

Research

The Social Account of The Space: Built Environment from the Standpoint of Sociology

Karimi, K. (Ph. D.)*

Abstract:

The issue of the relationship between space and society is one which has been ignored in the studies of both space masters (i.e. architects, urban and landscape designers, theoreticians and researchers in this filed), and society experts (i.e. sociologists, anthropologist and so on). Environmental sciences have largely filed to present a convincing theoretical framework for society, and similarly, in social sciences the concept of space and built environment has not reached a persuasive level. This failure is a missing link which is hard to deal with, but if tackled, it undoubtedly addresses many unknown problems of the built environment. In environmental sciences, there has been an effort in the past few decades to approach society in a more sensitive way. This has brought new interests in studies of built environment to pay more attention to understanding the views of sociologists on the subject of space. In this paper, however, there is an intention to focus on the relation between society and environment from the standpoint of sociology and anthropology. This is an attempt to establish a foundation for further pursuit of the missing links between spatio-environment concepts and their social counterparts by focusing on the ideas of a few prominent sociologist and anthropologists, and comparing them to contemporary thoughts on the relationship between space and society. The paper concludes that unless a new understanding of space-society is achieved, the efforts in this filed would suffer from a constant lack of an appropriate framework.

Key words:

Space, Built environment, Society, Societal approach, Structuralist, Space-society.

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*Assist. Prof., Faculty of Environment, University of Tehran.

INTRODUCTION: DIVERSION OF SPACE AND SOCIETY

The relationship between space and society is somehow understood in the urban and architectural experiences of the past. People needed places to live in and places were created to fulfil the demands of the society. This interdependence in the past, when the speed of formation and change in the built environment was slow and societies were far less complicated, was appropriately understood. It is after the huge changes in the patterns of life and construction in more recent centuries of the human history that diversion between the society and its physical settings emerge.

The incompatibility between society and environment started to grow when people became capable of creating spaces without social meaning or social patterns without physical conveyors. Transformation of the old cities into modern cities is a very good example for this argument. In the past, cities grew and expanded in a very evolutionary way during a long span of time. This gave enough time to the society and built environment to adjust and merge together. This is why the old cities seem so pleasant and logical to us. On the one hands, changes in the physical fabric of the cities were limited by the abilities of people, and on the other hand, societies could

not change rapidly due to limitations of the old societies. The result was a balanced situation that society and space were amalgamating into one entity. This situation changed drastically after the modern transformation of the cities after the Industrial Revolution and even before. Engineering solution were forced in the cities to create better places. But these changes had no time to adjust themselves with the societal transformations. These types of diversions have become more and more apparent in urban societies (including our country Iran), highlighting the problem of the relationship between space and society.

Another clear example of the diversion between society and space is found under the influence of the Modern Movement in the 20th century. It seems that in this period built environment and society were considered two separate entities and each one was doing something without consulting the other one. One master architect in the West was erasing the old fabric of Paris and substituting it with uniform skyscrapers, and one social politician in the East was suggesting a class-less society in its least spatial variety. The products of this period soon were criticised heavily. But the effects of the diversion between the space and society are still alive in many parts of the world. In fact, the attention toward the problem to 'society and space' in the past few decades is itself created by the failures of the Modern

Movement.

In a sense, the argument of society and environment might seem quite obvious. Human civilizations begin with spatial formations, and society, even in its non-civilised form, is in continuous interaction with the environment, i.e. the spatial context, considered as either built-form or natural habitat. Society could have rural, urban, regional or any other dimension, but even in the information era it is still difficult to imagine a society without a physical conveyor⁽¹⁾ Although the problems, objectives and development of the built environment all have a spatial nature, it is always and underlying notion that the investigation of the space cannot be considered independent of the society. However, when it comes to a sociologist's or spatial theorist's point of view, unexpectedly it seems that there have not been enough efforts on both sides to provide strong links between the society and space.

