Mapping boundaries – reading everyday urban text

Juliet Sprake

Abstract
In his analysis of the social consequences of globalisation, Bauman (1998) highlights the ever-increasing divide between the empowered, mobile elite in society and the ‘localised’ majority. He describes this gap as between ‘near’ and ‘far’:

‘Near’ is a space inside which one can feel chez soi, at home; a space in which one seldom, if at all, finds oneself at a loss, feels lost for words or uncertain how to act. ‘Far away’, on the other hand, is a space in which one enters only occasionally or not at all, in which things happen which one cannot anticipate or comprehend, and would not know how to react to once they occurred: a space containing things one knows little about, from which one does not expect much and regarding which one does not feel obliged to care. (Bauman, 1998: 13)

Boundaries as planned, strategic spaces characterised by lines of demarcation that serve as ‘passage’ or ‘non-passage’ from one space to another can be considered as ‘far away’ places in the social and cultural fabric of everyday urban environments. Instead, this paper seeks to exploit the spatial potential of boundaries as places (Hill 1998, Rogoff 2000) – places that can be read through user-producer intervention in the rituals, repetitions and routines of everyday life.

The manner in which a person crosses or occupies the space within the border influences its effect upon them. (Hill, 1998: 15)

As such, reading space can be viewed as post-structuralist activity, where ‘the reader or critic shifts from the role of consumer to that of producer.’ (Eagleton, 1984) The paper goes on to describe selected case studies of practice that consider the productive nature of design through user intervention in a specific local urban area of South East London (involving both design students and professional architects.) The focus of these projects is on developing design through mapping user production within perceived boundaries rather than analysis of spatial syntax. In consideration of this kind of reading as legitimate design activity, the paper is structured around two key questions:

1. Why does the everyday matter in developing knowledge about designing?
2. How can this contribute to discourse on user-producer relatedness in design processes?
PART ONE: BLURRING BOUNDARIES

The aim of this paper is to tease out, through exemplar project material, the problematic nature of reading everyday spatial practice and its relevance to understanding user-producer relatedness in design. The study of cities provides the context for this as the streets themselves provide a rich ground for experiencing local interruption in strategic use of space. As such moving away from solitary contractuality of informationalised space into socially organic production of place (Auge 1995) could be translated into a critical methodology for sustainable design practice.

The city is not confined to the spatial scale of the building, or indeed that of the city itself, but encompasses the whole, multiscalar landscape produced by human activity: from the corporeal to the global, the worldly to the intimate. (Borden et al, 2001: introduction)

Far...

In highlighting the connective possibilities in exploring spatial relationships between people and place it is inevitable that we consider the disconnective and dispersed in discourse on location (Massey 1994, Augé 1995, Kaplan 1996). Tabor is concerned that the ‘invasion’ of new technologies has defined the home as ‘the place of being, not doing – of ends, not means to the end. (Tabor, 1998: 221) It could be argued that decontextualising the subject provides a distance in critical space necessary for being jolted out of the familiar to ‘see’ a different set of codes and identities. In thinking about migrant communities, for example, it might be important to explore disconnection from national identities across spaces rather than more conventional social discourse concerning belonging, linking or bonding as ‘connective’ theories. Robins (1) suggests Turkish-speaking communities in London watch everyday Turkish TV out of context and they therefore respond to it in a different way. The ordinariness of the TV programmes doesn’t work in the same way as viewing locally, in Turkey. News programmes especially seem crude and disorientating as viewers in London are unable to do a ‘reality check’ on the disturbing exaggerations of daily events in their homeland. So the assumption that the everyday programmes make Turkish migrants in London ‘feel at home’ is problematic for Robins’ in analysis of trans-national experience.
Near...

Alternatively bell hooks (hooks, 1989) describes home as ‘that place which enables and promotes varied and ever changing perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference’ and similarly Petrescu echoes this in her description of a ‘new’ category of migrant – the ‘faux migrant’:

While maintaining their homes in Romania, the Oas migrants periodically leave for the west to obtain the status of ‘political asylum seeker’. This enables them to reap the financial and social benefits available to asylum seekers, whilst keeping their domestic economy going at home... Their spatial practices produce alternative ways of living... From frontier to frontier, from periphery to periphery, from squat to squat, the line of migration is always tangled with detours. (Petrescou, 2002: 66)

The faux migrator as an appropriator of temporary space is creative in connecting boundaries and codes of conduct from the village with the cramped conditions of the city squat:

The inner logic of the squat comprises of subtractions, additions, mixtures and compressions of displaced elements... In the same way, elements of metropolitan life are brought back to the village and flattened together to create a capitalist appearance within an ex-socialist lifestyle. (Petrescou, 2002: 68)

The established migrant that Robins describes is on a one-way journey – it has an end in Hackney, London. The faux migrants journey on the other hand has a return ticket and with its many deviations and tangles is in fact a loop. Petrescu indicates that this loop is never-ending as the next group of migrants sets off when others return. In making an analogy with these journeys and mapping design processes we might raise several related issues for further discussion:

The way in which boundaries are spatially perceived - as fixed or fluid, empty or active - affects how users appropriate space

Creativity is characterised by deviance, difference and tactical method (as opposed to a process that has a known end product)

There is distance between strategic intention and actual use in design

I will explore some aspects of these issues further by questioning notions of ‘reading’ and ‘text’ in urban design.

Rendell suggests that user-occupation in lived space is ‘doing DIY differently’ – where perceived, conventional boundaries are negotiated and transgressed through active appropriation of domestic space.

Through consumption, the traditional logic of need, which requires the architect to design for perceived use, can be upset... The occupation and consumption of architecture reinforces who we are and who we would like to be. (Rendell, 1998: 232)

As an architect this may be conceived as an intentional act of resistance against pre-planned living spaces where ‘every activity has its compartment, mapping and defining social relations very precisely in space.’ (Rendell, 1998: 241) What is interesting to draw upon here are possibilities for critiquing user production of space through everyday practice – doing it rather than observing it. (Thus rejecting theory as merely a commentary tool in design process.)
Does theory kill off practice?

*The city is for Lefebvre not something to be ‘read’. Spatial practice is not a signifying practice... The sign entails ‘mental space’, the representation of space, and representations of space kill spatial practices... He talks of an architecture based on tectonics, rather than the visuality of the façade. Under the visual sense he includes both the image and the word.* (Lash, 2002: 119)

Perhaps a focus on ‘reading’ or ‘seeing’ concerned with making sense of spatial practice inevitably places the designer or architect in the position of deconstructing the ‘text’ (sign, signer, signified) – albeit of a complex, social lived-in space. In as sense this kind of reading is an analysis of spatial syntax – to form a set of rules for observing typologies of environment. Yet again, distance from the object is required in order to read in this way and some costly mistakes have been made on the back of it. Julier describes how the ‘Leeds look’ in the 1980s was a centrally planned initiative designed by the city authorities to brand Leeds through exterior-defined style statements.

*A series of prominent buildings were established exhibiting the same external usage of red brick, York stone for lintels, sills and other such details, slate roof, and Tuscan towers, pitch-roofs and window openings.* (Julier, 2000: 119)

Restyling or papering over the cracks reflects a concern with image and mono-functionality in design. Alternative ways of reading urban environments that move away from external, visual consumption (shopping mall syndrome) are concerned with experiential association in everyday life.

Reading as (critical) practice in design

Belsey suggests that in conventional literary criticism the process of production is suppressed so that ‘the effect is an illusion of complicity between the author and the reader’. (Belsey, 1980: 126) She argues that instead the literary text is a ‘play of contradictions’ produced by what the reader brings to the text. As a consequence she goes on to present the case for new critical practices that ‘insist on finding the plurality.’

*Critical practice is seen as a process of releasing the positions from which the text is intelligible. Liberated from the communication model, the text is available for production in the process of reading.* (Belsey, 1980: 140)

In his ‘Critique of Representation’ (Lash, 2002) Lash refers to a spatial architectonics as the productive appropriation of space (as opposed to domination). This is exemplified as practice by David Blamey. (Blamey, 2002: ‘Safe Way’) He presents us with a hotel room in Chiang Mai, Thailand where as a backpacker he deliberately shuts the door on the outside world for a week.

*The strange juxtapositions, washing pans in the bath, olive oil next to shaving cream on the bath ledge, also work to transform the room, to give it a new life. But the transformation is not complete, and not very comfortable.* (Rendell, 2002: 260)
Transgressing boundaries of public and private both within the room itself and outside, everyday routines and ‘unnoticed’ objects prompt different or new perspectives. Critique in this instance is offered to a wider audience through a series of photographs – the ‘text’ brought home but it is the process of occupation that is creatively productive in focusing the ‘reader’ on everyday rituals and repetitions.

