

Introduction

Researching the social and spatial life of the city

In his well-known work on 'Species of Spaces' (originally published in 1974 as *Espèces d'espaces*), Georges Perec sets out a number of 'practical exercises' for studying the city. 'The street', he writes (Perec, 1997, p. 50): 'try to observe the street, what it's made of, what it's used for. The people in the street. The cars.'

'Decipher a bit of town', he continues (ibid., p. 51): 'deduce the obvious facts: the obsession with ownership, for example.' And: 'The people in the streets: where are they coming from? Where are they going to? Who are they?...Try to classify the people: those who live locally and those who don't live locally' (ibid., pp. 52-3).

'Decipher a bit of the town. Its circuits: why do the buses go from this place to that? Who chooses the routes, and by what criteria?' He goes on (writing, remember, in 1974): 'Wax sentimental over the memory of buses that had a platform at the back, the shape of the tickets, the ticket collector with the little machine hooked in his belt.' The city of Perec's imagination and observation was Paris, but this nostalgic moment from the early 1970s still resonates in London thirty-five years later with a mayor elected on a half-promise to bring back the buses with a platform on the back. The larger resonance, in view of the papers collected below, is with Perec's diverse interest in the social and spatial stuff of the city. His focus moves between the material of the street and the different people on it, patterns of movement and boundaries of ownership; taking the bus evokes both the abstraction of the traffic planner and the memory of the bus conductor.

An archivist ('try to classify the people') as well as an author, Perec was asked to write *Species of Spaces* by a friend trained as an architect, and this piece reads as a cross between social science, urban design and sheer play. It is a vivid example of what happens when different ways of seeing – the sociological, the architectural, the imaginative – are brought to bear on the city. As such it would be a good text for any apprentice urbanist, speaking as it does to the importance of looking, recording, asking questions, making connections, moving between the shape of the streets and the people inhabiting them, between form and use: working the joints that articulate the spatial, the physical and the social. It could be a protocol for the study of the city as an interdisciplinary, and often painstaking, practice.

Different ways of studying the city inform the pieces that follow. These are 'working papers' whose concern is to work out, or work at, or work through approaches to research, analysis and argument that move between techniques of recording, registers of telling, ways of showing. As objects of study cities are marked by the contrast between more or less fixed physical forms and the unfixable nature of urban social life and spatial practice. Yet even this basic distinction comes apart when one takes a closer look or a longer view. Juliet Davis's work on the site of the London 2012 Olympics uses the static device of the map to track a changing physical environment over time. In Jamie Keddie's account of the gentrification of Bermondsey, the built form of the urban fabric might not change even as its use, its value and its meaning shift radically: the downbeat typology of inner city pub, warehouse or factory reborn as upscale housing. Suzanne Hall's survey of the shopfronts along Walworth Road in south London opens onto an extended geography of migration and connection, at the same time showing how otherwise mobile bodies fix themselves in place through the steady occupation, over time and at their favourite table, of an everyday space such as the workers' café.

In his topography Perec was struck by the way space is 'broken up and...diversified' (ibid., p. 6). Urban

spaces are broken up by form (buildings, physical and legal boundaries, roads and other infrastructure), and diversified by practice (different kinds of use and different kinds of users). To understand the city in spatial and social terms – always and at the same time – is to see it, simply, as complicated. The spatial rationalisation of the masterplan and the social rationalisation of the census resolve urban complexity at a certain scale: these are necessary moments in city-making as in urban analysis, but an approach that seeks to integrate the social and the spatial will also be attentive to the way that cities are continually *disintegrated*. Social and spatial methodologies both are given to drawing boundaries – whether around groups or around sites – and the papers in this collection are concerned with the marking and crossing of such boundaries. Gunter Gassner's piece on planning and policy debates over London's skyline shows some of what it is at stake in the art of a drawing a line. In her study of Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, Corinna Dean explores a locally designated public space inside a national cultural institution, staging international artists underwritten by a multinational corporate sponsor – and, as evinced by the photographs she trawls on the *flickr* site, a space that is consumed not only on the spot but also via a virtual gallery of 'curated' images.

The authors – all doctoral researchers in the LSE's Cities Programme – find themselves working within and against their disciplinary training and professional formation. One of the critical challenges in seeking to work across methodological boundaries in this way is that of avoiding the piecemeal, the gestural, the slapdash. This is the challenge of doing inventive research that is also careful and consistent, which takes different methods seriously and does not trade coherence for easy eclecticism. In the particular context of this collection, it involves using visual material and visual argument in a way that goes beyond the descriptive or the decorative. Different pieces engage with the visual as an object and as a technique of analysis. Part of this task is documentary: Juliet Davis seeks to record the Olympic site 'use by use, space by space, relocation by relocation'; such mapping is not simply a shorthand means of depicting material sites, but a meticulous longhand rendering of a territory that was largely uncharted, and now has disappeared. For Jamie Keddie, too, broader processes of socio-economic change are readable in the built form of urban neighbourhoods: 'visible' not only in terms of what appears (the high-profile development at Bermondsey Square, with its bars and boutique hotel) but in what vanishes (local pubs that have been demolished, vacated or converted). Suzanne Hall produces different kinds of image – maps, photographs, drawing – based on different scales of observation, in order to capture the social relations and everyday rhythms of the street. In Gunter Gassner's work the skyline appears as both an abstract simplification and a powerful visualisation of the city, especially acute in the context of current debates over building tall in London. And Corinna Dean places a lens on Tate Modern's Turbine Hall in which the space in which art is viewed itself becomes an object of visual consumption.

'Observe the street...try to classify the people...decipher a bit of town.' Such moves between the physical, the social and the spatial speak to the intricate problem that a city is, the necessarily partial ways in which it might be grasped, and the careful work of urban research that aims to reflect the social and spatial life of the city in all its ordinary complexity.

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Reference

Perec, G. (1997). *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*. London: Penguin.