In this paper the main intension is to investigate deeply the ties between the environment and society. This can be looked at from two different perspectives. One is the viewpoint from the standpoint of environment and space toward society. This approach can be seen in the work and theories of many contemporary architects, urban planners/designers, landscap designers and so on, especially the ones that have realised how the diversion

between the society and space resulted into big failures in the built environment. No matter how limited these efforts have been, they have been at least well introduced. The other perspective, i.e. the sociologist account of the space, however, has been widely ignored and less introduced. This paper believes that no solution for the problem of space and society can be sought without spending enough attention to both aspects of the problem. The emphasis, therefore, in this paper has been put on the second perspective. In order to compensate for the lack of resources for analytical investigation of societal approach to the concept of the space, without any intention to reject the significance of re-visiting the concept of the space through its social meaning.

THE SOCIETAL APPROACH

The societal approach involves the conception of space through social facts and based on political-economic structures of the society as a whole (Sack, 1980). There are activities that have predominantly a collective nature. Nations, cities, armies and other sorts of social groupings are among these collective forms. These collective or social relationships in societal approaches are linked to space in two major ways. The first link is the fact that all social organizations and the individuals within them have 'spatial manifestation'

These manifestations have been recognised by sociologists and have been clearly reflected in the works of social geographers resulting in theories such as central place, land-use and gravity models. The second link is expressed by the fact that social organisations are often 'territorial'. Territoriality in this context does not mean location properties of social structures. As Robert Sack defines in his *conceptions of space in Social Thought*, it means: "the assertion by an organization, or an individual in the name of the organization, that an area of geographic space is under its influence or control (Sack, 1980)".

A great difference among societal conceptions of space relates to the classification of space from primitive societies to civilizations. There⁽²⁾ are two major properties that express the difference between the primitive and civilised conceptions of the space. The first property is about the conception of relationship between the society and its occupation of the space. In primitive societies the territorial boundaries tend to be unclear and the society is related to the earth's surface in very specific points, such as the holy place. But in more complex societies there are more clear definitions for territorial boundaries, although these definitions differ among civilized societies. The second property regarding the societal conception of space is about the elaboration of the awareness of

people of place and other people. This property is about how different societies identify themselves in time and space. The elaboration of such knowledge can be thought to be the developments of children's mind regarding the conception of space (Gurvitch, 1971). From the point of view of psychologists such as Jean Piaget, the child's awareness of the spatial relationship develops from a simple topological conception where the child is only aware of a little bit of environment beyond his/her physical occupation of the space. This grows to a more complex topological understanding of the environment, when the child grows, and then reaches to a complex level of topological/geometrical level of awareness of the environment (Piaget, 1968). This development can be seen in societal approaches as the way the conception of the environment evolves from primitive to civilized societies.

The link between society and space in civilizations is more conscious than in primitive societies. The function of this link is more clearly to substantiate the authority and its power, which is a bit less self-evident due to complexities and immensity of the society. This brings up the differences between the *social definition of the territory* and *territorial definition of the society*. The former means that the use of a space is non-territorial and determined only by belonging to a social

group; whereas the latter means that social relationship are primarily determined by location in a territory, not by social connection. The term social definition of territory was first used in Edward Soja's work (Soja, 1971), but the idea can be traced back to Henry Maine and even to Rousseau. According to this point of view territories are formed under the shear influence of social grouping and interaction, but the territories themselves cannot influence the structure of societies. Against this is the approach that is derived from the works of theoreticians who have recognised the influence of territoriality and attacked the heterogeneous urban environment of today since they do not properly reflect the territorial nature of the man and his various kinds of social groupings (Lynch, 1981; Alexander, et al. 1977).

An alternative view also begins with stressing on heterogeneity of territoriality as a fact, and not as a product of social groupings. This type of view, which draws on the non-correspondence between social groupings and territorial demarcations, have been used by sociologists, planners and others who have been concerned with social and economic processes. Max Weber in his classic statement of this view argues that aspects of place enter the realm of social relations only insofar as space is used as a means of physical communication. Therefore, "as accessibility

