

Cities as Sets: Narrative Eye to Urban Design

A course case study in combining art, design and media

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Abstract

The article presents a multidisciplinary workshop format to enforce dialogue between the disciplines of art, design and media in audiovisual ethnographical study of urban environment and its design. The City Sets workshop uses the metaphor of 'city as stage' in order to investigate critically and expressively the design elements, visual languages and narratives embedded in cities. By a multiple point-of-view audiovisual production, the participants aim to reveal narratives that define our roles on the 'stage'. In the follow-up essay writing, they consider the significance of their own artistic point of view to urban planning and design values that surround us. Reviewing the theoretical backdrop and results from the first experimental workshop in 2010, we present developments for the next workshops organized in the context of the Aalto University World Design Capital Helsinki 2012 programme in Helsinki and Paris. We argue that artistic observations through multiple narrative points of view enrich the understanding of our life in urban environment, as well as the role of design in it.

1. INTRODUCTION

"Cities as sets" is a metaphor that refers to cities as stages where passers-by are seen as actors. People with different motives and identities come to cities to live, to do business, spend free time and meet other people. These encounters have inspired many artists and designers from filmmakers and photographers to writers and architects.

Architecture in an urban environment tells about the history and the gradual development, which created the characteristics of the city, its visual urban identity. City districts differ according to their embedded stories and functions, and although the architecture is relatively permanent, the atmosphere of a place changes according to people's activities, lighting and weather. Design elements, advertising and signage in a city can be seen as sets, which also influence the appearance of a place. When a spectator moves from one quarter to another, the visual identity of the city seems to alter, and finally it is drawn by the people, the actors and the point-of-view of the spectator.

This paper frames the theoretical backdrop and presents the multidisciplinary workshop model initiated by the authors, Marja Seliger and Mika 'Lumi' Tuomola, for the Masters of Art curricula at the Aalto University in 2010. The aim of the workshop is to apply visual ethnographic methods to study and document urban scenes, designs and everyday life, and to use thus collected pictorial material to create moving and still image narratives showing multiple points-of-view to the city. The educational objective is to explore how an art production can benefit from scientific research methods, and to experiment with visuals and audio material to create representations of urban identities.

The pilot workshop was arranged in November 2010 for students in architecture, graphic design, new media and photography. It was followed by an open two-day seminar aimed for researchers, art and design students, town planners and general public. Both the workshop and the seminar got positive feedback initiating networks and collaborative art, design and research projects. Now City Sets is a World Design Capital Helsinki 2012 project with collaborators both from Helsinki and Paris: L'École Nationale supérieure des Arts Décoratifs (ENSAD), Institut Finlandais, the Paris metro company RATP, Aalto Living+, m-cult Association of Media Culture and Media Facades 2012 urban media art festival. In March 2012 City Sets workshops will be arranged both in Aalto University and ENSAD. The produced work will be exhibited in May-August 2012 in the RATP metro line displays, and as a part of the Paris Designer's Days event *1-2-3-Helsinki: Design en Seine*, together with the urban art works of the Finnish media artists Heidi Tikka, Andy Best and Merja Puustinen.

The theoretical backdrop of the workshop is introduced in the following chapter. The chapter 2.1 *Visual arts, photography and ethnographic methods in urban research* discusses how urban scenes and environment have been depicted and documented in paintings and photographs, and how similar visual methods have been used for urban research. The chapter 2.2 *Narrating Multiple Points of View* outlines some of the history of screen narratives depicting cities, building up to the visual narrative structures used in the City Sets workshop. The chapter three describes the City Sets workshop model as it was applied in the pilot workshop in November 2010. The outcomes and workshop development for 2012 are reflected in the conclusions.

2. THEORETICAL BACKDROP: VISUAL AND NARRATIVE REPRESENTATION OF URBAN LIFE

2.1. Visual arts, photography and ethnographic methods in urban research

As the objective of the City Sets workshop is to introduce visual ethnographic methods usable both for scientific research and for artistic productions, the workshop begins by elaborating the concepts of urbanization and visual identities of cities. Urban visual

culture inspires artists today, as it did already during the 19th century when the population growth was fast in many European cities and changes in social structures created the urban lifestyle as it is known still today. Technical innovations, such as electric light, central heating and transportation, improved people's lives in cities. Photography was one of the new innovations, and the development of modern city life in 1800s was documented in photographs, in addition to paintings.

