Staging Mobilities

By
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Mobility is so much more than going from A to B. Socially, it has a well-explored 'dark side', but there are many pragmatic and creative aspects familiar to designers that should not be overlooked by policy-makers, says Ole Jensen.

In this talk I want to elaborate and explain a little bit about 'staging mobilities' as an analytical perspective on mobilities studies. I also want to give you a few examples of how to think with this concept. But before doing that, I think we could exercise imagination a little bit. So try to imagine driving, either by car, bus, train or bike, to work, and then walking from, say, the parking lot to your office. During that trip you will most certainly have been involved in multiple interactions, with fellow drivers, pedestrians or other people. You are most likely to have drawn on routines as well as you have to improvise. Regardless whether you recall what was on your mind or not, the trip is sure to be a reflection of who you are and how you relate to the built environment and your consociates. So actually the morning trip to work is an embodied practice, often influenced by other social agents and always within a material and physical setting. So you could say that your situational mobility from the morning trip has elements of your own choice, like choice of selected route, mode of transport, relaxed or aggressive driving, choice of seat, etc.

Staging mobilities from above and from below

Now these elements are all expressions of a staging with a relatively high degree of self-determination – it's your choice. But along the route and the way, your practices were modified, by traffic lights, timetable, road design, traffic regulation, information systems, etc., reminding you that there's a staging going on from above as well. So if you think about the actual situation of getting to work in this manner, you're very close to what the actual concept of staging mobilities is all about, that is, about situation mobilities. Put differently, the concept is about the fact that mobility is much more than movement from A to B. It concerns how the movement of people and goods, information and signs, influences our understanding of self, other, in the built environment. The perspective takes point of departure in the so-called 'mobilities turn'. But it takes the analytical discussion further in terms of thinking about relationship between movements and environment. So mobilities do not just happen, or simply take place, they are carefully and meticulously designed and planned and staged from above, you might say. However they are, equally importantly, acted out, performed and lived as people are staging themselves from below, so to speak. So the staging of mobilities is a dynamic process between being staged, as when the traffic light commands you to stop, or when timetables organize your route and itineraries, and then the mobile staging of interacting individuals, making their own choices, as when you decide how to pass on the sidewalk between other people or other types of negotiation.

A new lexicon of mobilities

So therefore the basic question from this perspective is to ask, what are the physical, social, technical and cultural conditions to the staging of contemporary mobilities? Now as a particular contribution to the field of mobilities research, this perspective offers a number of theoretically derived but also empirically tested concepts that contribute to what you might call a new lexicon of mobilities. I want to show you a few examples of the concepts that I want to propose as ideas for this vocabulary of mobilities.

1. "Mobile With"

One example would be the notion of a "mobile with", which is, for instance, the dynamic and ephemeral flowing in and out of groupings as we move through the city, or the 'team', as when a family or a group of friends are moving around in the city, or in a car for that matter.

2. "Temporary Congregation"

Another example would be the temporary congregations, which may be seen as when we walk towards a road crossing and stop for a red light, and we become a group waiting to pass. Or in the elevator ride, when people with whom we, until we embark on the ride, actually do not know, suddenly become part of a common trip or travel together for a very short time.

3. "Negotiation in motion"

Another concept that we could think of is the notion of negotiation in motion, which is equally derived from the staging mobilities perspective, to coin, the dynamic interaction that takes place whenever we perform mobilities in a busy transit space, or when the "mobile with" is engaged in more or less explicit decision-making concerning routes or modes of transportation, like for instance, should we take this route or that route, should we go the shopping mall or should we go somewhere else. Those negotiations are taken internally, within the "mobile with", but they equally will be negotiated between other people. One example would be that we do not always choose where to go. Sometimes it's determined by, oh, there's a big queue, so we might alternate our routings or our ways of going. There's a number of other concepts developed within this idea of staging mobilities that will make the backbone of the book's contribution, but I think the key insight is that we need to understand the contemporary city as an assemblage of circulating people, goods, information and signs, in relational networks contributing to what I call the meaning of moving. So what are actually the repercussions of this movement? How does it affect us in social relations, in individual perspectives and, not least, in our understanding of our environment, the built environment as well as the natural environment? Now the livescapes of such mobile network conditions create individual experiences as well as collective processes. We find inclusion/exclusion, sites, areas and people may be switched on or switched off, and thereby being subject to complex relations of mobility capital and capacity to move, or motility, as some would term it.