becomes freed from propinquity, cohabitation of a territorial place, whether be a neighbourhood, a suburb or metropolis, or a region or nation, is becoming less important to the maintenance of community relations (Weber, 1946)". Alternatively, heterogeneity is seen by people such as Amos Rapoport as pathological rather than normal. He accepts the prevalence of the homogenous neighbourhoods historically and argues that the design should create a supportive physical environment harmonizing with the common attributes and images of the social groups within it (Rapoport, 1980). Oscar Newman in this line goes on to suggest that designers should provide a hierarchically ordered, clearly defined sets of spaces that can correspond to the levels of integration of the individual within the community (Newman, 1980). A third approach attempts, however, to suggest theory heterogeneity and non-correspondence for the relationship between society and space. In this theory heterogeneity is accepted as a fact in the society and this heterogeneity is believed to have been generated and controlled by space. Jane Jacobs is among the modern urbanists who have tried to investigate the virtues of heterogeneity in the society and its relationship with the living environment. She has explained in her classic, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, how the spatial structure of the neighbourhood crested in the old cities the

safe heterogeneous urban environment which was damaged by modern planning practices (Jacobs, 1961).

STRUCTURALIST SOCIOLOGIST/ANTHROPOLOGIST APPROACH

Territoriality is one of the aspect of the society which has been discussed in societal approaches, but this issue is not limited only to territoriality. Probably, a significant imprint of sociologists on the spatial aspects of society can be found in the works of 'structural' sociologist such as Durkheim and Mauss. This association might have been created by the implications of the 'social structure' itself. Unlike 'social relations' which consist of raw materials, 'social structure' comprises models with formal properties which are independently comparable. Structure needs to fulfil several requirements: it exhibits the characteristics of a system; it provides the possibility of ordering a series of transformations; it gives the possibility of prediction; and finally it makes all the observed facts intelligible (Levi-Strauss, 1993). Therefore, the notion of space, as a major correspondence of human activity, cannot be excluded in structural sociology. Extracting a direct discussion on space from the works of a structuralist sociologist such as Durkheim, however, seems not to be a simple

task. Durkheim does not make a direct study of the spatial associations of society, but his general sociology, especially when he sets out his idea of social solidarity, is profoundly spatial (Hillier and Hanson, 1984).

Durkheim derives his idea of social solidarity from the links between the 'personal conscience', which contains the states that are personal to each of us and characterise us, and the 'common conscience' which is defined as: "the totality of beliefs and sentiments common to average citizens of the same society forms a determinate system which has its own life; one may call it the *collection* or *common conscience* (Durkheim, 1968)". "If this relationship is based on sameness and is born of resemblance, Durkheim calls it mechanical solidarity". "This solidarity does not consist only in a general and indeterminate attachment of the individual to the group, but also makes the details of movement harmonious. In short as these collective movements are the same, they always produce the same effect (Durkheim, 1968)". 'Organic solidarity', in contrast, is based on interdependence through differences, or the conflict between the personal and agreed rights: "In effect, individuals are here grouped, no longer according to their relation of lineage, but according to the particular nature of the social activity to which they consecrate themselves. Their natural milieu is no longer the natal

milieu, but the occupational milieu. It is no longer real or fictitious consanguinity which marks the place of each one, but the function which he fills (Durkheim, 1968)". This latter solidarity, Durkheim states, results from the division of social labour, principle which is lacking in the former solidarity.

The conceptualisation of Durkheim's idea in spatial terms, however, is not as profound as the ideas themselves. He does not develop the principle of spatiality in societies, but he refers sufficiently to different formations of settlements under their social solidarity. In primitive societies, where the division of labour is not observed, the disposition and configuration of society varies: "Sometimes, they [clans] are simply juxtaposed so as to form a linear series; such is the case among many of the Indian tribes of North America. Sometimes- and this is a mark of a more elevated organization- each of them is involved in a much greater group which, formed by the union of several clans, has its own life and a special name. Each of these groups, in its turn, can be involved with several others in another aggregate still more extensive, and from this series of successive involvement there results the unity of the total society. ... These societies are such typical examples of mechanical solidarity that their principal physiological characteristics come from it (Durkheim, 1968)". But the societies of organic solidarity

produce a different system: "They are constituted, not by a repetition of similar, homogenous segments, but by a system of different organs each of which has a special role, and which are themselves formed of differentiated parts. Not only are social elements not of the same manner, but they are not arranged in the same manner. They are not juxtaposed linearly as the rings of an earthworm, nor entwined one with another, but co-ordinated and subordinated one to another around the same central organ which exercises a moderating action over the rest of organism (Durkheim, 1968)". These passages are quoted from Durkheim at this length not only to show the extent of his encounter with the problem of space, but also to demonstrate the limitations of spatial concerns in structural sociology.

