory of a more fluid kind, such as a meeting place, might instead need a much looser network relation, where actors can come and go depending on the situation – and this is also why the variety of different kinds of meeting places is so rich: sometimes you need a clearly visible place with a landmark, sometimes you want to meet more discretely. You can pick almost any place as a meeting place, still (and often dependent on different material prerequisites, such as location in the city, recognisability, etc.) some places turn out to be more attractive than others.

A fourth kind of territorial stabilisation that we have discussed recently (Brighenti and Kärrholm 2023) is crystallisation. Crystal stabilisation refers to the way in which existing forms might affect the way in which future territorial productions can develop, i.e. setting a certain privileged direction and rhythm for further growth. A crystal draws its stability from the stacking of similar (socio-material) forms, and although urban morphologies such as the development of an urban block structure might come to mind, we can perhaps also take the open-air market as an example. The market might grow around a specific nucleus, such as a square or a street and, as it becomes wider, extending itself step by step (or stall by stall), a certain pattern of growth relating to the stacking of similar entities, manifests itself.

Elements of urban design can play different roles for different forms or kinds of territorial stabilisation, and although these roles need to be investigated empirically, it is important

to understand that different kinds of design might invest more in one form of stabilisation (material, organisational, fluid, crystal, etc.) than another. This fact might have noteworthy consequences for the way in which social life can unfold in these places. Are we contributing to a process of crystallisation and an increasing precision of morphogenetic futures? Are we investing in well-organised and network-dependent territories, or are we opening up towards more open-ended (but less controllable) associations through investment in more fluid ways of stabilisation? Studying the different forms of stabilisation can be tricky, as it requires us to tackle processes of different speed and duration. In this vein, processes of different temporal scales also require different methods and techniques: for instance, studying the crystallisation of urban growth might call for the historical study of maps through decades, or even centuries. A more fluid stabilisation accomplished by the association of a specific territory to a certain territorial type might be only a matter of seconds, and relates more to living memories and ~~their relation to~~ contemporary imaginaries.

Scale alignment and scale production

Territorial productions are never defined by elements at the scale of urban design alone: all territories, in other words, reach beyond their own borders, since they draw on, and might also align with, objects of noticeably different sizes and scales. Scaling can, in general terms, be described as a graduation of orders, or spaces, and scales are often used as a way of taking measure: something is big or small, negligible or important, only in relation to something else, under some respect or capacity. For scales to be produced, one needs at least two different levels of complexities of the components producing those effects – where the effects of different complexities can be seen as constituting the different scales (Caniggia and Maffei 2001). Different territorial productions do always draw on similar phenomena, and might also be co-producers of scales. For instance, if I claim a spot on a park bench to drink my takeaway coffee, such a territory is sustained by the existence of the coffee shop around the corner, which in turn might be sustained by its location in the urban grid, by the workers of the nearby office area that buy enough coffee to sustain the business as well as, of course, by the global trading and logistics routes that allow for coffee to be delivered from another part of the world. In an interesting article, Ger and Kravets (2009) tell us about how the introduction of teabags in Turkey altered the territorial production of urban space: as the tea bag replaced the old samovar as the only available drinking alternative, tea got territorialised to new spaces and new moments of the day. It also opened up the possibility of multiple choices of tea, and for other drinks as well: the ubiquitous, constantly available samovar was replaced by specific tea-drinking places and tea times, i.e. the production of new specific territorial sorts to be reproduced, both inside workplaces and in public space (Ger and Kravets 2009: 199; see also Kärholm 2019). To capture this change we need to study urban transformation processes from the perspective of different scales, including changes in workplace behaviours, the material culture of specific ~~tea~~ places, etc. As different scales are produced and aligned, tensions between stable and unexpected aspects of these relations also ensue – these are what Tsing (2011) has called ‘creative frictions’. Urban design plays its own part in affording these possible overlaps and frictions, which also takes us to our final point.

Complexity and interstitial qualities

The same square, street and bench can, and is, often used as a stage for several different territorialisations. Such complexity (and the interstices produced through it) are important to

acknowledge for an urban designer when it comes to asking ourselves: How can we design spaces affording territorial overlapping and multiplicity? A certain degree of territorial sorting and superpositioning could very well bring about a much greater degree of accessibility. Several territorial orders also indicate several possibilities; conversely, the danger of an exclusive, one-sided use does not just lie in territorial homogenisation (of one territory becoming more and more exclusive), or in a strongly hierarchical (vertical) territoriality, but also in single-layered territorial productions, corresponding to an urban place lacking multiple superimposed layers, and consequently a more impoverished, less 'biodiverse' place. Public space should be regarded as the result of not just all the territorial productions within a certain place, but also all the frictions and interstices that inevitably follow. It is often through in-between times and spaces that new territorial associations and investments are made. In more homogenous spaces, such as in shopping malls, in-between moments (taking a rest from shopping) are often saturated with associations related to further consumption ('Take a break in our new café'). When interstices become colonised, the potential innovative or 'odd' behaviours, might be hampered. Under these conditions, public space declines, becoming at best a stale representation of its former shape. Territorial complexity and the publicness it produces thus depend both on the richness of polyrhythmic territorial productions (the actual multitude) and on the creative frictions (and virtual multitude) that these productions might afford. To look for territorial complexity is thus not just to track territorial productions (including their rhythms and scales) and different forms of stabilisation. It is just as important to develop methodological techniques that might help us to map interstices and anomalies. Here, artistic methods or ethnomethodological breaching experiments could be of interest. What is tolerated and what is possible? How do people react to unexpected interventions? By asking these questions, urban design preoccupations can be tackled more sustainedly *in vivo*.

Concluding remarks

Above, we have tried to highlight some of the peculiarities of new territorialological approaches, hopefully useable when analysing and designing public space. An important part of territorialology consists of theoretical and methodological curiosity, where ongoing experimentation and the crafting of methods reinforce one another. The messiness of public space is not there to be simply 'tamed' by concepts or methodological ready-mades, reducing it to static frameworks or orderly schemes; rather, we need always new tools to deal with its changing relations, its messiness and unpredictability – as well as to understand the roles that material design can play in these ongoing processes. Territories are alive and legion, and in order to capture the evolving urban life and the matters of our cities (as these can only be understood together), we need to attend to their ongoing formations and relations with care and ingenuity. For a territorialologist, this also means that we need to follow different paths in parallel: methods must be plural and they must enable us to study both the specificities of different situations and how these situations connect to times and spaces beyond the place at hand.

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