Cutting the city in half : ambiences, transects and projects

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INTRODUCTION

The term 'transect' is defined by geography as "a field observation device - or the "representation" of a given space, along a linear path and based on the vertical dimension - aimed at highlighting superpositions, spatial successions or associations between phenomena" (ROBIC, 2004). Transect is a practice whose elements were suggested at the early 20th century, mainly by Scottish urban-botanist Patrick Geddes, in order to be applied to the development of a given territory. Patrick Geddes insisted on the "synoptic" potential of the section, i.e., on its ability to give visibility to reports arising from long historical periods that can still be observed in present days, that link collective forms of human life to the structures of physical geography.[1] Geddes' use of this graphic projection also aimed at bringing together different disciplinary perspectives in a single visual representation. This factor certainly explains why, from that time on, the merge of graphic and cultural conventions of architectural section with those of the transect, which were practiced in the fields of human geography and biological sciences, was outlined. The resumption of the famous Valley Section by Team 10[2] - which had been envisioned by Patrick Geddes fifty years earlier and resulted from the geographic works by Humboldt - opened room for the hybridization of the two genres at the service of the architectural and urban design that, until then, remained undeveloped.

Nowadays, the transect is often revisited, both as representation technique and field practice. In the opinion of the present authors, it is a hybrid device between technical section and sensitive path: it is built through drawings, photos, measurements, texts or videos, as it is practiced *in situ*, as well as by perceptions, speeches, wanderings and, overall, through walks and crossings.[3] The transect aims to be a tool to both question and express sensitive spaces and experienced practices by rehabilitating the atmospheric dimension in urban representations and by enabling the inclusion of local narratives in specialized debates between disciplines.

Transect understanding and analysis processes follow the development of a method based on sampling, selection and assembly procedures; such a method can become a projective device supported by its repeatability and differences from other devices. Next, topics that would configure this device in the future are introduced; they show (as well as

1. Patrick Geddes' first publications, his famous valley sections, date back to 1925. For an archeology of this idea, see Ferretti (2012).
2. See the famous "Doorn Manifesto", by Peter Smithson (1954).
3. This article repeats and develops two articles by Nicolas Tixier *et al.* (2016; 2018).

suggest) the gestures, experiences and likely transformations, both in the act of living and in flows of people, activities, vegetation, ambience, among others.

Transect is not a unidisciplinary tool, it is an open support to knowledge and to representations of all disciplines that, therefore, can dialogue in a multipolar way. Its ability to identify and collect both unique and paradigmatic situations is based on the practice of *inventorying*. Its ability to compare things and situations is also associated with the concept of *album*. However, it remains open like Aby Warburg's *Atlas Mnémosyne*.[4] There is no need of having a formatted framework or a unit of representation modes. One can go from one scale to another, from one document to another. One can add and remove elements to the transect, whenever necessary. It is literally a work plan (a table, a wall, in the digital or physical environment) that can be shared and changed, since documents placed side by side, based on their association with a given context, produce meaning along the section line.

The transect enables a unique space and a non-hierarchical temporality, since it allows the emergence of different projects or experiences to be discussed and conducted. Totality is initially no longer a project defined by the classic game of scales (territory reading, masterplan definition, architectural design, details' production) or limited to the application of technical solutions; it is not a project that would be only imposed by its designers or that, conversely, would only arise from users' practice. It is, above all, an intermediate space for dialogue and negotiation, where all actors in the territory (from residents to designers, from politicians to managers) can find the project material in compliance with their scale, areas of expertise and practices. Building spaces based on this encounter (between disciplines, between actors, which are herein understood as having their own language) requires asking translation-related or, more precisely, translators' questions, as a third party between two unknown languages that also do not understand one another, but a third party that does not disappear, that remains present. As things are not translated from one language to another in our work field, it is necessary creating conditions to enable reading and understanding different languages and modes of representation adopted by different actors. It is also necessary creating devices that,

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4. The *Atlas Mnémosyne* by Aby Warburg is a large (flat) montage of photographic reproductions capable of "replacing the transmission issue with the matter of its exposure [thus, organizing] a network of tensions and anachronisms between images". Based on the vertical juxtaposition of synoptic panels, and without the intervention of the verbal register, "the Warburg's Atlas presents, on each plate, a multiplicity of images, so that the comparisons become multipolar". "Warburg's Atlas multiplies the framework and the scales". The atlas based on Warburg was not designed as a book, but as a worktable open to the reading and manipulation of new images. "Atlases are capable of creating heterotopias by operating across divisions and sets of domains that are often separate from one another" (MICHAUD, 2012; DIDI-HUBERMAN, 2013).

according to Paul Ricœur (2004), are capable of welcoming any language, of showing "linguistic hospitality" and of organizing contents in order to pass them on and to make them dialogue with other contents. This third-party role should be a wish, rather than an obligation - as Ricœur has already said - to help "improving one's own language".