Some theoretical sociologists, such as Anthony Giddens, add new dimensions to structural sociology and call it 'structuration theory': "Most forms of structural sociology, from Durkheim onwards, have been inspired by the idea that structural properties of society form constraining influences over action. In contrast to this view, structuration theory is based on the proposition that structure is always both enabling and constraining, in virtue of the inherent relation between structure and agency (Giddens, 1993)". By admitting the failure of social scientists to construct their ideas around the modes by

which social systems are constituted across time-space, Giddens attempts to bring back the notion of space to social structure through the conceptualisation of order. By criticising the formulation of time- geography, presented by geographers like Hagerstad, Giddens replaces the notion of 'place' with the broader concepts of *local and presence availability*. The term 'place', he believes, cannot be used in social theory simply to designate a 'point in space'; he would rather use the concept of local for identifying the contextuality of the society. In his definitions: "Locales refer to the use of space to provide the setting of interaction in, the setting of interaction in turn being essential to specifying its contextuality (Giddens, 1993)".

Locales in Giddens theory are crucial in providing the place of systematic interactions, and the major characteristic of these locales is that they are regionalized within themselves at all levels: "Locales may range from a room in a house, a street corner, the shop floor of a factory, towns and cities, to the territorially demarcated areas occupied by nation-states. But locales are typically internally regionalized, and the regions within them are of critical importance in constituting contexts of interaction (Giddens, 1993)". Contextuality in this sense is Giddens' strongest contribution to the spatiality of society. "Context thus connects the most intimate and detailed components of interaction to much broader

properties of the institutionalisation of social life (Giddens, 1993)". Therefore, Giddens make a strong connection between society and space through the notion of context, which is the locale of social interaction, on the one hand, and the locale of spatial regionalization, on the other hand. This is a large step forward from the works of Durkheim and other structuralist sociologists, but the notion of space and spatial structure is still an indirect property of society hidden in the notion of context, which does not appear as an inherent and co-existent element of society.

Some structural anthropologists, such as Live- Strauss, have also attempted to encounter the problem of space and society. Live- Strauss rejects the attacks of some anthropologist like Kroeber against the notion of structure. He defines the objective of social-structure studies as the understanding of social relations with the aid of models, and recommends it since "... the formal properties of which [structures] can be compared independently of their elements (Levi-Strauss, 1993)". He believes it is impossible to conceive social structures outside a common framework: "Space and time are the two frames of reference we use to situate social relations, either alone or together". Levi-Strauss pays tribute to Durkheim and Mauss for drawing attention for the first time to the variable properties of space which are necessary to understand the structure

of several primitive societies. However, he admits how limited the attempts toward linking society and space are: "There have been practically no attempts to correlate the spatial configuration with formal properties of the other aspects of social life (Levi-Strauss, 1993)"; and regrets: "This is much to be regretted, since in many parts of the world there is an obvious relationship between the social structure and the spatial structure of settlements, villages or camps".

Space and spatial configuration in Levi-Strauss's opinion is an adjective formation of the social life, though not an exact image of it: "These few examples [plains Indians of America, Ge villages of Brazil, and Pueblo tribes] are not intended to prove that spatial configuration is the mirror image of social organisation but call the attention to the fact that, while among numerous people it would be extremely difficult to discover any such relation, among others (who must accordingly have something in common), the existence of a relation is evident, though unclear, and in a third group spatial configuration seems to be almost a projective representation of the social structure. But even the most striking cases call for a critical study. ... Problems of this kind (which are raised not only by the consideration of relatively durable spatial configuration of but also in regard to recurrent temporary ones, such as those shown in dance, ritual, etc.) offer

an opportunity to study social and mental processes through objective and crystallised external projections of them (Levi-Strauss, 1993)".

