

## Pictures of Cities—Cities in Pictures

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### Introduction

A city is a specific societal environment that consists of both physical and social elements. Designing such an environment follows particular ideological concepts: the environment is planned according to people's perceptions of what a city should look like (see Hirst 2005). However, city planners are not the only people who play a role in designing a city. Everyone who uses the city shapes it to varying degrees. Inhabitants influence a city's appearance with their practices of everyday life—be it work or leisure activities. Visitors contribute by using the city during their visit, a usage that often differs from that of inhabitants. Both visitors and inhabitants are important for cities in two respects: on the one hand, they actively shape the city when they use it, i.e., when they, among other things, create the space by placing objects in relation to living beings—Martina Löw calls this practice spacing—on the basis of processes of memory, perception, and imagination, which Löw calls »Syntheseleistung« (Löw 2001: 159, from now on »synthesis«), and by interacting in this urban space. On the other hand, they serve as a reference for the city's urban planners and decision makers who organize their planning strategies according to the assumed needs of inhabitants and visitors. The planning then finds its physical expression in the urban space—this space is thus associated with images, ideas, etc. To put it in Henri Lefèbvre's terms: a city is a social space that is produced by the society's spatial practices, by representations of space (like urban planners' conceptions of space), and by representational spaces, i.e., the experienced space that is significantly constituted by symbols and images (see Lefèbvre 1991: 38f.). Carrying out an empirical study in Dublin and Gothenburg, I found evidence for three essential ways of constituting a city: by using urban space according to their needs, people shape that

space in specific ways (A), local history is used by urban planners as a strategy to shape future urban design (B), and graffiti is a means to communicate in urban spaces (C). These three findings can be conceptualized with Lefèbvre's three dimensions of social space mentioned above. Using urban space constitutes spatial practices, designing the space by utilizing the city's history is a representation of space, and representational space is created by graffiti, among other things. With the assistance of photographed visual impressions I will now present these findings in more detail after a short methodological note.

### Methodological Note

As soon as a researcher attempts to carry out an empirical analysis of a city and its interrelation with society, he or she is confronted with visual impressions. In the majority of cases, these visual impressions lose importance as the findings are written up, because the social sciences are still very much dominated by texts. This essay<sup>1</sup> is an attempt to take the visual impressions, recorded in photographs, seriously. The photos, all taken during my fieldwork in Dublin and Gothenburg from 2008–2009, are used as empirical data. Their value goes beyond mere illustration. I was inspired by Bazon Brock's 1986 photo essay »Sozio-Design« (Socio-Design) to use photographs in a more prominent way to present research findings. This is my first attempt to present findings by relying mainly on visual data and is thus an experiment. In using the essay as form, I refer to Theodor W. Adorno's notion of the essay: »Therefore the law of the innermost form of the essay is heresy. By transgressing the orthodoxy of thought, something becomes visible in the object which it is orthodoxy's secret purpose to keep invisible« (Adorno 1984: 171).

To my mind, the analysis of complex social phenomena benefits from alternative forms of presentation. This photo essay is one such alterna-

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1 For an exemplary description of the essay as specific form of writing (and thinking), see Adorno 1988, for an English translation see Adorno 1984.

tive form of presenting the interrelation of cities, urban spaces, and societies.

### A. People Shape Urban Space—Spatial Practices



Älvrummet

*Älvrummet* in Gothenburg is an information center that presents developments about Gothenburg's urban planning and that is further repurposed as recreational space. People make use of the existing physical elements—namely the building, the wooden stairs, and the lawn—and arrange themselves relationally to other people and living beings (such as dogs or birds) and objects to constitute this recreational urban space via the practice of spacing. In combination with certain memories, individual forms of perception, and imagination, *Älvrummet* becomes a particular local space imbued with an intrinsic logic and emotionally and physically bound to this place and its people.



**Flea market in Haga**

Flea market in Haga. Haga is one of Gothenburg's central quarters and has become a major tourist attraction after going through a process of gentrification. Tourists gathering at the flea market constitute the space as one of vitality, recreation, and social mingling, whereas inhabitants passing by or watching it from the windows might create this space as one that displays urban vitality by concealing social inequality and processes of displacement.



**Temple Bar Cultural Night 2008**

*Temple Bar Cultural Night 2008*—a cultural event for tourists and inhabitants to celebrate Dublin’s cultural amenities. Visitors and inhabitants alike use the urban space for cultural activities and for exploring cultural

institutions. During this event, the urban space is constituted in a particular way that is different from the everyday space. Different people use the space in varying ways, and thereby the processes of spacing differ. Through practices that are characteristic of performing and watching cultural events, space is thematically, locally, and temporally limited. In addition, people not taking part in the *Cultural Night* constitute a different space that is nonetheless unlike everyday space as they include cultural performances, performers, and visitors—all extraordinary elements in the practice of spacing.



