Space Syntax and Meta Theory

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I have been interested in space syntax since my days as a student at the School of Architecture during the 1990s. In my PhD and my later research I did, however, largely focus on the different but related subject of architectural territoriality. Architectural territoriality is a part of territoriology (Brighenti, 2010) that investigates how architecture and built form is used to produce territories in the built environment. In space syntax terminology one could perhaps describe it as an investigation of the relation between long and short spatial models (Hiller and Hanson, 1984). When I did an empirical study on the territorial production of three squares in Lund (Kärrholm, 2004), one of my conclusions was that both spatial configuration and territorial configurations had a lot to do with the 'publicness' of the square. The larger the number of superimposed territorial productions, the more used and, in a sense, public was the square. This, among other things, brought me to transform Hillier's famous statement: 'Places do not make cities. It is cities that make places' (Hillier, 1996, p. 151), into the perhaps less exciting truism: cities make places, places make cities.

The complex question about societal space and spatial production has developed parallel with space syntax from the early 1980s and onwards. The expansive and somewhat paradigmatical space syntax research has seldom been integrated with these theoretical discussions of what is sometimes called 'the spatial turn' of the social sciences. Instead, it seems as if space syntax theory has stubbornly held on to the architect's classical perspective on space as a kind of material, a physical, static, and metric space that can be described and measured in terms of geometry or topology (cf. Till, 2007). This could make sense in quantitative studies, but as space syntax research produces more and more detailed results within its own paradigm, it seems as if it is alienating itself from a wider discussion on the role of space in our contemporary society. This was evident when the well-known postmodern advocate of spatial issues, Edward Soja, discussed space syntax in his critical article 'In Different Spaces' (Soja, 2001).
In my view, one of the most important challenges for space syntax research is to integrate and contextualise the outcomes of space syntax research in a wider theoretical discussion on society and space. One way to do this is to develop the meta theory, i.e. a conceptual framework where the meeting and comparison of different related theories and methods can take place. What then would a meta theory that could include not just space syntax but other themes of urban research (e.g. morphology, territoriology, and time-geography) look like? One promising and possible starting point for such a meta theory is Torsten Hägerstrand's last book Tillvaroväven (translating into something like The Weave of Existence), posthumously published in 2009. In this book, Hägerstrand introduces a kind of infra-language with concepts that describe the very basic and inescapable human conditions of living, based on the fact that we are spatial and that we have bodies. Hägerstrand takes on a kind of senso-motorical perspective on time and space, discussing the relation between spaces and bodies in terms of time and movement. Sometimes he comes close to stating the obvious, such as 'things take place', but his contribution lies in the way that he establishes a coherent terminology, setting up basic concepts such as complementary space, (the space at disposal for movement) and next-to-each-other-ness (stating that all things on earth are materially connected), and start relating them to each other. Hägerstrand's notions often seem quite interesting from the perspective of space syntax. One example is his discussion on how things continuously change the spatial configurations of a city, e.g. how cars lined up in a queue completely changes complementary space and restrict each others possibility of movement (Hägerstrand, 2009, p. 88). Whereas other ontologies on space, place and time within the field of architecture, often have relied heavily on phenomenology (drawing inspiration from, for example, Heidegger, Merleau-Pointy or Edward Casey), Hägerstrand's ontology keeps closer to the ones explored in natural sciences, the relation of bodies in space, and then goes on to discuss their existential and societal implications.

Space and materiality makes a difference in everyday life. This has recently been acknowledged even by the disciplines of the social sciences that used to put very firm focus on 'the social', such as sociology and political science. However, the descriptions of how materiality makes a difference are still quite meagre. This is where the pragmatical and empirical strength of space syntax has a lot to offer. This is also why space syntax needs to be related to recent efforts of e.g. time geography, or why not actor-network theory (Latour, 2005) and non-representational theory (Thrift, 2007). In order to raise the consciousness and knowledge of material and spatial design in research, such a meta theory could be a most important means of communicating cross the borders of different disciplines and even paradigms.

References