This is a much stronger approach than the structural and structuration sociologist, bringing up the spatial properties of society as an important aspect of it, and also suggesting that spatial studies are an important way of understanding more about society. However, this type of approach still has two major problem. Firstly, by treating space as the 'external projection' of society, this approach envisages space as a by-product of the society, and not as an independent component: "By clear implication this denies the space exactly that descriptive autonomy that structuralist anthropology has sought to impart to other pattern-forming dimension of society-kinship system, mythologies, and so on (Hillier and Hanson, 1948)". By ignoring the lack of exact correspondences between spatial domains and social types, the structural-anthropologist approach also degrades space to a 'mechanical' model, whereas due to the complexities of space, common sense recognises that space is at least a 'statistical model'⁽⁹⁾ The second problem is that even if space is accepted as a by-product of the society, the Levi-Strauss type of approach is not eventually able to show a definite way of correlating the spatial configuration with the formal properties of

social life. This is partly because of the fact that a correlation is sensible when two autonomous factors -and not one as a reflection of the other- are correlated, but the more important reason is that in an anthropological approach, as well as the sociological approach, no effort has been made to investigate and analyse space as the true locus of societies.

SOCIOLOGIST'S CONCEPTION OF SPACE UNDER SCRUTINY

According to the above discussion, it seems that sociologists have left the task of correlating spatial configuration with society to spatial theorists (such as architects, urbanists and geographers). Here it is not intended to discuss the approach from the other side, but these approaches have not been more successful to develop sufficient links between space and society. Thomas markus admists: "Despite the evident social role of buildings, the boundaries of architectural discourse are drawn so as to exclude it. ... Farmpton, Vidler, Girouard and Fortier have all broken new grounds from within architectural scholarship; Lefebvre, King, Hillier and Hanson and Eco from outside. But we are a long way yet from generally accepted social theories about buildings (Markus, 1993)". Even the works done under the subject of 'building types', Markus adds, have remained mainly descriptive and types are seen as the results of

contextual forces, and not as generators of social change. He introduces idealist architectural historians, such as Paul Frankl, as one of a few relevant approaches in this field, though 'purposive intention' theory or recognising the building as the 'theatre of human activity' (Markus, 1993). However, Markus points out later that according to Frankl the relation between society and space is through intention, and since this can never be known, even Frankl's type of linkage seems contradictory to itself (Markus, 1993). In fact, until recently the significant approaches from spatial studies toward social concepts have been fairly limited.

What is the essence of the complexity then? Why is the correlation between these two disciplines, space of society not easy when they are obviously in an intuitive and sensible interaction? Hillier and Hanson detect the problem through the criticism of a range of approaches which tend to see the problem as the correlation between separate subject of society and an object of environment: "they do not first conceptualise buildings as carrying social determination through their very form as subjects (Hillier and Hanson, 1984)". In the case of the 'territoriality' theory for instance, which is based on the idea that each individual claims and defends a clearly marked 'territory', the theory traps itself into the assumption that human beings behave in just

one spatial way and therefore the theory cannot be used for revealing the differences in spatial configuration. Even less generalised approaches, such as 'cognitive' theory, which attempts to investigate spatial order through individual biological organisms, is still more about a useful method and not a theoretical foundation which can facilitate the spatial understanding of society or the social understanding of space.

By the aid of the above arguments an approach can be developed which seems to respond more sensitively to the enigma of society and space. According to this approach two concepts of space and society, have to be seen as an amalgamated entity, both conveying the inherent elements of each other: "Society must be described in terms of its intrinsic spatiality; space must be described in terms of its intrinsic sociality (Hillier, 1973)". It does not mean that a society simply exist in space. It rather means that society evolves through space and takes on a spatial formation. This formation includes the arrangement of people in relation to each other, as well as the arrangement of space itself by means of its components in order to give definite patterns to the physical locus of society. By this approach a big step is taken toward a social theory of space which accounts for two important notions: "first for the relation that are found in different circumstances between the two types

of spatial order characteristic of societies- that is the arrangement of people of space and the arrangement in space itself- and second it would show how both were a product of the ways in which a society worked and reproduced itself (Hillier, 1973)".

