

THE URBAN IDENTITY: The City as a Place to Dwell

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In this paper, I want to explore the question of whether or not we can speak of something such as an urban identity compared to a non-urban identity. Does urbanity, the fact that somebody lives in a city, mark that person's identity to the degree that it is specifically urban? Is it possible to distil common features from the disparate urban environments there are, and show their relevance to human identity?

My interest in this paper lies not so much in urban areas as such, but in the relationship between these areas and humans, and the effect the urban environments have on our identities. The word 'identity' in the title refers primarily to the identity of people living in the city environment, not to the identity of urban areas as such. The two are, however, interconnected. The identity of the city bears on the identity of those living in it, and *vice versa*: the urban environment reflects human needs and values. I shall thus not refrain from speaking of the environment as well. The main goal of this paper is, however, to shed some light on us humans as city dwellers.

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Before going into the issues of urban identity, I need to explain briefly how I understand this concept in general. I cannot argue here in any detail for what I shall put forward, but shall simply state where I stand, and trust that the conception is not too counter-intuitive. Indeed I do not think it is. One could use the word 'post-modern' to characterise the kind of theory I advocate, although I am not myself particularly keen on using this expression, since this conception was suggested well before any of the current post-modern tendencies and theories were available. My sources of inspiration in this matter go back to Oscar Wilde and Martin Heidegger, two very different personalities and writers. But there

is one matter in which their views overlap significantly – their theories of human identity.

What is important both for Wilde and Heidegger is the denial that human identity is something fixed, something that can be found by exploring the supposed depths of the human soul. To suppose the existence of an ego or a self that precedes our activities in the real world is problematic, to say the least. One of the insights that Wilde offers in his mature pieces, especially the comedies written around 1890 such as *The Importance of Being Earnest*, is that humans are entities whose identities depend essentially on the various relations in which they stand to the real world. Wilde portrays his comic characters as being very superficial. Gwendolen Fairfax, Cecily Cardew, John Worthing, and Algernon Moncrieff are nothing but composites of their poses and social affectation in various situations. In short, they are empty shells. All there is can be seen on the surface.

Without going into detail about Wilde's position, let me just quote briefly from this famous play:

Miss Prism (*rising*): Cecily, let me entreat of you not to be led away by whatever superficial qualities this unfortunate young man may possess.

Cecily: Ah! Believe me, dear Miss Prism, it is only the superficial qualities that last. Man's deeper nature is soon found out. (Wilde 1988: 356.)

The following has become well-known as an aphorism:

Gwendolen: ... In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing. (Wilde 1988: 371.)

Martin Heidegger advanced similar ideas a few decades after Wilde, although obviously with very different interests and emphasis. In *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit*, 1927), Heidegger explores the constituents of human existence, among other things. These basic features of all humans he calls *existentialia*, or existentials (Heidegger 1997: 70). One of the props of our existence is 'being with' others, *das Mitsein* (Heidegger 1997: 156). What each of us as a human being is, is determined by the relationships we create with our fellow humans. Another existential is 'being alongside' things, *das Sein-bei*, by which Heidegger means that we are always amongst and dealing with different kinds of tools and objects (Heidegger 1997: 131–132; see also Inwood 1999: 31–33). Being with others and being alongside constitute human existence; that is, we have to take them into consideration in order to understand what we are as humans. To put the matter in another way: it is in our 'nature' to be with others and amongst things.

There are many other existentials that Heidegger mentions, but we do not need to go into this complex problem here.

When it comes to particular individual humans, the existentials mentioned can be very different. We deal with various people and take care of various things. If you are interested, say, in the visual arts, and I am interested, say, in the opera, then the matters we are dealing with vary in this respect. The relations in which we stand are different and, accordingly, our identities differ in this respect. I am not saying they would not differ in any other respect – they obviously do. I merely point out one area that creates a difference in what we are. You are a lover of the visual arts, and you are involved in various matters in that world; I am an opera lover and I relate myself to all kinds of activities in that world. The important thing is to understand that the relations in which we stand in respect to these cultural fields are constituents of our identities. Both our being with others as well as being alongside have a different character because of the context in which each of us operates.