**Excise Walk in Dublin**

Excise Walk in Dublin on a weekday at noon—it is located in Dublin’s regenerated docklands area, a plaza near the *International Financial Services Centre*. Here again, the importance of people and objects for constituting



urban space is visible. Formerly a blue-collar worker's district, the Docklands' space on a weekday at lunchtime is nowadays mainly made up of white, middle-aged business-men—as seen in the photograph—who perceive their constructed and social surroundings in a certain way. Additionally, all other people present include these men in their spacing practices and therewith create an urban space very different from a long gone age.





**Spontkajen**

Spontkajen: a newly designed boardwalk in Gothenburg's docklands, Norra Älvstranden. The docklands are located at an estuary facing the North Sea and are now a place for comparatively expensive apartments

and the technology park *Lindholmen Science Park*. Spontkajen is used as sidewalk—and reclaimed as recreational space that might otherwise be lacking in the apartment buildings next to it. Different spaces interfere with each other and become visible in this photo: first, the man in the deck chair creates a recreational space with the help of the objects around him—the wooden boardwalk, the deck chair he brought with him, the water, the buildings, the sculpture, the lantern, not least the sun, but also the people. Second, the people toward the back of the photo each create their own spaces—of shopping, exercise, just walking, or business—and thereby use the same objects, but because the synthesis differs, the spaces are different. Some of them might remember the docklands as a shipyard industry location, some might perceive sun and water as signs of summer, and another might constitute the docklands' space as one of decline.

### **B. Local History and Urban Design—Representations of Space**



*chq*, Custom House Quay, Dublin

The façade of the shopping center *chq* at Custom House Quay in Dublin's docklands is representative of the city's strategy of shaping a new urban design on the basis of specific local history. The building was originally a tobacco store with cellars to store wine. Because it is protected as a historic monument, the façade received a modern touch with the help of glass, allowing the old relicts to shine through. This integration of the past becomes visually accessible for passersby, thus forcing them to integrate it in their practices of spacing and evoking particular understandings of past and present that are important for synthesis.



**Smithfield Horse Market, Dublin**

The rejuvenated urban quarter Smithfield, with newly designed apartment buildings, still plays host to the traditional *Smithfield Horse Market* every first Sunday of the month. This is an example of a conflict situa-



tion between traditionalists and current city planners. As the latter try to ban this aspect of Dublin's history, a history that is actually remembered and integrated in the city's identity, the former fight for their right to remain in this urban space. Thus, it is also an ideological conflict carried out in the physical environment.



**Norra Älvstranden in Gothenburg**

Norra Älvstranden in Gothenburg: Eriksberghallen, a building that was part of the old Eriksberg Dockyards, has been re-used as part of the *Quality Hotel 11 Gothenburg* as a conference and event space. It symbolizes the transformation of an industrial economy towards a service economy by using the material artifacts of the past for new purposes. Parts of the city identity are therewith re-interpreted: the industrial past—including exploitation, pollution, and social inequality—is ideologically smoothed over to be used as a positive element of present and future understandings of Gothenburg as city.



### Lindholmen Science Park

At Gothenburg's technology park, *Lindholmen Science Park*, eider ducks made of wood are integrated into the new design. They symbolize the continuity of the city's identity as ocean port city in the new technologi-

cal age, an approach promoted by the political planning institutions. It is connected to the programmatic development of the city as ecologically sustainable and thus represents a certain understanding of what the future should look like and which elements of its environmental surroundings, e.g., nature and wildlife, it should integrate.

### C. Communication in Urban Spaces—Representational Space



**Graffiti, Dublin**

Maser, a graffiti artist, contributes to the visual design of Dublin and takes part in communication in urban space by expressing a specific attitude toward the city. The artist is assigned a visual voice that is accessible for all passersby and undermines hierarchical communication structures on development of and in the urban space.





**Sannaplan, Gothenburg**

»They are so afraid of graffiti,« says an interviewee in Gothenburg, speaking of the city planners. Is this an alternative form of graffiti? Found in July 2009 at the tram stop Sannaplan, Gothenburg. This is a

visual voice different than the Dublin graffiti artist's described above. It causes irritation and amusement among those who discover it and itself becomes an object of communication, adding a new element to the constitution of space.



Graffiti, Dublin

Who receives these messages? Not only is this a direct message to anyone passing by, but, in combination with the other graffiti next to it, layers of communication become visible and materialized in Dublin's urban space. Different styles of different graffiti seem to correspond to different voices or speakers, but this might be an illusion, as anonymity is a constitutive element of graffiti artists.



**Tixter Teater, Gothenburg**

Being afraid of graffiti part II—painting on a façade in an area of Gothenburg that has not yet been rejuvenated. It is the façade of *Tixter Teater* at Andreégatan 13 as seen in June 2009. The question marks can be interpreted differently depending on the ideological position of the spectator. Are they referring to the process of urban development, a feeling of general misunderstanding of urban processes, or to the fact that it is hard to detect that a theater is situated inside this building? In any case, the artist(s) engage with the passersby via these visual signs placed on the urban fabric in communication on a topic that is unde-

fined and remains open to interpretation as long as the graffiti remains on the walls.

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