*Human beings are constitutively symbol-using animals: hence our spatial practice is also symbolic practice. Under capitalism, when these symbolic practices come under the aegis of capital they become representations of space. When they do not, they create ‘spaces of representation’.* (Lash, 2002: 128)

This is perhaps the crux of the significance of the everyday in design process – the space between immersion/pre-semiotic and representation symbolic is an active differential in creative practice. Pursuing these deviating trajectories characterises discovery or ‘new’ connections. Kristeva describes the ‘rupture’ or ‘boundary’ between semiotic drives (and their articulations) and signification as the thetic phase in language development. Attributing meaning is a ‘posing of identity or difference’ and metaphoric or metonymic interpretation is secondary to this intervention in producing language.

[In order to reject] *the subject sets his pulverization against natural structures and social relations, collides with them, rejects them and is de-posited by them… The new object is a moment of the process whose conflict constitutes the most intense moment of rupture or renewal… practice calls on rejection itself and, as a replacement for the thetic phase, offers it not an identifying addressee… to converse with, but rather processes and objective laws to discover.* (Kristeva, 1941: 204/5)

And so...

Focusing on a context concerning ‘architecture and the everyday’ does provide a forum for acknowledging traditional, centrally located power relationships within a tight-knit architectural profession through alternative reading of the (extra)ordinary or ‘deviant’ as creatively productive in architectural design (Barley 2000, Architectural Design 1998). The everyday is often something people can’t imagine being different – it is just there. As a teacher, I am interested in what affects shifts in understanding, critical moments of interconnectedness or indeed disillusionment with the everyday and how this might be relevant to students’ understanding about design process. To this end the following project wasn’t set up with a brief, a known ‘end’ (although a time deadline was given) and emphasis was placed on discovering critical thinking space in a design project that aimed to ‘bring Lefebvre a little closer to home’. (Merrifield, 2000: 181)

**PART TWO: TEXTURED SPACES**

The project, ‘Mapping Boundaries’ was based in Deptford Creek, SE London and involved a group of student teachers and a practising architect working as designers in this ‘deprived’ area of the city. It was structured around two project phases:
Project 1 – Beneath the Map

The city as we imagine it, the soft city of illusion, myth, aspiration, nightmare is as real, maybe more real, than the hard city one can locate on maps, in statistics, in monographs on urban sociology and demography and architecture.
(Raban, J., 1974, Soft City, Hamish Hamilton, London)

This project will require you to dive beneath the map. To pay attention to the architecture, artefacts and systems of the city but also to explore the way in which people engage in and continually produce within and through the city.

Brief: Walking Puzzle (in groups)
Explore, through walking, an area of Deptford. Your walk should be set up as puzzle, following ‘clues’ and ‘rules’ that are produced by the boundaries and thresholds you observe. What themes or narratives are shaping/forming your inquiry into the nature of the world you are moving through? Record and gather source material as you go. You may do this in as many mediums as you feel appropriate for your exploration of boundaries and thresholds in the area.

Build a map/model of your walk – observations, opinions, thinking. This should be formed in the image of the walk and therefore be a another form of ‘walk’ – a place of similar discovery and connection – a second level of inquiry and a new kind of map incorporating both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ city.

Project 2 - Site as Situation (individual)

Choose a public site in the Deptford area (eg a market, station, crossroads, school etc). Firstly, observe and explore the habits, rituals, patterns, everyday behaviour and routines in the site. Also note the boundaries and thresholds that are part of this performance of the everyday. How do they identify this site:
In a strategic way (planned, intended, controlled, global)
In a tactical way (indigenous, diverse, unintended, local)

Look for opportunities and make proposals for boundaries that create a socially organic place (rather than a means of dividing/separating) where the manner in which a person crosses or occupies the space within the boundary influences its effect upon them. You should use the most appropriate means for developing your ideas and communicating your proposals. (2)

One of the overarching aims of this project was for students to ‘get out there’ and ‘walk the city’. There wasn’t a prescribed map or a specified brief for them to follow – they would discover the map and then the brief for the project through their experiential ‘wanderings’ in Deptford.

The ordinary practitioners of the city live “down below”, below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk – an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, Wandersmanner, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban “text” they write without being able to read it.... The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other. (de Certeau, 1984: 93)
If the aim sounds vague, it wasn’t. Students were supported or directed towards finding a project through a programme of taught sessions on critical thinking and spatial practice that started to explore the role that space plays in structuring thought. The course provided opportunities for experiencing ‘transformative dialogue’ (Rendell, 2002) between theory and practice in production of place through exposing everyday ‘confrontations’ with strategically planned environments. To this extent visits to Container City (an organic riverside development that utilises shipping containers for artists studios) and Wood Street, City of London (where a plethora of ‘landmark’ architects battle it out for brick and glass supremacy) were arranged as ‘extra reading material’.