Paris and Berlin, two European metropolitan centres, emerged as modern cities and engendered two of the most influential periods of modern art, namely French Impressionism and German Expressionism (Hollein 2006, 8). Both styles acutely analysed the new urban lifestyle in visual terms as artists depicted city scenes and events in paintings and drawings. Finnish artists travelling to Paris and Berlin to study introduced new urban art and design trends to Finnish audiences. Olavi Paavolainen promoted the urban lifestyle in his book *Nykyaikaa etsimässä*, which was a manifesto to modernism, illustrating with photographs current arts and design in European metropolis. (Paavolainen 1929)

Urban scenes were popular topics also for the first Finnish photographers. The oldest photo taken in Finland is most likely the picture of Nobel's house in Turku photographed by Henrik Cajander in 1842 (Kukkonen and Vuorenmaa 1999, 29). The technique used by Louis Daguerre is applied in that photo, and also the scene resembles the *Boulevard du Temple* photograph taken by Daguerre in 1838. There are few photographs showing the urban development, which took place in Helsinki during 1800s. Helsinki was established already in 1550, but Turku was the capital until 1812. The Helsinki Cathedral was inaugurated in 1852 and the oldest panorama photo of Helsinki is from the tower of the Cathedral taken in 1866. (Helsinki City Museum 2010)

Helsinki City Museum was founded in 1911 and since then professional photographers have been employed by the museum to document architecture and people's everyday-life. Signe Brander (1869–1942) is known as the first Helsinki photographer, and her pictures illustrate how a small town became a city. Signe Brander's Helsinki photographs are more than documents, for the artistic quality of her loved pictures rejoice people still today in several publications (e.g. Alanco 2004; Alanco and Pakarinen 2009). Also Ivan Timirjasev (1860–1927) photographed everyday life and events on the streets of Helsinki at the beginning of the 20th century (Kukkonen and Vuorenmaa 1999, 76–77).

In the 1960s the focus in photography turned towards documenting social issues such as poverty of urban immigrants or racism. Visual sociology -term came into existence as sociologists were inspired by the work of documentary photographers (Harper 1998, 28). Douglas Harper points out that the documentary photographers often had deep involvement with their subject and thus an insider's knowledge. They were not sociologists and their books lacked theoretical frames, but by exposing social problems they had an impact on the fieldwork practices of sociology.

In 1960s and 1970s also ethnology expanded its methodologies from traditional inventory and historical studies towards quantitative research and current issues, including fieldwork to research urban lifestyles. Methods developed in sociology were applied in an extensive research programme which Helsinki City Museum implemented in 1970–1975 to survey and document urban lifestyles, living quarters and environments in four different districts of Helsinki: Museokatu, Vaasankatu, Puumäki and Tapanila. In addition to questionnaires and interviews, visual ethnographic methods were used and the outcomes of the research include photographs, carefully drawn floor plans, descriptions of furniture and interior decorations in people's homes (Peltonen 1997, 222). The research programme was carefully planned and ethnographic fieldwork organized so that each research team had an interviewer, a photographer and a graphic artist. The residents in the four areas welcomed the researchers, gave their time for couple hours' interviews and allowed their homes to be photographed and drawn. Marja Seliger who was a graphic design student and a research assistant in the project, has applied visual ethnography methods later in her research about visual rhetoric in outdoor advertising (Seliger 2008).

There have been remarkable changes in photographic techniques and methods since the advent of visual anthropology. Douglas Harper writes about new ethnography emerging from the postmodern critique. When ethnographic knowledge traditionally derives from the interaction between the 'subject' and the 'researcher', the postmodern critique questions the normal assumptions surrounding this interaction. The critique questions also the 'truth' of documentary photography and suggests that the meaning of a photograph is constructed by the maker, the viewer and the viewing context (Harper 1998, 30–32). "The idea of ethnography as 'partial truth' rather than 'complete document' lies at the basis of the new ethnography." (Harper 1998, 30)

In visual arts the interaction between an artist and a subject has traditionally been different than in ethnography. An artist observes the world and documents scenes and events by sketches to create a new artwork. Sometimes the sketches become pieces of art, and in some cases they could be called artistic research. For example, the skilful drawings and notes of Leonardo da Vinci contributed to medical science and engineering in addition to visual arts (Klein 2008). There is an analogue to sketching when artists use cameras for observations and to collect images, which they later on transform and combine with other visual elements to create artworks. Artists intend to show new points-of-views about the subject, whereas a researcher using ethnographic methods aims to transform the material into exact scientific knowledge.

