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Where design meets mobilities - Ole B. Jensen

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.

I want to propose an idea and a field of thinking that has been on my mind for a while. I want to talk about what I would call mobilities design. I'm not claiming it is actually out there, existing, but I'm sort of proposing it as a way of thinking, about partly the practices we study as mobilities scholars, but also how we can learn things from the design fields in more general terms. My basic argument is that by engaging with design, in relation to the way that designers and architects think about and practice their art, mobilities research will actually gain an immense level of knowledge relevant to understand deeper the mobilities in spaces, technologies, artifacts and how ultimately human bodies inhabit these sorts of spaces.

Design: a peculiar mix of rationality and irrationality

Now, if we start by thinking about the word 'design', there's a lot of definitions, you can go to the dictionaries and find that it means 'mark out, 'designate' or 'take something apart', 'shape it without having it in front of you' – it's an imaginary practice, it's related to a construction, mentally before physically, if there is even a physical object. I've been working with urban design for quite a while so my interest and my sources of inspiration is within urban design. The American designer and scholar Kevin Lynch offered this definition, and I quote "design is the playful creation and strict evaluation of possible forms of something, including how it is to be made. That something needs not to be a physical object, nor is design expressed only in drawings. Although attempts have been made to reduce design to completely explicit systems of search or synthesis, it remains an art, it remains a peculiar mix of rationality and irrationality. Design deals with qualities, with complex connections, but also with ambiguities." Kevin Lynch wrote this in 1980 in a book on how to design cities, and of course you can think of many other ways of engaging with the design question. But I think the peculiar mix of design rationality and irrationality is actually really interesting and helpful. So we're dealing with a field of practice that shapes the condition of our lives, shapes the places where mobility is actually being practised, that actually constructs the stages upon which we are mobile subjects. So I think we should pay attention to some of the lessons to be learnt from that field.

Designers: learning to describe the sensibilities

Now I'm not suggesting that designers have it all right. There's a beautiful quote by Bryan Lawson, an English architect and psychologist, who says that "the idea that people will walk where the hard landscape goes is so silly that one wonders how designers become so detached from reality." So, of

course, designers have all sorts of imaginaries that are less helpful to people in the real world. But having said that, I think that looking at design practices, the way designers engage with and shape the conditions for mobility is really something that we can learn a lot from. Also I think we could maybe consider mobilities design as a new material turn within mobilities research. In a sense, and I'm talking about material as a very sensorial, physical dimension, I'm interested in the body performances as people perform mobility and part of that is related to affect – to the way we sense, to the way we engage with the materiality, that can be anything from a book or a door-handle that we open into a train compartment if we have such old things, or if they open just by the proximity of our bodies because of sensor technologies – to how we sense the slope of the street, the pavement, the asphalt, the cobbled stones versus other types of pavement. So I think those sensibilities to the materialities of the physical environment are being described and a vocabulary is being developed within architecture and design that is much more fine-grained and sophisticated than the one we actually have in mobilities research. So why not learn from these people, why not learn from the practices and the way they engage with it.

The challenge of materiality

In this thinking, I've been quite influenced by Tim Ingold, who talks about a shift from materiality to materials, and I think he's on to something here. What I like about this, I am actually thinking of stuff and how it shapes situations of mobility, so I propose we need a new mobility analysis where the design and politics of stuff becomes part of our work, part of what we're looking at. I think there are two points about engaging with design that are worth mentioning. First, the obvious I think, we get closer to the materiality of these sites of mobility and second I think that the work mode of designers – the way they think, the way they engage – with the practice is often very different from the standard academic practice in social science and mobilities research, and actually even though we share commonalities – I think research is a creative practice, right? – I think sometimes we can learn more from the designers, like for example, asking the 'what if?' question, the imaginary question, stretching our minds, exploring what would happen if so. And I think designers often do that, either by drawings, or sketching, or modeling, or whatever, they try to imagine what this could be and actually this is pretty close to what could be relevant for policy making, how do you imagine the future, how do you envision the practices' potential or the practices you want to encourage in a city of various kinds. How do you nudge, encourage or force people to do certain things. I think that if you explore that imaginary space first, I think you actually have some potential there.

Mobility design asks: what makes mobile situations possible?

