

**Making Waves 3**  
research workshop  
BEYOND POLITICS? AESTHETICS & SOCIETY

Table 1 URBAN HISTORY & AESTHETICS

**Short impression of the table conversation by Yiorgos Douliakas.**

The Urban History and Aesthetics table began with a short introductory round during which we came to realise that although all of us were city-dwellers, we formed a multi-national/multi-disciplinary group. Prof. Claartje Rasterhoff presented an approach on the cities as a) a laboratory, and b) as utopias/dystopias, along with an introduction of Richard Sennett's positions, which would serve as one of the two guides for our discussion. What was particularly interesting was that Sennett was both an idealist and a pragmatist. Views that initially seemed contradictory, in the end, managed to provide answers and solutions, and ultimately foreshadowed our final remarks.

We were asked to write on a sticker our take on the questions, *a) What should a city be like? b) What should living in a city be like? c) How should we live as inhabitants?* Echoing the workshop's title itself, these questions brought into discussion matters of aesthetics, morality, equality, imagination, as well as individuality, yet an individuality that is inseparable from a collective group. Our proposals echoed both Sennett's and Jane Jacob's views, revolving around distaste for control, rigid planning and segregation. However, as one would expect, there are as many understandings of a city as there are citizens. One preferred a small green town, another a big city with glass buildings. Matters of identification/connection were stressed, discussing mini-communities within a metropolis, an approach that echoed with Jacob's ideas.

In that light, Prof. Rasterhoff had fertile ground to introduce Jane Jacobs. Jacobs was reacting against private developers and big city planners, whose actions we now know as neoliberal practices. In her view, life in cities should be small, local, and slow. Diversity of thought and background are not factors that would deprive one's feeling of being at home. Matters of space and temporality are stressed in Jacobs' work and an immediate remark on her position echoed the criticism surrounding it, and soon we posed the question "*What happens when change happens very fast?*" Although Europe has some regulations, this is not the case everywhere, and growth cannot exactly be stopped or regulated. As we came to realise, questions inquiring "small" or "local" are important yet they are overlooked in an attempt to examine the bigger picture.

Furthermore, the question of *How cities should "look" like?* brought into discussion the city of Cordova, a city whose characters derive, according to one of the participants, from the clash between the multi-cultural buildings. On another note, however, cities like Copenhagen have laws protecting the colour of the buildings, giving them their distinct style and supposed timelessness, but how good is that? Some remarks and distrust against uniformity were quickly answered by the results of its non-existence, where a lack of regulation leads to commercialization and numerous other problems. Heterogeneity in cities was of particular interest to the participants, this being a new trend, following a homogeneous tradition that dominated city building until the last decades. The following statements focused on practicality, as well as stressing the role of money, bringing in matters of pragmatism, as well as realism.

Socioeconomic equality is important, and definitely, it is not only about aesthetics when we meditate upon the city's potential shapes. However, as a participant remarked, the buildings in the cities outlive their initial purposes. What was considered cheap housing in the past is affordable only by rich people now, and, more than any other city right now, Amsterdammers are coming face to face with gentrification. Decision-making architects/planners, bear specific ideas in mind, ideas dealing with aesthetics, subjective as they may be, but at the same time unable to be disentangled from the ethics. In the end, it is always important to remember that big decisions are being made overnight, opinions that have both immediate and long-term effect on the citizens' life. Nevertheless, this is not to stress a lack of agency, or to invoke the agency crisis, yet points at the rather unique temporality of a city's decision making.

Subsequently, we began to question the *Aesthetics of the city*. Uniformity's criticism resurfaced as far as the potentiality that lies within the city's planning is concerned. Sennett's "open" notion of a city served as a guide, bringing us closer to the idea of commons, having taken into account matters of potentiality, ability, possibility. This time, "the people" were brought into the discussion, the way they are presented or taken into account as far as cities are concerned. Social equality, economics, all of these seem to affect people that live in the city, something evident from daily routines, as well as following numerous major events that topple their everyday life, such as an economic crisis. The people, along with the buildings make up an atmosphere, yet, as seen in Amsterdam, vibrancy, one caused by tourism, doesn't necessarily contribute to a city's vibrant character. Tourism is a multifaceted potential the cities have, however, one that only recently has shown its troubling character.

Nevertheless, there is a huge heterogeneity, a value we aim in the cities, which brought us to the questions of *What should the local/urban government be like? Should it exist in the first place?* For sure, many opinions were heard, and despite the numerous approaches, all called for small/big scale action, focusing on a bottom-up kind of approach. To act is to plan and regarding cities, there is the matter of long-term or short-term approach. Yet with planning being a, not always, individual action that affects collectivities, it wasn't long until the question of ethics appeared. Yet, what kinds of ethics dictate actions? What are the qualities of the goals these actions aspire to achieve? An important remark was to "make sure they [spaces] are open to the future," bringing into discussion the matter of temporality and purpose. It is evident that we need to allow all sides to manifest, interaction is crucial and the possibilities for different purposes are innate in the buildings, after all, they outlast the individuals that conceived them in the first place.

Yet, *How do we organize this? Who is in charge? Elective communal, the market, the government?*

Once more the importance of bottom-up action was stressed but before we could delve deeper, time was up. Wrapping up the discussion, Prof. Rasterhoff remarked that there is an increasing opportunity to get involved these days and stressed that change happens in small steps, bringing into discussion again Sennett's notion of the idealist versus the pragmatist when "big ideals might get in the way of doing stuff." A way one can get involved is through the streets, neighbourhoods, and as we came to realise, the first way is to observe the city in order to be able to delve into its problems/potentialities. They say about poets that they resemble icebergs, with  $\frac{1}{5}$  of them being hidden beneath the surface. Although we initially focused on the cities' and the buildings' exterior, the image they project, we were immediately immersed into their hidden values, values that constitute no less of a guiding force behind the actions to be taken, apart from the facade's affect on ourselves, the citizens.