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Transit Space: No Place is Nowhere

Kirsten Marie Raahauge

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Abstract This article deals with representations of one specific city, Århus, Denmark, especially its central district. The analysis is based on anthropological fieldwork conducted in Skåde Bakker and Fedet, two well-off neighborhoods. The overall purpose of the project is to study perceptions of space and the interaction of cultural, social, and spatial organizations, as seen from the point of view of people living in Skåde Bakker and Fedet. The focus is on the city dwellers' representations of the central district of Århus with specific reference to the concept of transit space. When applied to various Århusian locations, this might highlight unforeseen meanings and paradoxes.

Keywords Transit space · Urbanity · Anthropology · Brandscape · Tableau · Space

Who Constructed the City of Paris?

"If we can say in brief that in a Bororo village, the same populations simultaneously or successively play the syntactic roles of producers and readers of their topological space, it is much more difficult to answer the question of *who constructed the city of Paris*," Algirdas Greimas stated back in 1974 ((1974) 1990:156; emphasis added). He does so with reference to the necessity of making both "sociological" (even if they happen to be subject to sociocultural relativism) and "semiotic" (formal) analyses of the city and also with reference to the higher complexity of the cities of the urban era. Supposedly, this also goes for the post-urban era, maybe even more so.

The field material from Århus reveals a complexity of competing representations. On the one hand, the city is understood as a homogeneous whole in an ideal or cosmological representation; on the other hand, it is understood as a web of various compartments and conduits in a praxis-oriented representation. These differing representations of Århusian locations show a pattern of meanings and paradoxes important to a general understanding of the city as such. The representations of Århus are determined not only by tradition and continuity but also by fragmentations and discontinuities involving a transitory aspect. Typical *transit spaces* could be railway stations, subways, or airports.

In the book "Non-places. Introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity" (Non-Lieu. Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité), from 1992, the French anthropologist Marc Augé has defined the term *nonplace* as (among others) a kind of space formed in relation to certain ends that do not intend or produce social life. The Dutch architect Rem

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K. M. Raahauge (✉)
Department of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark
e-mail: kirsten.marie.raahauge@anthro.ku.dk

Koolhaas uses the term *junk space* for a similar kind of space (Koolhaas 2000). Artists such as Robert Smithson (1979(1967)), Richard Long (1994(1991)), and Gordon Matta Clark (Attlee and Feuvre 2003) also focus on how to treat the phenomenon of transit space and transitory elements and so does the Italian architect Francesco Careri in his book *Walkscapes—Walking as an Aesthetic Practice* (2002). The concepts of liminality and communitas (used by the English anthropologist Victor Turner in connection with rites de passage; Turner 1967) can contribute to the analysis of transit space, as Augé's relation between nonplace and place has to do with liminality (being on the move from A to B) and communitas (getting there, finding (a new) identity; Raahauge 2006).

With transit space understood as an analytical concept (rather than a concrete space), it is my intention to analyze representations of the inner district in Århus. A point of discussion in this context is the validity of the concept of transit space. Transit space supposes a static space; thereby, it poses a dichotomy or a formal negation that might give rise to more problems than insights. The same could be argued concerning the concepts of space vs. place, nonplace vs. place, and junk space as opposed to a supposed quality space. Also, place and space are common words in everyday language, whereby they lose analytical sharpness and ability to make distinctions.

The Hipness of Bigness and the Sweetness of Smallness

As the context of this article is ways to deal with the *post city*, the term post-urban will be a pivotal point of this article. Whether a post-urban condition indicates a radical shift or slow changes and whether this post-urban condition is to be found mostly in empirical urban life or in theories about the field is a matter of discussion in these years. Just as it is the case with post-modernism, post-colonialism, post-anything these years (these categories can be viewed respectively as modernism in the second version, colonialism continued, etc.), the post-urban era can be seen as radically different from a postulated urban era or as a continuation of an urban condition. The underlying approach in this paper is that the post-urban condition of today is both rather similar to the urban condition of yesterday and radically different from it. One of the radical changes that has taken place is that *transit space* has become a major part of the central districts in many cities. As a byproduct, these central districts have become brandscapes, on a meta-level miming and referring to the city they represent, simulating age with new design.