CONCLUSION

By focusing on the work of some prominent sociologists, and anthropologists, it became clear that society has strong links with its physical conveyor. Space, as some of these sociologists claim, is the physical projection of society, its actual manifestation, and its companion. However, both in theory and practice, there has not been a significant effort from the sociology and anthropology to establish a framework which could be able to relate two entities- society and space- and provide an appropriate 'social theory of space' or a 'spatial theory of society'. This huge gap is the foundation for many big misunderstanding in reshaping the built environment, particularly in the past century. Insofar as a 'social logic of space' or a 'spatial logic of society' is not achieved, the basis of approach in reshaping the built environment, the spatial -as well as social- findings hold only isolated meanings and cannot be integrated into the reality of society- space realm. Whereas some new approaches have attempted to break new grounds in

reconciling society of space, still more works are needed from both sociological and spatial sides in order to enable spatial concepts to correspond to different aspects of society, such as history, economy, politics and so on, which in return enable the researches on other disciplines to contribute to the space, society and their relations.

Note:

1. The concept of virtual societies, such as Internet users, is too new to be considered as a serious issue in our discussion. It will be interesting to see how contemporary or future sociologists deal with this problem. However, in spite of the huge advances in telecommunication technology in recent years, it has been experienced that the spatial aspects of the human society have not been overwhelmingly affected, at least as some futurists would have imagined.
2. The transitional stages between primitive and civilized can also be discussed in more details, as for instance discussed in the work of Elmon Service, *Origins of the State and Civilisation* (Service, 1975).
3. According to Levi- Strauss: "A model the elements of which are on the same scale as the phenomena will be

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تفسیر اجتماعی فضا: محیط مصنوع از دید جامعه‌شناسی

دکتر کیوان کریمی *

چکیده

موضوع رابطه مابین فضای زیست و جامعه موضوعی است که در مطالعات خالقان فضا (معماران، طراحان شهر و منظر و نظریه‌پردازان در این زمینه) و متخصصان اجتماعی (جامعه‌شناسان، انسان‌شناسان و غیره) مورد کم توجهی قرار گرفته است. علوم محیطی قادر نبوده‌اند که چهارچوب نظری قانع‌کننده‌ای برای نقش اجتماع عرضه کنند، و به همین شکل در علوم اجتماعی ادراک مفاهیم فضا و محیط به درجه قابل قبولی نرسیده است. این کوتاهی به مثابه حلقه مفقوده‌ای است که به سخنی قابل دستیابی است، اما هنگامی که در جهت رفع این کمبود تلاش می‌شود بی‌تردید به بسیاری از مسائل رایج محیطی پاسخ گفته خواهد شد. در چند دهه گذشته تلاش‌هایی در علوم محیطی برای نزدیک شدن به مفاهیم اجتماعی صورت گرفته است. این تلاش‌ها با خود علائق جدیدی را در مطالعه محیط مصنوع برای پرداختن به نظریات جامعه‌شناسان در مورد فضا به دنبال داشته‌اند. با این حال در این مقاله توجه اصلی به بعد دیگر قضیه، یعنی ارتباط مابین فضا و اجتماع از دیدگاه جامعه‌شناسان و انسان‌شناسان متمرکز شده است. این کار تلاشی است برای ایجاد پایه‌ای مناسب برای تعقیب حلقه مفقوده ارتباط بین مفاهیم فضایی - محیطی و مفاهیم اجتماعی از طریق تمرکز روی نظریات چند جامعه‌شناس و انسان‌شناس مطرح در این زمینه و مقایسه نظریات آنان با تفکرات معاصر در مورد ارتباط مابین فضا و جامعه. در انتها مقاله نتیجه می‌گیرد مادامی که ادراک جدید و مناسبی از مفهوم فضا - جامعه شکل نیابد هرگونه تلاشی در این زمینه از فقدان یک چهارچوب مناسب در رنج خواهد بود.

کلمات کلیدی:

جامعه، فضا، رهیافت اجتماعی، انسان‌شناسی، محیط‌مصنوع، جامعه، ساختارگرا.

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* استادیار دانشکده محیط‌زیست، دانشگاه تهران.