The transect potentially appears as a framing power because it does not belong to the previously defined categories of mobilized elements and due to exchanges it is restricted to. It may even seem like an implicit criticism of urban zoning and of its regulations, which enables bringing local singularities and residents' practices back to the core of discussions in order to work on the future of things for and with their environment in different ways.

APPROACHING URBAN DAILY LIFE BASED ON AMBIENCES

The theoretical interest on the transect is mainly explained by the fact that it is used as a means of approaching a plural representation of aspects observed at the heart of any urban situation: the unity and uniqueness of a given place, its daily life and its ambiences.

There is no evidence enough to describe what would make the urban aspect something banal, part of the daily routine of dwelling. Moreover, it is even harder to take it into account in the logic of a project. And yet, we pay attention, and sometimes we are even "caught" by the perceived ambience at the time we arrive to a certain place: we are attentive to excellent lighting, to a particular sound, to how we are energized by a lively public space or otherwise calmed by it, to how we are led to contemplation in a place steeped in calm… Often singular and irreducible, the ambience of a given place can change depending on the day, time, climate, public and on our actions. However, despite these variations, it often presents features that give the place an identity that enables acknowledging it.

We experience and are tested by ambiences on a daily basis. Although we can easily feel and share our sensitive experiences, paradoxically, the concept of ambience escapes any significantly-strict formal definition. It lies on what is singular, it is a whole whose parts do not separate from one another before our sensory channels, actions, perceptions and representations. However, we only know how to analyze it by dissecting it in a plural

way, sense by sense, topic by topic. Thus, the more our knowledge about ambiences' composition and form of constitution gets more accurate - they are enriched by sound, light, thermal, tactile ... as well as by spatial and social analysis - the more we risk losing what makes its unit, this always unique relationship lived in the place. "A fleeting singular, a dispersed plural", according to Jean-François Augoyard (2007).[5]

TRANSECT, THE CONTEXTUALIZED DIALOGUE OF SEIZED ELEMENTS

Studies about ambiences are based on the cross-checking of different data such as spatial typology; acoustic measurements; aero-hygro-thermal fluids; sunlight and lighting; direct observation of uses; collection of statements by users, inhabitants and local actors; history of the construction and environmental conditions, among others. Reporting this data and crossing them in a meaningful way is not so obvious: some data are graphical, whereas others are metric, temporal, textual, photographic, or even video- or sound-based. In addition, each record presents significant variations in data nature and status. The transect appears as one of the possibilities of literally putting data deriving from different records side by side. These data interact with each other, based on their locations and distances. They respond to, complete, blend to, contradict, resonate and ignore each other, among others. They are not just organized in front of each other; they initially present an extremely specific thread, since they are always in line with the cutting edge, with the transect layout. It is a major difference from Aby Warburg's atlas, which does not presuppose any context on the worktable before depositing the elements. This association between data and cutting edge can be located in a very accurate way (through direct association with a given location) or in a more globalized manner, based on the likely distance one can cover to place the element upwards (the sky) or downwards (the ground).

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5. With respect to the principles of debate about the definition and effectiveness of the concept of ambiences, we herein refer to some references in chronological order, starting with the number organized by Luc Adolphe, "*Ambiances architecturales et urbaines*", in *Les cahiers de la recherche architecturale et urbaine* , N. 42-43, 3rd trim. 1998. Marseille, Éditions Parenthèses; then, the collective work organized by Pascal Amphoux, Jean-Paul Thibaud, Grégoire Chelkoff (eds), *Ambiances en débat*, Bernin, ed. A la Croisée, 2004 ; the work by Jean-Paul Thibaud *Enquête d'ambiances. Éprouver la ville en passant*, Genève, Éd. MetisPresses, 2015. And, most recently, studies by Gernot Böhme, Tonino Griffero, Jean-Paul Thibaud, Juhani Pallasmaa, *Architecture and Atmosphere*, ed., by P. Tidwell, Tapio Wirkkala-Rut Bryk Foundation, Espoo, 2014; by Gernot Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, ed. by Jean-Paul Thibaud, London, coll. Ambiances, Atmospheres and Sensory Experiences of Spaces, Routledge, 2016; and by Tonino Griffero, *Quasi-Things. The Paradigm of Atmospheres*, Albany, Suny Press, 2017.