There is much more to say about the difficult issues of identity, but this will have to suffice for my purposes. I have outlined something which can be called a ‘relational identity’ – what we are, our identity, is determined by the links we create when we live and act in the world.

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What does all this have to do with the problem of the so-called urban identity? What I want to do in what follows is to consider whether being urban, living in an urban environment, makes a difference in the substance of our existentials and, if it does, what kind?

We all know from our own experience that urban environments can be very varied indeed. Nothing is like New York, say those who live there and, even though this might be an exaggeration, it is clear that the identity of somebody living in New York is different from somebody living in London, Paris, Helsinki, or Tallinn. Does it then make any sense to use the broad expression ‘urban identity’? We need to have a closer look at a particular case, and then decide whether or not the characteristics found have any larger significance. We have to give some kind of phenomenological account; that is, consider a particular case and try to see beyond it to the general features and structures of the phenomenon.

Although Tallinn, the place in which the ‘Place and Location III’ conference took place, is an urban environment, I would like to ask you to consider an en-

vironment much larger in scale and more varied in its appearances – London. I think London is a typical urban environment in the sense that it has considerable historical depth as an urban environment; it has several layers of time, and also incorporates various new building programmes. That is, there is both history, the present, and the future involved in this city. London is also obviously big enough to count as a city, a real urban centre. A more personal reason for me to choose London as an example is that I lived there for many years, and have some first-hand experience of it. I am also sure many of the readers of this book have visited the city as tourists.

One of the striking features in London is its multiplicity. London has many faces, different kinds of districts and areas; there is the financial centre, Oxford Street and other famous shopping districts, there are residential areas, places inhabited by various ethnic minorities, etc. For an individual, there is always a surplus of significant things in a city like London – there is no way the interests and time of a single human being could encompass the variety available. Let me call this feature the ‘surplus of meaning’. The variety in many fields of human life – shopping, the arts, entertainment, things to see and to do – goes beyond the potential of an individual. The opposite of this is ‘deficit’ or the ‘shortage of meaning’ – an individual can exhaust the potential of a place. A small village does not offer surprises or things unfamiliar. We know by acquaintance what there is, how things look, and how everything functions.

I want to make it clear that neither the ‘surplus of meaning’ nor the ‘deficit of meaning’ carry any reference to value in my usage: I am not saying that a surplus of meaning is better than a deficit, or *vice versa*. Both of these terms are supposed to point out an aspect of our relation to different environments, and a surplus seems to be typical of the city environment.

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This surplus suggests another characteristic of the urban environment. When we live in surroundings we cannot exhaust in the sense that we know it thoroughly, there always is something that is within our reach but still strange to us. Perhaps the most striking examples of these areas are the various ethnic cultures that can be found, not only in London, but also in many modern cities. Chinatowns are paradigmatic examples of this. They have always represented something different in a Western city. Even though we are by now familiar with them, they are still strange to us in another, perhaps deeper sense – because our own backgrounds

are different we are bound to be just visitors there. We cannot be completely embedded in that cultural milieu.

But it does not have to be a cultural difference in the sense in which an Asian culture is strange to a Westerner. Various areas of our own culture are more or less strange to us, depending on our interests. In a city such as London where the cultural offerings are so varied and where the character of its districts is so diverse, there is bound to be something we cannot identify with. The residue remains; that is, there is always the possibility of the unfamiliar.

