

## **An Anthropological Approach to Cities**

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### **Abstract**

*Anthropology is concerned with finding the rules that define the way of life of a culture or another and is, in its right, a very important source of inspiration for architects and urban planners who need to provide spatial solutions to the problems of the community. Thus the way space influences human activity and quality of life is common research ground for architectural theory, urban planning and anthropology in equal measure. Nowadays cities double in size every few decades mostly through immigration so the way we adapt to this tendency is vital to the wellbeing of newcomers and old citizens alike. The concern of this paper is to underline a few success strategies that urban planners found to work when adapting cities for people's needs, basically employing methods used by anthropology to solve the most stringent urban problems. Naturally most of these problems come from overcrowding, from the excessive growth that cannot be sustained by the limited area the city has around it. With rapid increase in size comes rapid increase in traffic which in turn translates to an increase in commuting time. Pollution is another essential problem derived from the above. Last but not least, more recently we encounter the problem of urban blighting - a process by which entire neighbourhoods fall into disuse, degradation and eventually oblivion. All these sum up in the form of an ever more present need for sustainability that our cities will need to meet in order to survive the years to come.*

### **Rezumat**

*Antropologia se preocupă de descoperirea regulilor care definesc modul de viață al unei culturi sau alta și este o foarte importantă sursă de inspirație pentru arhitecți și urbanisti care trebuie să ofere soluții spațiale la problemele comunității. Astfel, felul în care spațiul influențează activitatea umană și calitatea vieții este un domeniu de cercetare comun atât pentru teoria arhitecturii, urbanism cât și pentru antropologie. În zilele noastre orașele aproape că se dublează ca populație la fiecare câteva decenii, în cea mai mare parte din cauza imigranților, astfel că modul în care ne adaptăm la această tendință este esențial pentru bunăstarea celor nou veniți și vechilor rezidenți în egală măsură. Acest articol se preocupă de sublinierea câtorva strategii de succes pe care urbanistii le-au descoperit încercând să adapteze orașele la nevoile oamenilor, practic folosind metode de cercetare consacrate în antropologie pentru a rezolva cele mai stringente probleme urbane. Evident, cele mai multe dintre aceste probleme provin din suprapopulare, din creșterea excesivă și nesustenabilă a orașelor actuale care au o zonă metropolitană limitată ca posibilități de extindere. Această creștere rapidă duce la probleme de trafic care, la rândul lor, se traduc în creșterea duratei de navetă între casă și locul de muncă. Poluarea este o altă problemă esențială, direct derivată din cele de mai sus. În fine una dintre cele mai recente probleme este deșertificarea urbană - cartiere întregi lăsate în paragină, pradă celei mai crunte degradări și nepăsări. Toate duc la o nevoie tot mai stringentă pentru o sustenabilitate reală în orașele noastre în anii următori.*

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## 1. Introduction

We believe that if we look from above we can see better solutions, but people have their own logic that disregards that of the designer as Michel de Certeau puts it [1]. Most large scale insertions in the urban tissue have been approved by studying them on large scale models of the neighbourhood or city, at most taking into account the silhouette as perceived from a distance but with great disregard for all the other smaller scales - that best exemplify a correct division of the entire into smaller components like the entrance or hallway, for example. These have a significant importance as they mark the entry point and should be well perceived beforehand by first time visitors. As for the human scale and details, it is almost entirely lost in these interventions and, as such, it is no wonder that, most of the time, visitors feel like termites or, as Françoise Choay would call them, as insignificant flies in their cramped 14 square meter cells [2].

Following the disastrous effects of modernist so called "open" urbanism (especially its perversion through later stage densification projects), more and more people question the ability of architects and urban planners to actually solve the problems of the city by themselves.

Top-to-bottom urban planning gives way to bottom-up urbanism. The New Urbanism, participative design, street art and more or less spontaneous events like the "Occupy Wall Street" movement have proven the interest of the public into winning back their built environment and public space. We see a plethora of such manifestations, usually involving young enthusiasts stirred by comments on the social networks to action against the deplorable current situation of public space in this area or the other.

We see parking lost turned into small green plots for a day. We see a girl meditating in the middle of the street with all the traffic around her, we see people laying down carpets or towels in the middle of the street and taking it over as a form of guerilla urbanism. However small scale temporary interventions are perceived by some as insufficient. Despite the inventiveness, there is a bitter feeling of artificiality here. It bears more the signs of symptoms than cures and it's temporary. In the end the street reverts to its former grim state unless more is done to transform it on the long run.