Mike Leigh’s recent film All or Nothing projects a bleak view of life in a similar area of SE London through the very repetitions and routines of daily life in a strategically planned housing estate. The concept for such a way of ‘living’ is what Henri Lefebvre might have called ‘representations of space’ – spaces that have been conceived by planners, architects, developers. For Lefebvre the very conception of such space tries to colonise everyday lived space that is by nature, experiential:

*It may be qualified in various ways: it may be directional, situational or relational, because it is essentially qualitative, fluid and dynamic.* (Lefebvre, 1991: 42)

Others have since developed Lefebvre’s metaphilosophy on the increasing technocratisation of social life (Merrifield, 2000). Marc Augé (1995) suggests that non-places - supermarkets, airports, cash points, bypasses - contract people to use them in defined ways. Information uniformly tells us what to do and what to expect, informing our solitary transit through these non-places at the expense of the socially organic place. ‘Solitary contractuality’ confines the user to what the designer wants them to do in a particular space – the designer is at the flight deck controlling uniform connections in a ‘non-place’.

*‘The city’, like a proper name, thus provides a way of conceiving and constructing space on the basis of a finite number of stable, isolatable, and interconnected properties.* (de Certeau, 1984: 94)

At a recent conference at the Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies (3) Andy Platt and Helen Jarvis presented aspects of their research into live-work units in the South of Market (SOMA) district of San Francisco. The area had been ‘labelled’ as a neglected dockside with decaying properties and marginal users. New media developments initiated employment opportunities for those seeking experimental, ‘urban’ careers and the built environment planners responded with newly built live work units. Planning arrangements were changed to allow for a move from industrial to residential occupancy in SOMA. Consequent research has revealed that in fact most of the live work unit dwellers don’t work at home. Instead they commute to a place of work adding to increased hypermobility, stress, congestion and property famine. If people ‘make do’ it is at great personal, social and environmental cost.

*… the notion of a networked colony of new economy firms and workers wrongly conveys the impression that material renewal and lived experience are unidirectional. In practice, a complex matrix of social worlds underpins these contested cultural and territorial transformations.* (4)
This research highlights problems in the actual use of artificially divided space - or as these researchers put it ‘the built environment fix doesn’t work.’ Interestingly Massey’s research into live-work spaces in the high tech industries in Cambridge resonates with this conclusion. She found that the workplace was highly specialised to keep mostly male employees focused and productive. So that although table tennis, cafes and gyms may have given the illusion of playtime in fact this environment was highly structured to ‘productivity of the intellect’. Boundaries between play and work in these high tech workplaces have been seemingly blurred but are in fact designed as fences to separate one space from another. She suggests that ‘instead of endlessly trying to juggle incompatibilities, and to resolve ambiguities which in reality point to contradictions, it is important to undermine and disrupt the polarizations which are producing the problem in the first place.’ (Massey, 2000: 32)

The walking puzzle phase of the ‘Mapping Boundaries’ project did indeed raise conflicting issues concerning barriers as polarising objects in Deptford. Looking for rejection of intended use of space in Deptford provided students with a critical space in which to question the ‘fencing-off’ notion of boundaries in this area. One student developed this critical space as project in exploring the tensions between a squat in a disused factory and a newly built dance complex next door.

If this is about revealing ‘tensions’ in local, diverse production of place and global intended use then what kind of investigative methodology does this call for? Geographers at the Open University developed rhythm analysis as a research method to examine global/local tensions in newly reconstructed Berlin. (5) This kind of project exemplifies a concern with public planning in cities that ‘smothers’ the ‘visual and aural spectacles produced by the private sector’ and, as such, is a starting point for thinking about different kinds of ‘rhythm analysis’ as poetic research method.

The ‘Mapping Boundaries’ project highlighted that associative or experiential methodology is creative in producing ideas that enfold the user in process. Difference or disruption to the perceived order starts to bring ideas to the surface and in hindsight these might be called critical moments or nodal points in the process. In this project, those students who were more comfortable with linear design process felt most at risk when a straight line to the ‘next bit’ wasn’t there.

*I work in a very linear, methodical way using only medium that I feel ‘safe’ with. With this project I was so rushed and constantly working on it that I desperately tried to work within the confines of what I felt comfortable with. The nature of the project did not allow this, so I ended up confused, frustrated and annoyed with my end result.* (student sketchbook, Nov 2002)

Others were able to reflect on what had been critical in making that point of interconnectedness in the project.