So mobilities design, I would argue, asks a pretty straightforward and very pragmatic question. It would simply ask in prolongation of this state of mobilities perspective that I am advocating, what makes mobile situations possible? What creates the affordances or the blockings of particular practices – and when I'm asking 'what', you could ask a lot of things: you could ask what are the regulatory frameworks, what is the policy frame, the national law and stuff like that which, granted, are important to life on the ground but you could also ask it in a much more material sense. Now what makes driving your car fast here possible – the car obviously, but also the speed limit, to a certain extent, even though it doesn't control the whole thing, but also the paving, the way the street slopes, the way it interacts with the physical environment, the way it's been mediated by the design decisions. Now, interestingly, I think a lot of those people practices coming out of shaping our environment are not made by people who concern or think of themselves as designers. If you have nine seconds to cross for green versus 10 seconds to cross for green in a city as a pedestrian, that is a piece of code made by an engineer somewhere. I think that's part of designing the situation, that is what affords and affects the situation so to the pragmatic question our answer would be 'is it relevant to include?' – yes, it is, because it shapes the conditions. So I think the mobilities design question is very straightforward in that respect, but is also very complex and complicated of course.

Crossed perspective between designers and mobility research is required

To me, looking at mobilities design means a number of things. I think we could actually use this to discuss how do we make our mobilities systems more inclusive. How do we make them more environmentally restraining? How do we make them more resilient, risk-averse and flexible – less vulnerable – but we could also ask the kinds of questions that designers often do, how do these spaces become more interesting, how do they become fun? How will they afford social interaction and engagement between people that the public might not engage if they were just minding their own business? So I think these are the potentials within a programme of researching mobilities designs, so to speak. The impact or the implication of this, both in theories & methods and disciplinary input, in line with what I think in general, is that there is no particular, single discipline that can organize all this. I think the designers, by themselves, would never apply the mobilities research concepts, they would never take the theoretical reflection to this level that we are working with.

I think there's a two-way interaction here. But I think the potential in looking at the materialities of mobilities, as I would like to call them, from the point of view of mobilities design, is promising. They are creative ways of thinking about engaging with the city, understanding the city and mobility, so I think the benefits of a mobilities design research agenda affects both the theoretical and the methodological, and also the disciplinary concepts and thinking. I do not think we have one discipline that can take care of all this – I don't think there is only one methodology either and I do not believe in one theory only. I think there's scope for interaction here that is not being tested before and I think looking at design and designers' practices is potentially very helpful.

The lesson of the Copenhagen metro

So to state it briefly, I would say that the staging of mobilities materializes within mobilities design. Let me try to exemplify that a bit. I am teaching in an urban design curriculum and part of what we've been doing for some years is to work with design of public spaces in relation to infrastructures. This is a model of a space, a site in Copenhagen and what we're dealing with in this project is students working with the metro and trying to understand the relationship between the underworld of the metro and the everyday life public spaces on the surface. Now, interestingly, when we made this project we talked to an architect-planner who had been part of planning the metro, and he didn't understand why we were interested in the metro because that was belonging to the metro company in a completely different legal framework - whereas urban designers work in urban spaces. And that was really helpful because I could say to my students 'Now, did you watch that, did you hear that'. Actually this separation between above and below is not helpful because the mobile subject lives in the whole thing. So in this project, we worked with how to open up this metro station, how to connect to some of the shops here, to create a new type of public space and how to use the metro as a facilitator of social interaction and cultural life. It's not just a people mover, it's also something else.

Understanding the 3D of the city

So I think that on its own is interesting for me, to work with designers on these issues because it challenges my notion, my understanding of what is a city and what real mobilities mean. But also I get more much more of a sort of technical handle on this, because we work in layers. You can actually start understanding the 3D of the city. We all know it, with our bodies and our practices - but knowing it with our minds and our concepts is slightly a challenge for some of us at least. So this is where I'm using the model to actually understand a layeredness of this situation. And you can take this model and add to it a very important part which is not visible here – which is all the digital technologies, all the wifi, all the apps and stuff that people use to navigate up and through these spaces. So this is just a small example of how you can learn stuff from working with designers but also how you can actually test out some of your concepts and looking towards improving the designers' awareness of the repercussions for life in the systems and the design but also how we as mobilities researchers might develop our theories and concepts by looking at very tangible, physical manifestations of design.

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.

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