This article is concerned with transit space, which will be discussed in connection with sociality, taking the starting point in a specific place, namely the city of Århus. My argument goes as follows: the concept of transit space in our post-urban era includes other kinds of space than railway stations and the like, for example, the renovated central districts, as the one in Århus, emerging in many cities these years. Furthermore, spatial definitions such as transit space are dependent upon the nature of the social life taking place, not upon what is intended by city planners which, in turn, means that transit space can be understood as places where *transitory living* is performed. The concept of transit space is powerful since it reflects important elements of the post-urban era; thus, transitory living has become a sign of hipness.

In 2001–2002, I conducted fieldwork in Århus, which is the largest provincial town in Denmark with about 250,000 inhabitants. My topic was space perception among people living in the wealthy neighborhoods, *Skåde Bakker* and *Fedet*. The people I studied are wealthy, well-connected, often well-educated, well brought-up, often even good-looking; all in all, they are well off in many ways, and they quickly absorb transformations of everyday life. In my research project, I am dealing with the city of Århus as a space of continuity and transformation, which is in the process of changing from a town with a center and a periphery to a *city-web* of fragmented zones with transport-conduits between them. These transformations are dependent upon transportation and virtual media being speedy and efficient.

Århus is a city with two contesting identities: as a big city trying to contest big brother Copenhagen and as a cozy town where nothing bad ever happens end everybody knows each other (see also Raahauge 2004). Århus residents try to combine the hipness of bigness and the sweetness of smallness.

Topology, Expanse, and Space

In the aforecited text "Toward a Topological Semiotics" from 1974, Greimas starts out with "the age-old

opposition *expanse vs*. *space*" (étendue vs. éspace), defining expanse (étendue) as "the substance that once informed and transformed by humans becomes space (éspace; i.e., form)....By becoming *signifying space*, it simply becomes another 'object'" (ibid.:139). Furthermore he states, that "any place can be apprehended only if it is situated in relation to another place, (lieu) that it can be defined only by what it is not" (ibid.), thus, establishing the disjunction *here vs*. *elsewhere* (ici vs. ailleurs; op.cit.:140).

The Greimasian opposition *expanse vs*. *space* holds the same meaning as the anthropological opposition *space vs*. *place*; an example could be the anthology "The Anthropology of Space and Place" from 2003 (Lawrence-Zuniga and Low 2003).

According to Greimas, expanse informed and transformed by humans becomes signifying space, only to be apprehended in relation to another place. Hereby, the importance of positioned points of view is stressed: a place changes signifying potentials according to the other places to which it is positioned.

One could add that a place changes signifying potentials according to the other "objects," i.e., places, but a place also changes signifying potentials according to the "subject" defining the objects and using the space, i.e., according to the intentions and praxises of the individual using the place. So, "transit space" is a natural category for a city planner with the intention of making a monofunctional space, but the category becomes meaningless in the polyfunctional everyday rumble of city dwellers.

Liminality, Transit Space, and Nonspace

The concept of transit space is fascinating because it captures our contemporaneity stressing flow, communication, transportation, globalization, and dislocation. *Transitory elements* are seen on every street corner reflecting the global trends: cellular phones, parabolic antennas, internet cafés, etc. Transit space can be understood as a contemporary version of liminality in which van Gennep's (van Gennep 1977 [1909]) *rite de passage*, and later Turners *liminality*, has been transformed to space: in the transit from A to B, you find yourself in a liminal sphere that gives room to *performative social life*.

My argument here is that other zones than typical transit space (such as the transit areas of airports, railway stations, or subways) can be labeled transit space, since *transit* is not only a spatial condition but also a social condition. In fact, social life is nourished in transit space to such an extent that performing in transit space can be interpreted as a major element in the construction of contemporary identity.

As mentioned above, the French anthropologist Marc Augé deals with transit space. Augé operates with a twofold categorization of space: *place* and *nonplace*. He states,

> clearly the word 'non-place' designates two complementary but distinct realities: spaces formed in relation to certain ends (transport, *transit*, commerce, leisure) and the relations that individuals have with these spaces. [...] as anthropological places create the organically social, so non-places create solitary contractuality. Try to imagine a Durkheimian analysis of a transit lounge at Roissy! (Augé (1992)1995:94) [emphasis added, Roissy is the main airport of Paris]

According to Augé, *place* is where we engage in social relations with each other and where many purposes come together, while in *nonplace*, we are serially connected to the other individuals present. Only accidentally and for a short time do we share the physical surrounding; moreover, nonplace is designed for certain ends, Augé mentions transport, transit, commerce, leisure. Augé tries to find a new concept for a new kind of place emerging in the post-urban era. The name *nonplace* might be polemical, but it is one that presupposes that all the other *places* are authentic and full of something (anything, in fact, but it implies a social meaning of some kind), while the nonplace is false, constructed, and empty (this emptiness also implies absence of social meaning). The relativity of different places is turned into an absolute negative space, and that makes the figure place vs. nonplace less productive.