Mobile situationism: an opportunity to enrich the mobilities field

Even though the book takes its point of departure in the 'mobilities turn', it actually tries to connect to a number of readings and literatures that are probably less familiar to the mobilities audience, part of that being architecture, design and planning literatures. I think this is part of my interest in trying to show how the connections between mobilities literature and the design field, so to speak, might be an

opportunity to enrich our understanding. So I would argue that the work on the perspective may be understood as what I would call a "mobile situationism". By this is meant to put the actual and situational practices at the centre of analysis. So in the staging mobilities perspective, I understand a mobile situation as a dynamic and process-oriented event in time/space, and not as a fixed point. So for instance, if we're thinking about the number of network and digital technologies, like GPS transmitters, smart phones, apps and things that will modify our interaction in the city, I think we need to stop thinking about the situation as a fixed point, because the networks and the communication technologies reach out and connect me to other people, other layers of information in the city. And so, thinking about situations as only face-to-face, proximic interaction seems to be less helpful, and we have to add to this that the situation is actually sort of stretching, or reaching out, mediated by these technologies. This has all been very influenced by the Canadian-born sociologist Erving Goffman, who worked a lot with the interaction face to face in the city and in public spaces. So what I'm sort of proposing here is to recontextualize Goffman, or mobilize Goffman if you want, and put him into a contemporary understanding where his sensitivity to the nitty-gritty, tiny details on how people move in spaces and interact is connected to the more contemporary understandings of, for instance, digital technologies and how they interfere and mediate with our ways of getting around in the city. So to recontextualize Goffman, the analysis of the situation has to reach beyond the face-to-face interaction dimension.

A plethora of networks engaged in a singular mobile situation

One example of the importance of these new technologies would be like the Intelligent Traffic Systems, or ITS systems, that we would find in many different cities across the world. And also, increasingly, location-based services facilitating the choice of where to eat, or shop, or drink, are a few examples of how systems interfere in the situation, and how you have to think about the situational reach-out, beyond, so to speak, the face-to-face level. A large number of trips are now done while people are also communicating as they move along. I like to think of this as, we carry networks, so we're moving within networks but we also carry networks. Often, you might have experienced being in public transit, that the first thing people would say would be inform their communication partner somewhere else that 'I am in the bus'/ 'I am in the train' and thus forth. So the reaching out and the non-proximic interaction, as I would call it, is increasingly becoming important, and also being part of the technological nexus that we have to engage in as mobile subjects. So you might say that in all sorts of ways the situation reaches out and in material terms this may be in dependencies on hardwares and physical connection of infrastructures, or, as in the case of technologies, how we are being informed by opportunities or problems along the road. So a mobile situation, maybe where someone is on the move in a most traditional way, as well as it can include very complex communication technologies and ways of engaging with these global-reaching systems.

Mobilities in situ: from body scale to global scale

In summary, you might say that a mobile situationism is an analytical focus that moves across scales, reaching from the body to the global, like for instance when I'm walking around in the city, applying an app, utilizing a GPS transmitter. You might ask, am I in the local or global scale? I don't think it makes a lot of sense. I think it makes sense to understand how the situation is embedded into these sorts of multi-scale perspectives. Also, I think the situational focus explores mobile practices as creative and skilful dimensions to mobilities. People are actually performing these mobilities with a high degree of routinisation as well as improvisation. So our everyday life journeys are sometimes very systematic and almost like repetitive but they are also often conditioned on you to be able to do quick decisions on the fly, very easily to decide what to do.

So I think what I'm trying to say with 'mobilities in situ', as is my term for situational mobilities, is that it uncovers the relational and associational character and practices within networks and environments that affords and restricts particular practices. I'm not trying to suggest that there is no over-individual or systemic properties working. Neither am I trying to say that the human agent is an omnipotent or

isolated field of force. But rather, I think, that the human mobile subject is a constantly mediated and negotiating entity within a network of complex ecologies, reaching from the very local to the very global.

Ten pointers for future research

Now at the end of this book I'm proposing ten pointers for future mobilities research that I want to very quickly just stress. Some of them might be more manifest alike but I think that for the sake of clarity you often have to have to make your point maybe even provocative.

1. Mobilities must be thought of in the plural

I think first of all we need to think of mobilities in the plural. I'm not just thinking here about the many modes – of walking and trains and flying and stuff – but also the empirical diversity and the multi-layeredness of mobilities actually feeds into our language. This is why we talk about mobilities rather than mobility. So we're thinking about a complex and, intellectually speaking, very varied phenomenon.

2. There is no singular discipline for understanding mobilities

Second to that, and from that, means that there is no singular discipline that can take care of understanding mobilities. You need a multi-disciplinary perspective on this.

3. Understanding static entities from the point of view of the mobile

The third point I'm making in the book – and maybe this is more as a comment to more sedentary theoretical perspectives – I think thinking about mobilities does not turn everything into flow. What I'm interested in here is to suggest that foregrounding mobilities makes you understand structures, places and static entities, or whatever, in a different way. So it's not like everything is up in the air and moving about, but it is in such a way that you need to understand these more or less static and structural properties from the point of view of the mobile, or the mobilities.