Surplus of meaning and the unfamiliar go hand in hand. The same goes for deficit of meaning and the familiar. There are other features that characterise the unfamiliar or the strange. When we are in unfamiliar surroundings, there is an element of surprise involved in our experience. 'Surprise' is not the best word here, but perhaps it captures the phenomenon well enough. Imagine being back in London after many years; coming from Helsinki or from Tallinn, the sheer variety of cultures and indeed, the number of people becomes a surprise. It does not have to be anything like a major shock, although it can be. Surprises occur in degrees – there are smaller and larger surprises. This also means that being in an unfamiliar area we are more on the alert than on our home ground, and pay more attention to things. In one sense of the word 'aesthetic', we are more aesthetically sensitive. This is what I mean by the element of surprise – things around us require more attention in an unfamiliar setting than in a familiar one.

As a matter of fact, there is an analogy with the arts here. The city environment has sometimes been compared to a work of art (Olsen 1986), and although cities and works of art are *prima facie* very different entities, a closer look reveals striking similarities. Works of art also require attention; we cannot appreciate art properly without having seen or heard its characteristics attentively enough. If there was no element of surprise in art, if a work was 'just plain boring', it probably would not be regarded very highly. I am not trying to analyse value in art, nor do I want to enter the discussion about the definition of art. I am simply pointing out a feature that in my view seems to be of relevance in many of the arts. Unfamiliarity and surprise are features that we encounter both in art and in an urban environment, which is what often makes them interesting and challenging.

Further, neither works of art nor cities are easy and manageable; to understand, manage, and appreciate them often requires effort. Sometimes the effort

may be too much; nobody likes all art, and I do not think anybody can be happy in all possible city environments, either. The strangeness may be just too much to handle. I will not mention any examples, because this varies from one person to another, but I am sure each of us can imagine something that exemplifies the point, be it a red light district in Amsterdam or a business area in London.

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So far, I have compared the city identity with a smaller-scale urban identity. City environments offer variety, the surplus of meaning, surprise and strangeness in contrast to the deficit of meaning and familiarity of small-scale built environments. What about nature? If there is an urban identity, is there also a 'natural' identity? Does somebody living not merely in a rural setting, but somewhere where nature and her forces are dominant, have a radically different identity from the urban dweller?

Obviously, in one sense, the answer has to be 'yes'. Our experiences are different in nature and in the city: in the city we mainly encounter products of human making, while in natural settings we generally deal with objects that are not artefacts. But what about the surplus or deficit of meaning? Is nature rich or poor in meaning? I do not think we can give an either/or answer – it depends. Being a Robinson Crusoe on an isolated island would certainly create an experience of deficit of meaning. Living in the Amazon jungle would probably result in the experience of surplus of meaning. Even though I have never visited a jungle, judging by what I have read and seen, the variety and richness of the flora and fauna is very clear. There simply are so many different things to be experienced. Other examples of the deficit of meaning include the open sea or the mountainous areas in Finnish Lapland.

This also implies that both familiarity and strangeness can occur in our experiences of nature. Natural environments can offer the same surprises as works of art. Although they are, by definition, not man-made, and not products of intentional activity in the sense in which works of art are, they can nevertheless be as surprising as any work of art, or any urban environment for that matter.

I would thus not introduce the notion of natural identity in the sense in which I have talked about urban identity. As I already pointed out, there is an obvious difference in our experiences, and, accordingly, in the qualities of urban areas and nature. What is important in this context, however, is the structure of our experience. We have seen that the same structuring principles determine both natural

and urban experiences and, by the same token, our identities as urban dwellers or wilderness lovers. I think the metaphor 'urban jungle' captures this idea, since the urban environment can be as surprising and dangerous as a jungle with its snakes, poisonous spiders, and other species that can threaten human life.

There is another reason for not distinguishing between natural and man-made environments, although I cannot argue for this point here. I am skeptical that we can draw a sufficiently sharp line between cultural and natural surroundings in the first place. As soon as we settle into a natural environment, we start to 'humanise' it; we make it our own, even if we do not do any physical damage to it or change it. Once inhabited by humans, natural surroundings change into a cultural setting. Nature becomes part of our culture. The simple fact that we categorise certain areas as natural, or wilderness, or indeed, jungle, shows that we have included them in our cultural discourse and, by the same token, our cultural setting. This is, however, a controversial point that needs more argument in its support.

