

Culture > Magazine > Text and the City

On the "Signs of the City" project, urbanism and textuality

by M. Beatrice Fazi

"Urban culture", my encyclopaedia reads, "is the culture of cities". Cities all over the world - past, present and future - have social patterns, cultural behaviours and economic structures that distinguish them from rural areas. These structural and symbolical operations that we exchange with the urban environment shape our individual and relational identities. In this sense, as we drink our Cosmopolitans (irony of the name!), top up Oyster cards and dream of "A Place in the Sun", we behave as network actors in, more or less admittedly, politicised and competitive spaces. From socialism to the Chicago School of Urban Ethnography, from German sociology to British cultural studies, the city is a paradox of difference and sameness that has productively engaged intellectual debate over a diverse range of disciplines and approaches. Similarly, there are a number of official or semi-official narratives for such sites: institutions and norms that embed how the city is organized and consequently model the behaviour of the players within such dynamics. As a sort of Google Map, a life-size GPS, the "street view" of cultural policy traces the history of urban representations mapping the "megacities" as chronicles of participation, regeneration and people empowerment, dialectics of inclusion or exclusion or - in a more up-to-date and trendy vocabulary - connection and disconnection.

Yet there are other minoritarian stories of the city - oceans of messages, arrays of texts and images, islands and ghettos of signs which can be not only read but also claim to stand as actual knowledge, there for the viewer to make meaning and create change at the nexus of public and private. In such a spirit, *Signs of the City - Metropolis Speaking* is a project in between theory and practice, a multi-level conversation that takes place via images - through digital photography and new media - as a creative and productive exchange between young people, artists, youth associations, media training centres, cultural institutions and leisure groups. Such research - initiated by Berlin-based youth art organisation *urban dialogues* and carried out with the support of the Culture Programme of the European Union, amongst others - aims to explore the sign systems of four major European metropolises by gathering up a visual inventory, an archive whose access is free and open to interaction and usage. Professional artists worked for nearly two years with young people in Berlin, London, Barcelona and Sofia through about 35 workshops engaging with local/global urban environments. In addition, a specifically academic research project has been in parallel commissioned to one of the world's leading academic institutes for social research: the Centre for Urban and Community Research (CUCR) at Goldsmiths College, University of London.

The final outcomes have been presented in exhibitions in the participating cities. In particular, on 4 October 2008 London hosted a one-day conference at the Goethe-Institut where the experiences of the *Signs of the City* project were taken as a point of departure in order to develop a stimulating discussion between theoreticians and practitioners on creative researches and engagements with visual urban contexts, as well as on the use of art methodologies in participative education projects for young citizens.

Georg Simmel - pioneer of the aforementioned German social network analysis - used to say that a common stance of urban dwellers is the "blasé outlook", namely a lack of responsiveness, an indifferent attitude towards the values that characterises things and situations, which acts as a sort of immunising strategy against the claims and expectations of others. As the online image database (available at www.citipix.net) is explained in its process of conceptualisation and production and revealed as a reflection on symbols that gives way to an exploration of personal and shared configurations, one can not help but realise how - at least in this case - such blasé attitude has been replaced by new literal or metaphorical regimes of visibility.

As one of the participants commented, people are still "dazed and confused by the urban spectacle." In this sense, what Walter Benjamin once said is probably still valid: to know a city means to loose oneself in it. Far beyond trendy practices of psychogeography, for me *Signs of the City* is a project not on how we see space and time but on how things get seen and assembled

together. The 20th century gave us the metropolis as we know it but also presents us with what can be considered the greatest gift from the artistic avant-gardes: the collage. Therefore - but this is just my personal take on the event - the importance of the project and the related conference is less on the semiotics of urban aggregations - which, it can be argued, still adopts semantic methodologies - but in the potentiality for thought and action that such a praxis can allow. The archive, as a collage practice, opens up to further implementations, connections, levels. Might it be a clashing collection - like a badly photoshopped Jordan - or as harmonious as your granny's patchwork quilt, this assemblage is respectively a tool for research and the structure of collaborative projects, no less an abstraction of the city itself.

Every sign is a text. It can be read, interpreted, deconstructed. Or played - yes, I do pay tribute to those French poststructuralists! - as an exchange between signifier and signified, seen as inseparable but not united. Of course there are still many questions of how to read to the city and why we would, could, should. How the non-representational can interface, disrupt and reconstruct such a textuality, for example, and how these conjunctions might travel to all the different scales of what a city is, of how it is lived and experienced. But this, again, is probably another archive.

© M.Beatrice Fazi. All views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of, and should not be attributed to the European Commission.

© Europe in the UK 2008