By introducing nonplace, Augé has elaborated on the opposition *space vs*. *place* (this opposition holds the same content as Greimas' *expanse* vs. *space* (ibid:139)), constructing a subcategory of it: *place vs*. *nonplace*. Augé has seen those important new places emerging, and he stresses the importance of including social organization when interpreting spatial organization. Regretfully, he also dichotomizes and negates the topic of space presupposing that some places are

holders of *one* kind of sociality (the real, old-fashioned, existent), others of *no* kind of sociality (the false, new, socially nonexistent). The idea that certain places do not hold social meaning, i.e., they imply nothing socially, makes no sense in practice, which brings it close to nonsense. Augé recognizes transit space, but not the *everywhere* of social life. How, then, should we grasp transit space without losing sight of social life?

An example of a space that could be defined as transit space under certain conditions would be the central district of the city of Århus (see also Raahauge 2006, 2007).

The Central District of the City of Århus: Urban Going Post-Urban

Asphalt is broken open and cobblestones are laid down in the streets of Århus. A river formerly encapsulated in a subterranean pipeline is brought back to broad daylight and bordered with cafés. A 100-year-old building is torn down, leaving only the façade as entrance of a shopping mall. Although this is the central district, this change has to do with transit space and with changes of the post-urban era.

The central districts of a number of cities are undergoing *reconstruction*. Functional buildings, broad streets, rational city planning, and public space used to be an ideal for modernistic city planners. However, in the 1990s, the scene changed into a commercial display of history and authenticity. Many everyday users of the inner city enjoy the novel concepts of this quasi-old architectonic authenticity. The wealthy people I came to know loved this new-yet-old part of the city.

The residents of Skåde Bakker and Fedet use the central district for transitory living, including many kinds of transitory purposes such as walking through town while enjoying consumer objects on display, the aesthetical smoothness of the architecture, and the new reconstruction of oldness. The central district functions as an outdoor mall or an airport transit area. Furthermore, the area is dotted with pictograms and signs telling you whether outdoor beer drinking is allowed or not, who sponsored the different pavements, what directions to go, and the names of the shops. The central district has, thus, become a brandscape. This branding calls out to be noticed just like the people with the cellular phones want to be noticed as they enjoy distanced social relations.

In the central district, you can act according to a number of codes, such as the consumer code by letting yourself be fascinated by the objects on display (a new kind of fetishism) or by the "cozy code" using the area as a social meeting ground. Here again, we find the confluence of the two city identities: the big city and the small town. The slogan of Turist Århus hits the nail on the head: "Århus the world's smallest big city!"[1] The wealthy people were fond of this expression because it caught the two worlds said to exist side by side in Århus: the metropolis of transitory anonymity and the provincial town where you meet someone you know while walking in the cityscape.

If the concept of transit space is stretched out to contain such kinds of space, one might argue that transit space loses sharpness. On the other hand, these new spatial mixtures indicate that transit space has become a category too rigid for the new kinds of city space that are emerging.

Even More Post-Urban: Tableaux Devouring Other Kinds of Space

In the central district, the old city is represented as an image of its old self by means of new materials. Århus has become like a theme park thematizing itself. At the same time, it has become a consumption and leisure area. The display of objects in "authentic" yet commercial surroundings have altered the city: the old place, Århus, a medieval town unaware of itself, has been replaced by a new place, Århus, a new town consciously pointing at its medieval roots and at the same time transforming itself into an outdoor mall (for an extended discussion of similar kinds of authenticity examples and of the many conflicting meanings of the notion of authenticity in postmodern times, see Gable and Handler 2003[1998]). The city dwellers do not only use the central district for transit but it is also an arena for commerce and leisure and for many different social purposes; they do not talk

[1] "The Biggest Little City in the World" is the slogan of the city of Reno, Nevada in its competition with big brother Las Vegas. As a neon sign, the sentence spans over the main street of the city. I wish to thank Kirsten Møllegaard who introduced me to this example, very similar to our Århusian case.

about it as a transit space only but, as a combination, it is represented as an authentic place with commercial and transitory elements.