## 2. Coining Some New Terms in Urban Planning

**Tactical urbanism** on the other hand is a little more goal oriented according to Mike Lyndon: *"When you're yard bombing something, it's a really cool and interesting piece of public art and it can have some social and political commentary that goes along with it, but the intent generally is not to create a longer-term physical change. Most of the things that we include in the guide generally are aiming at doing something larger. They're not just for the sake of doing it. And of course in a lot of ways, to make that work, you need to have whatever you're doing to become sanctioned or supported, either with funding or with being allowed by the municipality"* [3].

Lyndon is the main author of a two volume guide to Tactical Urbanism [4], [5] that emphasizes these ideals. Tactical urbanism features short term realistic actions, the development of social capital, a focus on the local and a phased approach to permanent change.

**Participatory urbanism** includes the inhabitants and users in the design process. Designing is done with them not for them. That is why the *charrette* as a newly coined process for design within the

new urbanism is mostly avoided and replaced by a more open approach to design (the charette, sometimes called a **design charrette**, is an intense period of design or planning activity. In the École des Beaux-arts in Paris in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was not unusual for student architects to continue working furiously in teams at the end of the allotted term, up until a deadline, when a charrette would be wheeled among them to pick up their scale models and other work for review while they, each working furiously [sic] to apply the finishing touches, were said to be working *en charrette*, in the cart. [6]). This is also why some people criticize government policies, like the Street Seats program in Portland. Enlarging the terraces of posh street cafes appeals to only the middle and upper class and therefore cannot be considered to hold cultural value for the city as a whole.

The same can be said by the Museum Square development in Cluj. It was a great thing to turn it from a parking lot into an urban square but now it's just an open air bar with very little space for anything else than consuming. Mono-functionality means less flexibility and, in the end, less appeal to an otherwise precious landmark of the city.

So how can urban anthropology help designers respond better to human needs?

- it provides a broader perspective than other social sciences because of its methods – namely participative fieldwork
- it accounts for cultural relativism, meaning that it realizes that not all interventions are suited for all people
- it emphasizes a less judgmental and biased perspective as compared to sociologists, economists & political scientists [7]

According to Edwin Eames and Judith Granich Goode [8:19], *Urban anthropology* started out as a study of the city from three main perspectives or clusters:

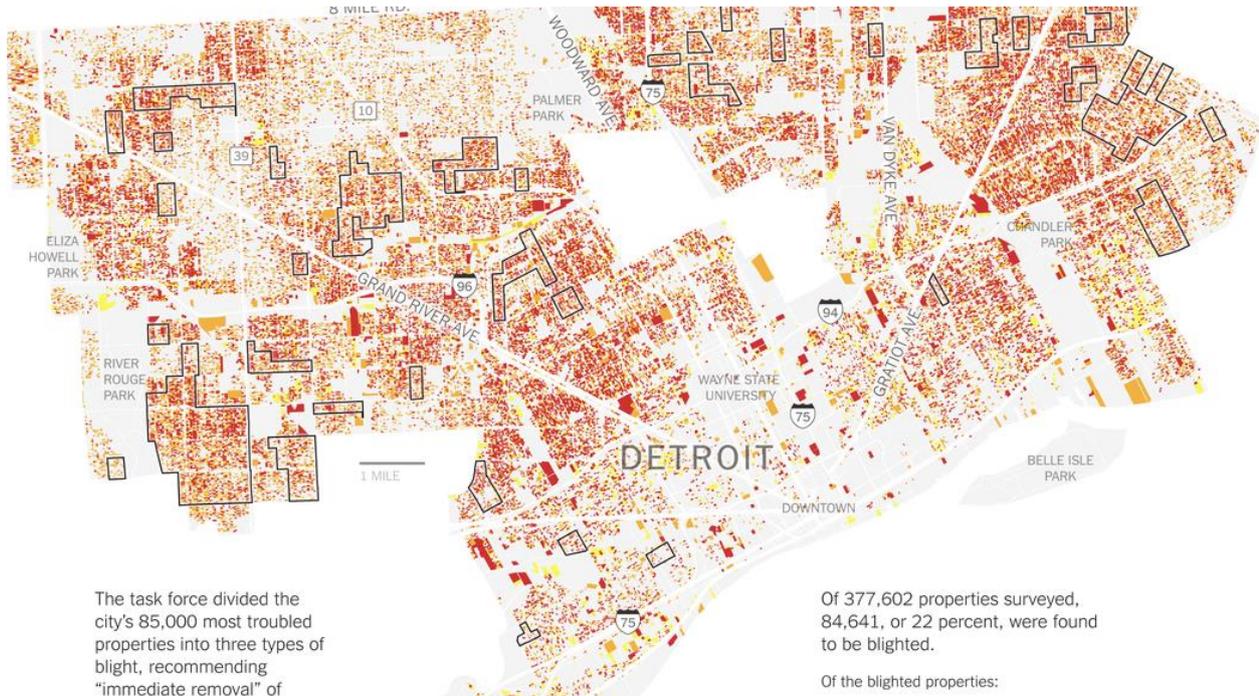
- peasants in the city cluster (anthropologists followed the peasants migrating to the city and accounted their ways of coping with this new environment)
- problems in the city cluster (subcultures that didn't fit in the main stray of the city, including minorities of all kinds)
- the city viewed from traditional anthropological perspectives on tribal societies (namely kinship, religion and socializing factors)