2.2. Narrating Multiple Points of View

We used the metaphor of 'city as stage', City Sets, in order to investigate critically the design elements, visual languages and narratives embedded in the cities. Narratives define people by defining their roles on stage. City design has multidimensional impact.

For example, it attempts *to inform* people about their space and rules (e.g. street and traffic signs), *to identify* places and events (e.g. shops, restaurants, exhibitions), *to persuade* people to change their behavior (e.g. advertisements and promotions) and *to tell stories* about past, present and future (e.g. monuments, building plots and people's interaction in space). These dimensions together with architecture create city's identity, it's 'big story.'

As city itself is of man-made design, among unintentional elements, it was important to first outline how the object itself directs its observer's attention. Awareness of the city as a set that constantly directs our attention - not unlike a stage of dramatic improvisation, which "offers us a set of rules for... participator representation and action" (Tuomola 2009) - was our key starting point before pointing camera's observing eye at the city.

The still and moving image presentation of city has a long history to draw upon, as demonstrated in previous chapter. One of the first representatives of the city symphony genre, in which the main focus of moving image narrative is the city itself, almost like a character, is *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927) by Walter Ruttmann. Today the semi-documentary film can be reviewed as a socialist-modernistic film about the city as a well-oiled machine in which various elements from people to traffic system, factories and places of entertainment all play their perfectly designed roles. While bringing forward the investigation of city as the main theme of cinema, *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* no doubt loses the individual experience and alternative, multiple points of view to the city, as deploying the *linear* structure of screen narrative: "All events of the narrative take place in chronological order, as if the camera had merely followed the action in real life, and the narrative was the edited highlights." (Parker 1998)

The single point of view of directorial vision, like that of *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, is deliciously discussed in John Smith's short film *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976), in which the fictional director's voice-over seems to direct random events that unfold on a London street corner. "It quickly becomes evident that the scene is not responding to the voice, but vice-versa. Through staggering image and sound track, the voice seems to gain powerful authority over the scene, predicting events that the images thus confirm. How much is this simple trick like viewing the evening news? Much like Chris Marker's best work, Smith's film exposes the constructedness of the real in a way that is fundamentally destabilizing." (White 2007) By reversing the directorial point of view to happen after the shoot, Smith reveals how any frame of camera can be made to appear anything director/reporter intends. At the same time, the idea of visual narrative being able to present real city events *de facto*, is put to question.

So how then to achieve a closer to truth, more multi-voiced, visual narrative of cities that themselves direct our observation by design, while (wo)man-with-the-camera is necessarily limited to a frame and directorial point of view? Contemporary media offer

us many alternatives, out of which we present few and our choice for the workshop methodology.

Run Lola Run (1998), directed by Tom Tykwer, shows us quite a different Berlin from that of Ruttman. The individuals and their different choices affected by the choices of others – particularly those of the main character Lola – come to focus, as the film portrays three possible worlds and sequences of actions depending on how Lola solves the problem of his boyfriend Manni. The film is constructed of three runs of Lola as she rushes through the streets of Berlin to save Manni. After the first two runs the film goes back in time and shows the alternatives of Lola's action and its subsequent impact on the lives of citizens, thus handling the city space and its dwellers as a fluid system influenced by our choices of action. Philip Parker (1998) calls the visual narrative structure *circular*: "Here the narrative is formed from repeated events. This has been used in one-off narratives such as *Groundhog Day* and the various episodes of *Road Runner*. However, its major contemporary use is in the form of interactive games from *Super Mario* to *Doom*."