The set of arranged elements generates a triple-open urban narrative, in the sense that:

- the transect reader is the one who decides what he/she is going to read and in what order he/she is going to do it, what he/she is going to connect with, what he/she is going to keep as important, among others;
- new data can always complete the transect; thus, they can reinforce or influence the stories and deposited elements; and
- the future of the place is not registered, but it takes shape among the profile, data and stories of the place, thus enabling the link among past, present and future.

It is important going back to an essential point, which is the reason why each transect must be built: the aim of the research matters as much as the *raison d'être* of a potential project. This initial issue strongly guides, without a doubt, the transect line and data collection. Therefore, in order to meet these goals, we must do more than just "investigate", interpret, associate and then design one or more likelihoods of evolution, rather than a solution, based on specificities of the context, by giving ourselves creative freedom. As in any research, the elements capable of working with the largest possible number of clues for interpretations and future projections derive from a given context. Such interpretations and projections, all together, form narratives capable of explaining the likely outcomes of each situation (TIXIER, 2011, 2013; POUSIN *et al.*, 2014).

Therefore, whenever there is orientation about the type of data to be collected at research implementation time, there is also the selection of data to be kept and deposited in the transect. Thus, it is necessary finding the right amount of data to be selected in this operation (not so little to the point of leading to a poor transect in stories and likely developments; nor too much to the point of hindering visual associations between the taken elements and their context). Working with several (and different) disciplines, both in data collection and transect construction processes, not only helps guiding the selection of such amount, but also accepting what each person wants to highlight and, consequently, to group. The size of the worktable and the scale selected for the transect play an important role in this operation. Once the elements were placed in the transect, they can be brought both into the debate and the design process, as well as be made available to us (researchers and urban planners) and, above all, to local actors.

Thus, understanding a given situation involves elements found in residents' speech, a set of localized measurements, the shape of the building or vegetation type, some photos, an element that is part of the story, among others. Therefore, such an understanding is not explicit, it is built by each person at transect-reading time. It refers to our own knowledge, either of disciplinary or experimental nature. It needs to be narrated and shared with others. The implementation of a critical and design discourse takes place naturally and can be registered in the transect, whose representational function becomes, therefore, the matrix support of the project.

TRANSECT EXPLOITATION: TRANSITIONING FROM THE ROUND TO THE LONG TABLE

The long table [6] device consists in effectively having ... a long table where the worked-on urban section is implemented; it includes a minimum number of elements capable of expressing the issues to be addressed, based on the project in progress (residents' and experts' speech, photographs, uses expressed therein, quantitative data, an enlarged section at a specific point, elements that are part of the diagnosis and of problems, project sketches, among others). Thus, it is a matter of summoning actors who live in the place where the issue will be addressed to participate in a debate, based on the aforementioned section, to trigger reactions based on what is already registered, or on what is still missing, as well as to add comments, information or new narratives, based on discussions happening in different places around the table, among others.

Putting both the issues and the actors under debate has the advantage of always keeping the context at the core of changes - due to the presence of the section in front of participants - since the transition to the round table (which is necessary to enable a certain distancing) often places the debate at the level of stating opinions or of taking positions that may deviate from the features of the place. Triggering the first comments is in itself a moderator-like task, since it is necessary listening and encouraging the actors to debate among themselves and with the collectivity participating in the process. Three properties used in prospective diagnosis are applicable to this type of method, namely: speech-generating device, notation-collection device, and device capable of revealing experienced realities. The multiplicity of experiments conducted in different contexts has rapidly enabled identifying some principles contributing to improve device efficiency:

6. Terminology that we have proposed along with Pascal Amphoux.

- After the first long tables were held, it was essential having "thick description" elements (cf. GEERTZ, 1973), although we were not initially looking for a synthesis capable of stopping us from analyzing the density of the situation (through a highly-technical representation) and of experiences (through significantly-simplified narratives).

- Positioning along the transect a set of data that "look at each other" ("two images can form a story, as Jean-Luc Godard used to say) and adhere to the context due to the graphic device, which enables maintaining each element in its own enunciation mode (a text remains a text, an image remains an image, a measure remains a measure, among others). Consequently, we ended up significantly straying away from the logic of the overlapping thematic layers, which are specific to geographic information systems, which, in their turn, overall require codifications such as colors, hatches, values, markers, among others.

- In order to be applied in the best way possible, the previous two points must be subjected as little as possible to codes that require captions to be interpreted. If a given datum requires caption to be contextualized or specified, it becomes clearer at the time it is simply indicated as information on the transect device under data themselves.