Therefore Urban anthropology developed three meanings [8]:

1. the study of contemporary complex society in general
2. anthropology *in* the city (the city is seen just as a background)
3. anthropology *of* the city

One example of such an interest is the *urban homesteading* tendency in North US. The “rust belt” as it's called, namely many cities along the border of Canada that fell in decline because their heavy industrial economy was no longer viable in the 60's were subject to great depopulation. Later, during the 70's, the government enacted the urban homesteading act therefore granting easy access to poor families to unoccupied houses within the affected cities: Baltimore, Detroit etc.

### 3. A case study - the rybbie community



Deteriorating conditions in the central neighborhood of Detroit, for example, decreased land value for those that decided to stay. Crime also became a problem. The government finally saw the opportunity to give away for free the foreclosed properties to neighbors. Landownership was found to be the only solution to the rampaging problem. So, in a desperate act, the municipality took over for a very short while the derelict properties, only to sell them for the symbolic amount of 1 \$ to direct neighbors who then doubled their plot including the newly purchased one and, therefore made sure no homeless or, even worst, criminal gangs would inhabit the derelict houses.



Fig. 2 One of the derelict properties of Detroit, soon to be taken over by the neighbor

Another similar situation was present in central Baltimore, where young people with little money

but with great ideas thought of moving en masse in blighted neighborhoods. These houses had been victim to speculative processes in which the prior owners of the house were misled to believe that black people were about to buy houses and, therefore increase the risk of crime in the neighbourhood. The news spread like wildfire and many landowners sold their property for far less than the real value just to avoid these problematic (yet nonexistent new neighbors). Then the speculators who bought houses real cheap wanted to sell them to african american families for far greater value but, since the neighborhood was now empty, that backfired and soon, nobody would purchase these abandoned properties. It was a heaven for squatters and crime gangs.

But some people like Adam Meister saw the potential of these houses. Apart from being in a deplorable state, they were cheap, central and available right away. Moving there alone would be very hard because of the squatters and crime issues but, if more people would move at the same time, they would be able to help each other and cope with these problems. So he started by talking to his friends that were looking for a new house and told them of his idea. Here is an excerpt from his blog:

*There is an old saying that goes a little something like this: 'You can't choose your neighbors'. Most of the time when a person or a couple moves into a neighborhood they do not bring along a friend to move next door. But what if you could do this? Not only would you and a friend move in at the same time, but there would be 15 other friends moving in also. I have been thinking and I realized that Baltimore is the perfect city for such an event to take place ... If 15 to 30 other people just like me, people who were willing to take chances and work hard, bought some of these cheap homes at the same time then we could change the area right away. The fact that somebody with the same goals in mind as you is right next-door will provide an immediate sense of security. Once people heard of these pioneers who resurrected these dead blocks then others would move in and fix up properties.*

Adam Meister, *rybbie*, apud Brooke D. Wortham-Galvin (*rybbie* = risk taking young Baltimorean). [9]

Prior to moving in, the *rybbies* developed a virtual online community with the goal of establishing what their neighborhood would look like, who would be welcome to join the community, issues of gentrification and land ownership. They encouraged landowners, regardless of their background, but refused renters as they would have no real incentive to invest in the property they didn't own themselves. It was secret bottom up urbanism.

This is actually a current practice in Florești and other suburbs of Cluj as well (though far less organized and in a different economic background), where some communities of IT specialists have been established in the newly formed neighborhoods. They also keep active online virtual communities and vote for decisions regarding their common problems.

#### **4. Our own backyard**

There are some timid but well ment anthropological studies into urban life in Romania as well. *Etnografii urbane* is one such study where anthropologists from Bucharest attempt to survey the main issues of urban life in major cities [10].

Issues range from the way citizens view the ideal of a beautiful house to night identity in Bucharest and the impact of mobile phones on the community or even to the presence of socks as merchandize in electric stores. The study self-entitles itself as the study of the ordinary, small facts of everyday urban life as opposed to the larger problems the municipality faces like traffic jams and littering.