*I’m not sure their will be an end to this project as people would continually reinvent the museum wall with what they found in the mud banks on the river. The significant point was about Christopher Marlowe and how he was stabbed with his own dagger. Suddenly I could see that history and this site were all there through the dagger and I wanted to recreate*
that feeling in this out of bounds site. Buildings were derelict and still. Parks were empty. It was as if at every corner I was expecting the Deptford community to jump out and surprise me, but no. You couldn’t actually see the people but the buildings let you know they were there. (student sketchbook, Nov 2002)

On reflection, this student was able to map her design methodology by plotting distinct juxtapositions that had emerged from the process:
A dagger buried in the mud for users to find // mud banks were out of bounds
A museum constructed as self-built wall // museum as don’t touch glass case
Water’s edge as active place // edge defining limit
For this student the act of digging up clues planted in the mud banks meant that the user was appropriating that space and making connections between space and time. The object was then relocated in a glass wall along with other ‘found clues’ related to the Christopher Marlowe murder and history of the ground.

Sometimes the edges of a border are monitored but not its centre… So often we assume a place is empty, when it is actually full of what we do not see. (Hill, 1998: 15)

Lastly it is relevant to briefly consider critical theory concerning ‘mapping’ of creativity. Anti-hierarchical rhizomatic structures (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980) that can make connections between any two points on a surface resonate with experiential association. I asked one student to visualise her process for this project as her final ‘product’ had was a performance of the process:

When we were given this project, I automatically tried to organise mentally how I could direct thoughts.
With me thinking closely within the starting points, but also having ideas randomly spiralling out. Some fixed, some constantly shifting around.

This went on for quite some time, so as for trying to relate it to a shape… I don’t really have one! It seemed to depend on the type of idea - how grounded it was/how much I liked it and if I could develop it. I tried to push the idea of an ‘outcome’ to the curb and focus on immediate reactions to situations and I loved the idea that everything I was encompassing was EVER changing. But the problem with this was that I now couldn’t mentally see a structure anymore, although this was the most TRUTHFUL relationship to ‘Deptford’. (student sketchbook, Nov 2002)

Wittgenstein’s (1953) concept of ‘language games’ – underlying dynamic concepts that in their familiar relatedness to what is signified, challenge the notion of fixed principles – also offer a structure for constructing meaning through identifying similar or familiar relations determined by the world in which we live. Lash suggests an alternative mode of production (rather than identification) in the information or ‘parallel’ space – he names this ‘web-weaving’:
Networks need walls. Webs go round the walls, up the walls, hide in the nooks and crannies and corners of where the walls meet. Networks form linear links between objects; webs irregular and curvilinear links. (Lash, 2002: 127)

Nodes of deviance or difference as points that can be mapped in design process come into extra significance when the subject is immersed in the everyday. As a final example, Hebdige (1988) describes the perimeter fence during the Greenham Common protest as a ‘wall of yearning’ decorated as it was with personal memorabilia and keepsakes. The other non-visible fence was an ‘edge of darkness’.

To know how to read a disputed text is a strategy of ambivalences and contradictions and not a celebration of universal access to information. (Rogoff, 2000: 111)
Footnotes
Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies, 25th anniversary conference, September 2002
I am indebted to Terry Rosenberg for the original thinking behind this project
Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies, 25th anniversary conference, University of Newcastle, September 2002
Pratt & Jarvis, Creative Destruction: the Struggle for Work-Life Balance in San Francisco’s New Knowledge Economy Milieu, keynote summary presented by the Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies, September 2002
www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/geography/research/berlin

Bibliography
Belsey, C., 1980, Critical Practice, Methuen, London
hooks, bell, 1989 Yearnings: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics, Turnaround Press, London
Massey, D., 1994, Space, Place and Gender, Polity Press
Massey, ‘Blurring the Binaries: Hign Tech in Cambridge’ in Paechter et al, 2000, Knowledge, Power and Learning, Paul Chapman
Rogoff, I., 2000, Terra Infirma, Routledge, London
Biography – Juliet Sprake

Juliet is a lecturer in the Design Department at Goldsmiths College, University of London. Previous to this she was a teacher in inner city schools for 10 years. She is currently studying for a PhD at The Bartlett, University College London and her research interests are: unpredictability in design process, everyday and architecture, critical theory and design methodology, geographical issues in location and mobility. Juliet also works as a consultant with London Open House, Arts Inform and the Design Museum, London – producing resources and evaluation reports for organisations that seek to consolidate architectural practice in education.