4. Understanding place in a relational sense

The fourth point I wanted to stress by the end of the Staging Mobilities book was that, if you're thinking about mobilities in this particular way, you would have to understand place in a relational sense. So I think, despite the scale and the level that you're thinking of, any site, place, region, city, will have to be understood relationally, in its relation to other places, other sites. And I think the nature of that relation is dependant on mobilities and immobilities, flow and friction, and how that is played together.

5. Thinking transition places as public spaces

A fifth point that I want to make, which might sound more surprising or strange, is to think about how these flow spaces, or what I call 'armatures' in the book, the channels for movement, how they act through public spaces. We tend to think of them, as just instrumental spaces where we move from A to B. But they are actually our new agoras potentially. Those are places where we can be exposed to ideas and public deliberation if we wanted to, and I think there's an awful lot of media interaction here that you need to think about in that respect.

6. Encourage mobilities potential thinking

I think, if you wanted to look at a transit space as a potential agora, or public space, public sphere, I think that is dependant on the sixth point of my list, which is to encourage what I call mobilities potential thinking. I think there's been quite a well-established tradition within the social sciences to point at critical issues, problems, what I term 'the dark side', which is definitely relevant, but I think if you wanted to explore what could these spaces be, what could the potential for new types of social interaction be, you would have to think in a more potential sort of oriented kind of way. And I think my colleagues within architecture and design are often way ahead in terms of what the social sciences are able to do in this respect, which is why I'm working with these people to learn how to think about potentials, to see potentials in situations.

7. Understand the "dark sides" of mobilities

Of course this leads me on to the seventh point, which is that we still need to pay attention to what I call the dark side of mobilities. I think any way of working critically with mobilities research would have to acknowledge that we both need to understand the potentials but also what I call the dark side. This could reach from anything from exclusion, social exclusion, power, segregation, to some of the more contemporary issues related to system failures, crises, breakdowns, various forms of systems vulnerabilities that are exposing us to disruption, and those sorts of things.

8. Exploring the "mobilities design"

Now the eighth point I want to make, which I've sort of been building towards, is that I think we could get much deeper into our understanding of mobilities if we start exploring design – architectural design, but also industrial design, systems design – various ways of designing the conditions for these situational mobilities. So in order to do that I would propose to explore a term that I call the 'mobilities design'. So how do these various design decisions and interventions affect the actual situations as we move about? I think that would be a new field of engagement for me as a researcher.

9. Introducing the pragmatic dimension in Mobilities research

Now the ninth point I want to make is that I think there is a pragmatic dimension to this. I think being governed by the question what might the practical effects be of this and that, is really important, and I think this is one of the ways that designers often ask themselves: before intervening, what would happen if…? And I think that way of thinking goes nicely hand in hand, too, with some of the potentials within design that we could maybe try to export or learn from in the mobilities research.

10. Understanding mobilities in situ: a fruitful perspective

Now my final point of the list of ten in the book is that it all comes together in situ. I think there's an awful lot to gain from having this situational perspective, and I'm obviously aware of structural, theoretical macro-perspectives that are relevant, that this is also about how society at large and global capital develops conditions. However, I think this is where there's a lineage from Simmel to Goffman to what I'm doing. I think we need still to understand the various sort of practical, on-the-ground situations for mobilities. So I think the most fruitful place to study this complexity is an everyday practices and lived situations perspective.

Taking into account the individual perspective for policy planning

Now, to end this presentation of the staging mobilities perspective, I'd like to not necessarily give an answer but at least throw in a question. So I think one of the questions that would be relevant for us to think about in mobilities research would be: what would be the adequate policy implication of all this? Is there any relationship to policy, to planning, to ways we organize — or think about organizing – differently, like transition, different ways of organizing our society? And I think that a gaze from the point of view of situations would be an interesting and important antidote to, for instance, abstract traffic counting, you know, these huge, large-scale theoretical perspectives that seem to govern a lot of planning, a lot of policy making. I think if you are applying a situational perspective on mobile practices, you would have to acknowledge that people live in these spaces, people are moving along in these spaces, and therefore any policy, any planning, any regulatory practice targeting these sorts of things would have to, so to speak, understand that perspective as well.

I realize you need large numbers, big data and lots of structural understanding to organize big cities and societies today, but if you don't understand how it works for the individual, I think you're doing a poor job. So I think this is potentially an answer to what would be the adequate policy implication of the staging mobilities perspective.

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

En savoir plus x

Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

En savoir plus x

Motility

En savoir plus x

Associated Thematics :

Lifestyles

- Diversity of lifestyles
- Digital technologies
- Representations

Policies

- Cities & Territories

Theories

- Concepts
- Methods

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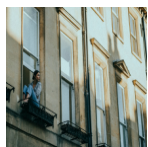Slowing down: Yes, but why, what and how?

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