But one of the most important studies among all is the evolution of a community of neighbors in a block of flats in Bucharest. Notable conclusions were that although the block is the same, and the neighbors are roughly the same even after many decades, their relationship has hugely varied alongside the changes in society from the communist era until today.

More than half the inhabitants were from rural background and returned to the countryside during weekends, maintaining a double life as workers in the city and part time peasants as well. The relationship during the communist era however didn't take much into account the social background and social status of the neighbors. Social events such as coffee visits were far more frequent than nowadays and sometimes neighbors would help each other, more often than nowadays. [11]

This goes on to prove that architecture alone is not the only factor that influences the range of social connections between neighbors. The fact that although very different, neighbors felt the need for communion is actually the reason that blocks, although derided as a habitation solution then and even more nowadays, have worked for Romanians more than for Britons or Americans. Society has changed though and not only for the better. Competition and social inequity seems to have embittered the neighbors of yesteryear.



Fig. 3 The entrance bench in front of most blocks is/was a place for conversation among neighbors and contemplation - similar to benches by the household fence gate in rural communities



Fig. 4 Something viable for a culture is not necessarily appreciated in another – architectural failed import from the US and UK to Cluj



Fig. 5 Eating a family meal in the street (notice the soup pot) like an urban pick-nick is very unlikely for us but perfectly fashionable in Denmark [12]

In the end, it seems that architects and anthropologists often speak two different languages when it comes to cities, like two opposite sides of a river that is quite hard to bridge. There are however notable exceptions that will be addressed as follows, architects and urban planners that put the community in the center of their design practice – a city for the people and by the people I might add.

## 5. Architecture and Urbanism for the people, by the people

Efforts to design cities better, according to the needs of the people date back a long while, with the writings of Jane Jacobs and the first critics of blind modernism in urban planning of the early 60's. Recipes for how to implement more sound urban planning principles can be traced to the early 80's.

In *Accommodating the Pedestrians*, Richard Untermyer provides concrete design examples where he attempts to refurbish an abandoned shopping center by increasing density, eliminating parking, ensuring a better and safer pedestrian access and, last but not least, a green square in the middle. He also found ways to change existing street profiles so as to be more pedestrian friendly [13].

Untermyer was not alone and one of the most famous and verbal promoters of urban planning for the people is Jan Gehl whose books have touched sensitive issues of city life including social activities, issues of traffic and overcrowding and so on.

Also notable is the former mayor of Curitiba and former governor of the Brazilian state of Parana, Jaime Lerner, architect and urban planner whose ideas, compiled in what he coined *urban acupuncture*, have stirred a radical new approach to city management worldwide. Looking back, his principles seem incredibly simple but they were perceived as radical back then. Instead of enlarging the car way on November 15<sup>th</sup> Street, one of the busiest boulevards of the city, Lerner chose to close it to cars completely, leaving it for pedestrians, bicycles and public transport only. And he did that in just 72 hours because public opinion was so openly against the project that the only way it could succeed was by simply doing it over the weekend and seeing how it unfolds. It was a gamble but one that was worth it as the most vehement opposers to the project (mostly shopkeepers on the street) soon demanded new streets to be treated the same way [14].

Lerner is also famous for his simple, cheap and very quick solutions including his plan for a natural park in the floodable area of the Iguacu River instead of trying to construct a costly concrete dam as well as for his innovative way of maintaining the large green areas of the city by using city shepherds instead of mechanized lawn mowers. Opera de Arame, built in less than two months on top of an old stone quarry that ruined the landscape is another example of urban acupuncture at its best.[15]

Finally, Lerner developed the *co-responsibility equation* to help destitute inhabitants of the favelas. They were expected to clean up the city and recycle and the authorities would give them vegetables, fruit and bus passes for their effort.[16]

Participatory design where the poor were regarded as an asset instead of the problem are ever more appreciated around the world. New Gurna – Hassan Fahty's most renowned work is an example of architecture designed to follow simple and efficient vernacular principles like ventilation in the form of wind towers with natural and local building materials and local workforce. The site is now on the UNESCO Most Endangered Sites List [17]

Social housing, built not only for the poor but using them as builders, can be found in Gramen Bank, Bangladesh and Kampung Kali Cho-de village, Indonesia, both of them recipients of the Aga Khan prize for architecture [18].

## 6. Conclusions

The rampant growth of cities will also mean the need to include the future inhabitants as designers

and, sometimes, even as building force. This does not have to be perceived as a disadvantage, on the contrary. Participative design is only a natural return to the ways most historical cities were built in the first place. If correlated correctly, it can mean a new way of assuring sustainability as well as a more desirable look of the city.

To conclude, in the words of Jaime Lerner: “if you want creativity – cut a zero off your budget, if you want sustainability – cut two”.

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