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Visual Methods in Cultural Urban Studies

The emergence of cultural urban studies is in the 21st century a component of the global intellectual landscape. There are a few studies on cultural urban studies which reveal it as a new sub-discipline, but whilst it has a long tail, it also has a short body. In the historical perspective there are several studies on urban cultural studies in England and a few studies on cultural urban studies in Poland, but various emergences of this intellectual query can be seen from the beginning of the 20th century all over the world. Despite the inner differences, however, they transgress various disciplines which are interested in urban studies. Because of the ways cultural urban studies has developed, the distinctive differences are – firstly – the unavoidable articulations of theories of culture and – secondly – a question of methodology. In order to investigate the construction of cultural urban space, the sociologist's, urban geographer's, urban planner's and so on have carried out detailed studies on cultures. The contrast between the cultural attitudes presented by them was permanently noted. The divisions between concepts, theories and methods, which are already developed in cultural studies, manifest themselves also in their works. The articulation and re-articulation of methods within this subdiscipline is not only an act of intellectual history within discipline, but also a model of the negotiation of multiple methodologies and strategies of intellectual inventions. In many cases there is the constitutive difference between cultural urban studies and established disciplines such as sociology and history.

Urban cultural studies/cultural urban studies is an expanding discipline concerned with the viewing, hearing, experiencing and reading of urban space. The experience of city space is here both idiosyncratic and affective, empirical and analytical. Perhaps the most critical problem in cultural urban studies methodology is that of balancing the "typical" and the "idiosyncratic" sides of the equation. On the one hand, there is a danger of favouring the quantitative methods, on the other, there is a danger of favouring the art-based-methods. Clearly, any investigation into the uses of urban space must involve some interrogation of the accepted theory of culture. The explosion of city cultures hidden within "universal" theories of culture is not simply a reaction to technological, economic, and political changes in our world, but also a positive attempt to shape a new concept of culture and create the new methods in cultural urban studies.

The modernized, but still historically marked spaces of our cities produce plenty of images of urbanites and their cultural practices. Moreover, this explosion of city cultures is not only about centers of cultural production, but also about peripheral urbanization in typical middle size towns. This doesn't mean that each city could be viewed as a place of sovereign

cultural processes. For many of the artists and activists these processes begin with the re-thinking of national and urban history. Nevertheless, most cultural studies of the production of urban spaces and practices take into consideration urban space as a kind of visual space. On the cross-roads of urban culture and visual culture there are multiple methodological challenges and questions. There are also various present forms of answering these questions. The common goal in this field, however, is to rethink selected visual methods from the cultural urban studies viewpoint.

We see the continuum of engagement represented by visual methods. The most popular are methods of the visual representation and documentation (photography, film, architectural drawings, paintings) of urban spaces: iconic buildings and powerful symbols, urban life and everyday activities. Photography in particular has been used in many different ways in relation to the city with the intention to retrace what has remained of the past. As many authors suggest, photography documents historical examples of urban spaces which are especially important for architects, urban planners, historians and urban geographers. However, simultaneous usages of micro- and macroscales in cultural studies suggest that there are several topics and approaches, e.g. a construction of urban memory. Urban scholars have worked with the visual representations of city spaces created by professional visual practitioners and amateurs for many reasons, but the main task today is creating international urban imaginary and constructing specific understanding of the urban, and urban cultures.

New models of community activity within the urban environment reinforces expectations formulated by urban cultural studies research addressed to visual methods. We think about such images which are not so much a representation of the city, but which are symptomatic of the processes of collective knowledge formation. The visibility of micro- and macro-social structures, movements and bottom up practices, their subordination to immaterial and different circuits of communication, often leads to a data-driven activism. The efficacy of this activism depends on the creators of crowdsourcing, and collective urban maps of traditional and emergent socio-cultural problems. Tools such as collective maps of cultural activities, and mapping as a visual method, interfere often with other methods: recording, photography, cartography. Merging digital and physical spaces through mobile communication networks reorders conceptual and public images of the city as a common space. Although this is a trend, it would be unjust not to point out that the cultural urban studies often question the criteria of the merging visual methods with these which concern the urban smellscape and soundscapes. Urban cultures are constructed with images, colours, sounds, smells, tastes and haptic experiences.