The *tableauxization* of spaces such as the central district of Århus devours other kinds of space and creates a hybridization: both homey and transitory, both a reconstruction of old age (and home-like installations such as heating elements in the pavement so the Århusians will not slip and fall in the snow and ice in the winter time), and an effective route to pass through (everything is designed to be smooth and easy to walk through). Movement and consumption have merged in city planning creating a space for passage and commerce. A new kind of space has emerged where the city itself is put on tableau and, consequently, so is social life: it is a scene not only for transitory life but also by being on display the protagonists get a chance for performing transitory lifestyle (see also Raahauge 2005, 2006).

Conclusions: Århusians and "Transit Space"

While I spend time deconstructing transit space, criticizing the concept of nonplace, and wondering how to cut the spatial cake, the wealthy city dwellers of Århus have other solutions. They have internalized the idea of transitory living, or sometimes even a transitory lifestyle, and they use it ad hoc: the situation at present decides the social life of transit space.

Many residents spend considerable time commuting to work, going back and forth between point A and point B. This *transit time* takes place in transit space (e.g., flying or driving to a meeting). But, it can be done in many ways. A husband often drives to work in his car, giving his wife a ride, using "the scenic route" through a beautiful landscape, instead of "the straight way", not getting as quickly to his destination but using the scenic route for picturesque and social purposes. One woman puts little rugs and other homey objects in her car, so her little blob of privacy keeps its integrity as a satellite home on the public road of seriality. In the airport, the relation to the other individuals present might be serial, but when you meet a friend in the transit lounge, it suddenly becomes a social transit space. Similarly, while you are talking on the cellular phone, you are displaying your social importance. Regardless of the age of the residents, everybody emails worldwide, often every day. The only exception to this practice is Christmas cards because they are part of a serene, time-honored ritual of exchange and, therefore, are sent in the old-fashioned manner. The Christmas cards are also put on display in several of the Århus homes (as they are in the US and UK) during the holiday season to signify one's social network. The Århusians use cellular phones, computers, televisions, and other transitory objects. The cellular phone, for example, is thought of as a vehicle for social relations by the well-off residents. Most of them hold the opinion that it can be used everywhere, except in trains and buses because it is offensive to the social life happening around you to engage in your own virtual social life. This bourgeois Århusian code is contrary to the everyday use of the cellular phone by the majority of passengers in Århus. On the bus in Århus, everyone else is blabbering loudly on their cellular phones.

Transitory living is smoothly mixed with the residents' lives. Of course, their wealth facilitates such choices. More importantly, though, "transitory living" is not opposed to social life, "transitory living" *is* "contemporary living." "Transit" describes a major element in interpreting our lives, reflecting our time and is, therefore, fascinating and desirable.

The complexity of post-urban city life makes it necessary for anthropologists to renew our spatial thinking. It is not a matter of finding new concepts; rather, it is a question of conceptualizing space more fluently and as less fixed. Transit space understood more fluently could mean taking for example the central district of Århus into consideration as a transit space. It also means thinking about *the transitory* as a social act and about transit spaces as scenes very apt for display of sociality.

Transitory elements play an increasingly important role in post-urban life. The number and size of highways, airports, railway stations, and subways have increased, so has the number of brandscapes, such as malls or reconstructed inner cities spaces designed for transit. Meanwhile, space understood as Greimasian *expanse* (taken empirically, not as an ideal type) shrinks precisely because it has become so easy to transport oneself quickly from place to place and to send and receive messages virtually. There is no in-between, no wasteland, no nonspace or *expanse* (in the complementary sense) when you move from A

to B and back again either inside a car or in another bubble of *place* (Greimasian *space*), often so fast that you do not really experience being in transit. Quick movement, speed, virtuality, and efficiency have become important factors in the changes of spatial organizations taking place. In parallel, the idea of transitory living has also become more influential.

Maybe we have to give way for positioned and situational definitions of places. But, we also have to give way for the fact that social life takes place everywhere—sometimes, even with more intensity on the grand and liminal scene of transit space. That is part of post-urban living.

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