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Surplus of meaning, unfamiliarity, the possibility of something new, surprise – is there anything more to urban identity? Let me point out one more feature, again related to the previous ones, which I find important – uncontrollability. In any environment there are certainly at least some elements which are beyond our control, but in the city the number of uncontrollable factors seems to be greater than in smaller-scale surroundings. One of the explanations of this is obviously that the more people living, working and operating in an area, the less say we have in what to do in and with the area. The various interests, opinions and views about what is worthwhile and what is not force each individual to take the others into account.

Uncontrollability also includes the possibility of threat, whether a physical threat or some kind of psychological threat. In an urban area, there often is a threat of physical violence, being robbed, or being harassed in some way or another. This is obviously something most of us would rather avoid. Although the possibility of violence and the accompanying threat and feeling of danger may give some individuals a thrill, most people, understandably and for good reason, would rather avoid this aspect of the urban environment.

Uncontrollability is again a phenomenon which we encounter in all kinds of environments and obviously in nature as well. To give a trivial example we all ex-

perience on a daily basis, the weather is something we often want to manipulate but obviously cannot. The features that I am pointing out in the urban environment, having to do with the ways we experience the environment and live in it – and accordingly with our identity – do not define the characteristics of urbanity in the sense that they distinguish the urban from the non-urban identity. As I have pointed out above, living in the wild is often based on similar structures. I am not looking for a definition with necessary and sufficient features, but rather trying to pick up as many of those features that determine our existence in an urban context as possible.

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The features I have pointed out in the urban context go in one sense against our nature. People typically try to create familiarity and safety (Haapala 1998). This becomes clear when we think about the place that is closest to us, our home. Home is something we know thoroughly; if a place is full of surprises, uncontrollability and threat, it cannot be our home.

The tendency to create familiarity around oneself extends well beyond the walls of our home. We have our home region, a more or less well-defined area with which we can identify ourselves. In my case, it is a particular area in the centre of Helsinki; there are a few shops into which I go, streets along which I walk to work, the park, the sea, and two cafés by the sea.

I mention these only to invoke similar kinds of images in my readers' experience. Phenomenologically speaking, humans create a familiar and relatively controllable place for themselves (Haapala 1998). We would not be able to manage our lives if we always had to live in a region we did not know, if we were, so to speak, lost most of the time. We strive for a homey environment and, on entering an unknown territory, immediately start to familiarise ourselves with it. If we have to settle down in it, sooner or later we know it well enough to be able to cope with it and control it at least to a certain extent.

We make connections with our surroundings, thus creating normality and order. This also means that once we have familiarised ourselves with the place, it loses its surplus of meaning. Quite literally, the place has become a part of us; we have thrown our existence into the world, over things and matters that are meaningful in our lives. This happens in all cases, in all environments. Even living in London or in New York, you would have to familiarise yourself with your immediate location. You have to find your way in order to deal with the practicalities

of your daily life – buying groceries, going to work, amusing yourself, and so on.

What is typical of the city, however, is that it always remains unfamiliar in some respect. As I said at the beginning of this paper, the human scale is simply too small and manageable space and time too limited for anybody to extend his or her existence over a big city such as London. If you have travelled in London, you know the scale of the city, and you have realised that one needs a lot of time just to move from one place to another. To put it more dramatically, in some respects the city remains a perpetual mystery, just as great art remains a mystery – extending beyond our capabilities. This is certainly one of the main fascinations of the urban environment. We have to accept this mystery and take it as a fact constituting our identity, otherness that is beyond our reach. For some people this might be a burden; for others a challenge and a source of joy. The reactions and attitudes to the specifics of the urban environment depend entirely on the person in question and on his or her past experiences and preferences.