The analysis taking place during the long table is refined through exchanges among actors participating in it. It results from consensus or, on the contrary, it expresses strong local controversies and often focuses on project sketches at all scales (from residents' intervention to urban orientation) in order to consolidate or change the situation (either built, social or sensitive). It is a plural way of putting the everyday life into debate and in projects.

TRANSECT AND PROJECT(S)

If the transect enables the transition to the project at different times of its construction or when it works as mediation between actors, is it possible building projects as transects?

From the formal viewpoint, any project focused on creating or renewing a line that crosses an existing line can be seen as a transect. However, the transect's ability to read a crossed context and to reproduce a reciprocal change is what defines its strength. Thus,

projects comprising an old railroad such as the High Line in New York (launched in 2009), or the Promenade Plantée in Paris (launched place twenty years earlier, in 1988), are well-known and consolidated examples of built devices that literally work as transects. However, these lines and sections in the physical environment sometimes take on more common, although not less powerful, aspects in the practice of, and perception about, the city enabled by them, due to spatial, social and historical densities that make us feel. After the 19th century passageways - which were appreciated by Walter Benjamin and Charles Baudelaire (for whom every passerby is a *flâneur*) -, would the "transect" lines be the passageways of the 21st century (where every passerby is an operator without a camera) (cf. PACI; BONNARD, 2014)?

There are also projects presenting a more symbolic aspect that resemble transversal projects due to their academic construction. An example of this type of recent project, which is particularly exciting for us, lies on The Newtown Creek Nature Walk, in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. It was launched in 2007 by artist George Trakas and landscaper Quenell Rothschild & Partners. Based on our viewpoint, this project manifests what we could call "transect". It is described as follows at the time it was introduced to the public: "It is a linear walkway by the sea and an entrance garden at the access point of the street. It was designed to evoke the rich and continuous environmental, industrial and cultural stories surrounding Newtown Creek". Far from being just a place for the body and sensations - as Catherine Grout (2012) has shown very well in one of the rare studies carried out about this project -, we see it as a thread from which everything can be implanted: history, geography and society. Based on this solid and thought-provoking project, it is possible identifying tools and concepts such as section, tracks, stratum, atlas, urban miniature, tasckape, among others. It is so, to the point that this project appears to us as the paradigm of a transect project at public space scale.

But it is, above all, from the structural viewpoint of how to understand a given territory that the transect consolidates its potential by revealing unique spaces and non-hierarchical temporalities for a whole set of projects. The whole is no longer mainly a project defined by the classic game of scales, or a project that is only imposed by its designers or, conversely, that arises from users' practice. It is, above all, a space for negotiation, where all actors in the territory can find the project material in compliance with their own scale practices.

USING THE TRANSECT

How do we proceed when we consider these elements as clues? First, we associate data and, then, we compare situations. Clearly, there is deduction and induction whenever one tries to generalize, establish rules or check consequences; but unique contexts are always the ones that quickly resist to any explanatory rule. Each place is a unique composition that must be understood based on its spatial arrangements. Thus, abduction, which is herein mainly understood as the formulation of hypotheses into the narratives integrating the clues, is often carried out around the long table. It is done through the development of a new link between two elements that were not previously connected, through the introduction of new elements by actors participating in the long table, through the implementation of a new arrangement associated with a logic that applies to elements of other nature (analogy), but also through the introduction of a novelty capable of catalyzing a given situation and of overruling previous interpretations. First of all, the long table is a fertile and abductive time to enunciate narratives, to experience, the very narrative of the place in terms of what is literally placed on the table and, then, to implement, change or reinforce such a narrative in order to test its validity by enunciating it to others. *The interpretation of a given situation always requires outlining its future*. The novelty of a given narrative or proposition comes before the establishment of new relationship between elements that already exist, in order to set relationships between elements that would be composed in an original way, based on the singularity of each place. In other words, innovation no longer lies just on the novelty field, either it is technical or aesthetic; it lies on the always unique hybridization of different challenges specific to each existing situation; it is, above all, a matter of bringing things up (AMPHOUX, 2009, p. 22-23).

It rests on the (pragmatist) idea that every urban situation is a "public thing", that it is a permanent construction. Once the elements have been placed in the transect, they can work as clues to develop possibilities for the future or to tell a story about the past, to give meaning to the present. Thus, it seems to us that all the work on the future of a given place one wants to build, based on the knowledge about what already exists, goes through an abduction phase. Therefore, as Dewey would say, relevant clues necessary to manifest a given situation often give room to a set of possibilities and help attracting the public. This process enables a local validity that a group of actors, or even public policies, must be able to count on, even from top to bottom.

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