In the same year than *Run Lola Run*, Peter Howitt's *Sliding Doors* (1998) painted us a vision of two Londons. Two alternate realities open when the protagonist Helen either makes it in time through the sliding doors of the Waterloo station underground train or not. Maureen Thomas (2003) sees the narrative as a *branching* structure, "where the main character steps through sliding doors into an alternative version of her reality, and the movie switches between events in both."

While *circular* and *branching* visual narrative structures offer more opportunities than *linear* structure to present a multi-voiced image of city and its design, we still wanted to bring in the *simultaneous multiple points of view* in the city - its choral voice, if you will - in still and moving image presentation for ethnographical research purposes. Mike Figgis' *Timecode* (2000) that depicts a Los Angeles based melodrama from four simultaneous points of view that open up very different views to the city from inside a limousine to therapy rooms, acting agencies and L.A. streets, proved inspirational.

For narrating the multiple points of view to city, we have so far optimized our narrative presentation tool City Sets Media Player, introduced in the next chapter, to show still and moving image collections by a split-screen technique (see pictures 1-6). At the same time, the tool also enables associational review of the annotated visual material. In Parker's (1998) *associational* narrative structure "the narrative is formed from a series of moments which are linked by common elements and do not rely on chronology or episodic relationships to produce their meaning or effect."



Picture 1. City Sets Media Player is an online-server designed to store the pictorial materials collected in the project. (City Sets Media Player 2010/2011)

3. APPLICATION OF VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY AND MULTIPLE POINTS OF VIEW NARRATIVE IN CITY SETS WORKSHOPS

The City Sets multidisciplinary course begins with a one-week intensive workshop including lectures, tutoring and fieldwork in small groups. The lectures and tutoring integrate the visual research and narrative presentation approaches introduced in the second chapter. The course continues with students' individual working period to write an essay about the fieldwork experience.

In the pilot workshop 2010 students working in pairs were given a route in one of the central districts in Helsinki to observe, explore and document urban life and design elements. The participants in the workshop were architecture, graphic design and new media students representing five different nationalities. In the tutorial some facts about urbanization were discussed and the question of local and global visual cultures aroused. Design in cities and city sets were studied and terms defined. The design elements and their functions in cities were divided into four categories: information, promotion, identity and stories.

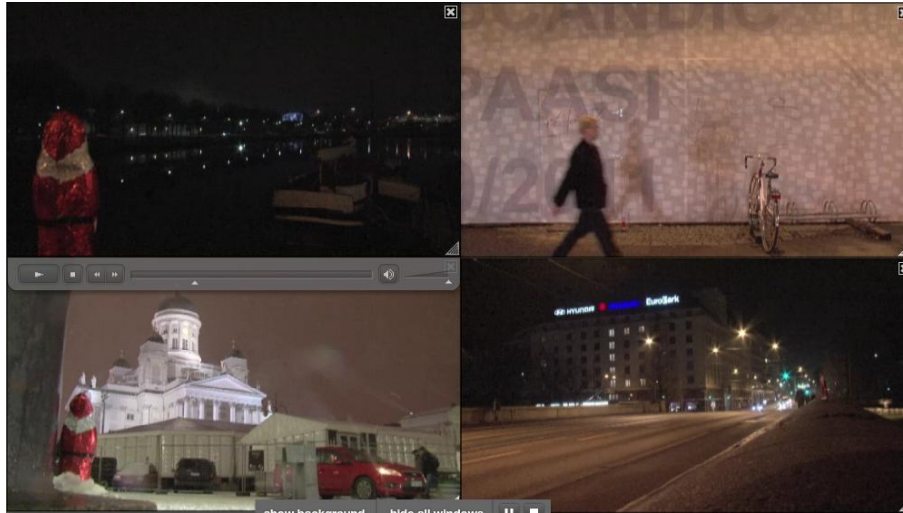


Picture 2. City Sets Media Player can be used to watch the videos in bigger size and to create multiple point of view collages of them. The "Making the City" picture on the left is from the narrative produced by Satoko Hinomizu and Jian Li.

An on-line server, called City Sets Media Player (<http://citysets.net/>) was specially designed for the project to upload and save the visual materials (Pictures 1–2). Each group created their visual narrative by applying and editing the media clips collected during the fieldwork. At the end of the week four multi-point-of-view visual Helsinki narratives were presented and discussed.