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Let me finally return to the original question of whether there is something which can be called an ‘urban identity’. Although it may sound rather trivial and not very helpful, the answer has to be ‘yes and no’. On the surface or, in Martin Heidegger’s terms, on the ontic level (Heidegger 1997: 32–34), there are differences in our experiences of natural environments, small-scale built environments and urban environments. These differences are based on the simple fact that the objects to which we relate in these various milieus are different; for example, an old forest as contrasted to a big department store or a small village shop. In this paper I have, however, tried to look beyond the possible objects of our experience to the underlying structures. Again, in Heidegger’s terms, the target has been the ontological level. Here we find similarities and dissimilarities between things. The distinction between urban environments and natural environments is no longer so crucial because of the structural similarities in the ways we relate to these environments.

These structural features – surplus of meaning, unfamiliarity, potential for something new, surprise, and uncontrollability – do, however, create a difference between small-scale and large-scale built environments, between, let us say, ‘town identity’ and ‘city identity’. In talking about urban identity in this paper, I have been referring to ‘city identity’. This is the urban identity proper, urbanity at its purest.

A final point of clarification: the structural features mentioned characterise our relationship to the urban environment, but at the same time they describe what it means to live in a city milieu; that is, they characterise humans as urban dwellers and urban identity. There is probably much more to urban identity than what I have mentioned, but I do think that the cluster of phenomena I have pointed out clarifies the notions related to urbanity. Further explorations have to be left to another occasion.

References

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Linnaidentiteet: linn kui elamise koht

Kokkuvõte

Käesolevas artiklis on vaatluse all küsimus linlikust identiteedist: kas ja mil moel avaldab inimese identiteedile mõju asjaolu, et ta elab suurlinnas. Tähelepanu all ei ole niivõrd linnakeskkond, kui inimeste ja linnakeskkonna vahelised suhted. Linnaidentiteet mõjutab selles elavaid inimesi, kuid ka vastupidi: linlik keskkond kujuneb inimeste vajaduste ja väärtuste järgi. Füüsilisest linnakeskkonnast ei saa mööda vaadata, kuid põhirõhk on siinses käsitluses inimese kui linnaelaniku identiteedi eritlemisel. Inimidentiteeti käsitletud autoritest pakuvad teoreetilisi lähtekohti Oscar Wilde ja Martin Heidegger. Neid ühendab arusaam, et inimidentiteet ei ole midagi fikseeritud, vaid kujuneb suhetes ümbritsevaga ning sellele reageerides. Nähtust võiks nimetada suhetepõhiseks identiteediks (*relational identity*).

Tüüpilise suurlinliku keskkonna näiteks on artiklis valitud London, mida ise-loomustavad märkimisväärne ajalooline sügavus, ajalookihistuste paljusus, aga ka ehitatud keskkonna pidev uuenemine ning mitmekesisus üldisemalt – nii ajalugu, olevik kui ka tulevik on kohal üheaegselt. Londoni-taolises linnas leidub alati rohkem tähelepanu väärivaid asju, kui inimese meeled haarata jaksavad. Seda võib nimetada lisatähenduseks (*surplus of meaning*), millega käib kaasas mitte-tuttavuse tunne ja üllatusmoment. Lisatähendus kogemuste struktuuri olulise osana eristab suurlinna väikelinnast või maakohast. Ka metsikus looduses, näiteks džunglis, võib esineda lisatähendust. Neid kaht struktuurilt sarnast keskkonnakogemust ühendab ilmekalt “linnadžungli” metafoor.

Suurlinliku identiteedi olulisimad struktuurilised omadused on lisatähendus, mitte-tuttavuse tunne, pidev võimalus millekski senikogematuks, üllatuslikkus ning kontrollimatus.

Oma ümbrusega kontakti luues korrastab inimene alati seda talle arusaadava normi ja korra suunas. Linna lummus seisneb aga selles, et teda ei ole kunagi võimalik korrastada täiesti arusaadavaks – lahendamata saladused jäävad linnakeskkonna paratamatuks osaks.