The weather during the workshop week in November was very cold and the lighting conditions were not ideal for shooting films outdoors. This hindrance did not scare the students, but had a special effect on some narratives. For example Ben Dromey and Anna Nyssönen filmed the empty streets in the darkness of November nights and watched lonely persons walking down the streets in central Helsinki (Picture 3). The film shows that people are more concerned with their preoccupied minds than the immediate environment, into which Ben and Anna placed a chocolate Santa Claus to watch unnoticed the empty streets of Helsinki.

Observing and filming the cityscape of Kallio during a freezing cold day, Mina Arko and Teresa Winter popped in a small restaurant to warm up. Enjoying the warm atmosphere in the restaurant they discovered that the liveliness of Kallio district has nothing to do with architecture and houses but rather with people living in them. People became the subject of their study as they spent a full day documenting people's stories in interesting places (Picture 4). Mina and Teresa concluded that without the fieldwork exercise they would have never entered those places in Kallio. The stories of their multi-linear narrative were recorded in a typical local Finnish restaurant, an Asian market and a gun shop.



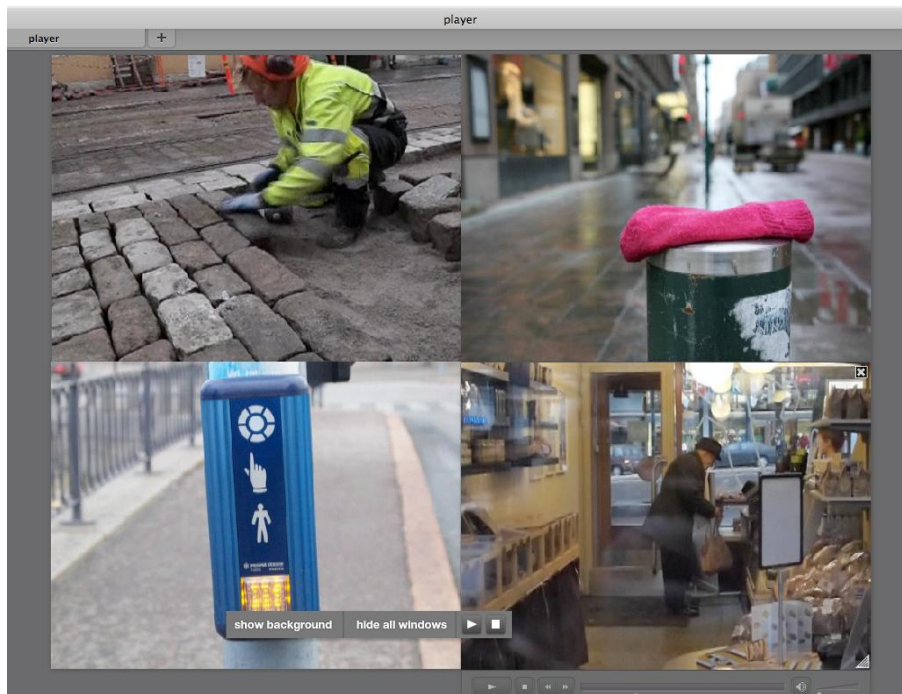
Picture 3. In the final presentation the screen was divided into four parts. The multiple points of view narrative of Ben Dromey and Anna Nyysönen depicts the central district of Helsinki with empty streets and lonely people in November.



Picture 4. The narrative of Mina Arko and Teresa Winter shows life behind the shop windows. They documented stories of people in a local restaurant, an Asian market and in a gun shop.

Nature played an important role also in the narrative of Satoko Hinomizu and Jian Li. While photographing design elements in the city, they discovered interesting patterns and details formed by snow and ice on the streets. They divided their design elements into two categories: intentional design and unintentional design. Some accidentally forgotten objects, for example a red gap, belonged to the latter group in addition to the nature made designs. When filming people's activities in the city, Satoko and Jian observed also animals, dogs and birds, who seemed to be city dwellers. The aim of their work was to capture the character of Helsinki from the viewpoint "What is making the

city?" Based on that goal they divided the activities into two categories. Firstly, there were people and animals, the actors, who formed a part of the cityscape just because they were there, walking, talking and watching. Secondly Satoko and Jian documented people who were literally making the city, for example builders and painters (Picture 2). For their final multi-linear narrative the four categories of visual materials were shown simultaneously on the screen divided into four sections (Picture 5).



Picture 5. The split-screen multi-linear narrative of Satoko Hinomizu and Jian Li depicts simultaneously people making the city and design objects which are either intentionally or unintentionally placed.

The narrative of Suse Miessner and Heikki Nuutinen was again different as they observed the architecture and the type of activities, shops and institutions on their route. They discovered four contrasting sections, which they named Residence, Jewellery, Big Power and Modern Centre. To illustrate the contrasts they applied different speeds into the video clips and added music to describe the rhythms of those four city districts. The screen divided into four equal-size parts was the form of exhibiting the multi-linear narrative (Picture 6).

At the end of the City Sets seminar the students presented their narratives and got valuable feedback from the visiting lecturers. In their course assessments the students rated the City Sets experience very useful and in the essays they described the manifold learning outcomes. To give one example, Satoku Hinomizu reflects his own production to the lecture of François Penz who introduced the concept of narrative layers: "According to François Penz's presentation, narrative layers are something that audience bring in while watching cinema by themselves to interpret the film. They are based on the expectation of what is being told, and it is not the action but the set, which

makes this expectation. By looking at any part of the city we can extract four 'narrative layers' such as people, zoning (city planning), story of the space/building, and framing." In his essay Satoku analyzes one video clip of his own depicting an old man buying bread in a bakery. She examines the four layers in the film and begins to create a narrative: "Who is this old guy? Is he coming to the bakery everyday? He must have his favorite bread that he always buys? Does the shopkeeper remember him because of his charming good-bye sign? (layer of people) The place looks urban (layer of zoning). If the Glass Palace would not exist, this scene would never have occurred (layer of the space). Reflection of the window gives the effect of keeping certain distance to observant that it is a true scene of the ordinary life (layer of framing)." Satoku concludes that the analysis of narrative layers made him to comprehend the concept of 'city as a set'.



Picture 6. The split-screen narrative of Suse Miessner and Heikki Nuutinen illustrates four different identities of city districts, which they discovered through photo observation.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

The workshop participant Satoku Hinomizu's observations and the workshop results in general illustrate that the 'cities as sets' metaphor can function well in opening up city for critical visual investigation. The application of ethnographic methods to document city as a construct of intentional design with unintentional elements has proven to be useful for analysing the complexity of city environments and human actions. The experiment shows that when attempting to remain open and humble when pointing out the camera, the fieldwork may bring unexpected results, which can surprise even the observer. Based on the pilot workshop documented in this paper, we are convinced that the final presentation format demands a narrative structure that includes simultaneous

multiple points of view. The outcome may raise new artistic, design and visual urban narratives and entities in between the points of view presented as a chorus of aspects. Meanwhile, the deep penetrating visual ethnographical research requires actual fieldwork and visual production in order to acknowledge the limitations of camera, frame and the subjectivity of the points of view, however chorally presented.

In short, the paper at hand proposes the following methodologies to investigate the life and design in the cities: 1) the metaphor of 'cities as sets' to be applied to explore designs and human actions, 2) visual urban ethnography, i.e. photo-observation, filming, video recording and interviewing as method to document and collect material, 3) complex multiple points of view narrative as the format to present the results of exploring cities and 4) 'eyes on with minds on' research and production workshop format to convene multidisciplinary participation and encouraging artistic expression.

Since the November 2010 workshop described in the previous chapter, the City Sets Media Player application has been developed, its database updated and the visual and interface design improved upon. In March 2012 two City Sets workshops were arranged, the first one in Aalto University School of Arts, Design and Architecture, Helsinki, and the second in ENSAD, Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs, Paris. The theme of the workshops was Metro, the underground, and some of the students' photographic production will be exhibited in different metro station vitrines along RATP metro line 14 during June–August 2012. The visual presentation accompanying this article in Cumulus Helsinki 2012 Conference will show outcomes of the Aalto & ENSAD collaborative workshops.

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