LECTURE: NEGOTIATING (IN)VISIBILITIES
by Cecilie Sachs Olsen, 2013

1. Introduction: Negotiating (in)visibilities

- I have chosen to call my presentation for "Negotiating Invisibilities". This is because I want to direct the attention to the different –often invisible- processes that shapes and controls urban space, and the possibilities of urban interventions to question these processes and open up for new ways of perceiving, understanding and using urban space.

- I think we can all agree that what is visible in the city is a rather incomplete picture of how our cities work and how we experience them.
- Nevertheless there is a current tendency to treat urban space from a very visual point of view
- → Disney pic: Particularly good example from Disney world: Points to how the look is treated as the experience of a place. → exemplifies how controlling the vision has become an important tool for power in current processes of urbanization
- A constant struggle of power therefore is to determine what should be visible and what should not.

- Urban space is often constructed out of an emphasis on visibility and transparency, as a means of controlling and securing it
- for example, as you see here, the increase of CCTV cameras, or the emphasis on large windows and glass facades in the new architectural aesthetics)

- However, one should not forget that closely connected to this focus on visibility, are also decisions made of what should not be visible.
- This is of course an extreme example, but there is indeed a tendency in urban development to focus on visual representations that hides the more "unpleasant" and intimidating aspects of urban life, such as beggars, poverty, street-sellers etc.
- As these things are made invisible in urban space we may more easily forget all about them

- I believe urban interventions has got an important part to play in questioning these underlying power structures that decides what is visible and what is not in urban space. And thus also open up to new perspectives on the city.

- So this is what I will try to elaborate a bit more on in this presentation.

- I will do this by
  1. first having a closer look at urban space, what it is, how we define it and how it relates to politics.
  2. Second, I will have a look at how these conceptualizations of urban space and politics relates to urban interventions. I will give a concrete example from "invisible Zürichs" which is a project zURBS is doing at Gessnerallee this autumn.

3. Third, I hope we can discuss some of the topics I will bring forth in this presentation

2. Urban space and politics

- So let's have a closer look at urban space
- Historically, there has been a tendency to treat space as empirical, objective and *mappable.*
- Space has been considered to be a neutral container, a blank canvas filled with human activity.
- Public space, for example, is often taken for granted as being public simply because it is defined that way by the government and planning departments.
- Urban space is here seen as having a pre-given intention that decides its use and function.
- In this view, space is conceived as outside human existence: it is regarded as a passive backdrop against which human behaviour is played out.
- This conception relates to what I choose to call "a limited spatial imaginary" → meaning that it treats space as a given, closed and static entity.

- However, in the 1970ies a different interpretation of space started to gain significance
- Space started to be seen as playing an active role in shaping social life, and being socially produced rather than an absolute and given

- This opens up for an understanding of space as:
1. a product of interrelations and constituted through interactions
2. a sphere of coexisting diversity
3. space as always under construction and in the process of being made, it is never finished or closed

- As opposed to the former understanding of space as given, space is here seen as having the possibility to generate new relations and openings, it opens up for a spatial variety

Example of Occupy:
- I have here chosen a picture from the occupation of the commercial square Puerta del Sol in Madrid, as the beginning of the occupy movement.
- I think the occupy movement challenged people to think about urban space in new ways.
- It did not take space as a given, but opened up for questions about for example public space, such as who really owns it? And who can use it?
- By using tents and sleeping bags as their weapons they tested for example the city's limits on freedom of assembly.

- One can say that these two understandings of space relates to two different forms of spatialisation
- The word spatialisation here refers to the spatial forms that social activities, material things, phenomena or processes take on.

- This can perhaps be illustrated by an example:

[EXAMPLE OF MOSAIC VS PUZZLE]

- Think of this jigsaw puzzle and a mosaic as representing two different forms of spatialisation.
- In the puzzle, the pieces are spatialized by physically moving them around, but they only fit one way.
- So there is spatialisation, but there is not spatial variety.
- There is only one rational and predetermined way of giving spatial form to the pieces.
- In the mosaic however, it is possible to imagine a variety of spatialisations without even moving the pieces around.
- The individual pieces are in the mosaic, but the final outline that will define the spatial form one wants to imagine is not given.
- Depending on the outline I imagine, different pieces will be related to each other, producing different spatial forms each time.
- So, I can imagine different ways of seeing the pieces of the mosaic, establishing new connections and making out different forms.
- There is spatialisation and there is spatial variety, even though the pieces have not been moved around.

- When one is working with urban space, I think it is important to make possible such spatial variety, so that new relations, connections, forms and structures can occur.

- One could say that thinking spatially in this way can open up for new ways of thinking politics.
- I am here not referring to politics as the institutionalised practices of the government and administration, but rather –as Rancière defines it: *Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time.*
- Rancière calls this underlying structure of what is visible or not, sayable or not, hearable or not for "the distribution of the sensible"

- So who is it that decides what is visible or invisible in for example urban space?

- According to Ranciere this is "the police" → not the police as the people working to protect the law, but police in a broader sense: as a specific and invisible social order that regulates what is not legitimate or perceptible.
- Examples: this can be intangible things such as norms, but also physical manifest things as for example how a space is planned

- According to Rancière, one may say that politics may challenge "the distribution of the sensible" by for example making visible what "the police" wants to make invisible.
- Politics may do so by undermining and resisting the "givenness" of urban space.
- As Rancière says: It is a matter of knowing who is qualified to say what a particular place is and what is done in it: What are these places? How do they function? Why are they there? Who can occupy them?

- Political action then, always acts upon the distribution of places and roles and represent a possibility in any given order..
- Example: The Occupy movement: The tactics of Occupy was to take a central public space close to where power are centred and converting this public space into a place for open discussion and debate over what that power is doing and how we can create future outlines of an alternative city, and an alternative way of organizing production, distribution and consumption.

- Now if we have a look at this lovely picture of one of the main streets in Disney world, what urban givenness can you find here? How are the places and roles distributed?

- What kind of place is this? How does it function?
  → private? Public?
  → have to pay an entrance fee to get in (confidence that equal access is not threatening)

- Who can occupy them?
- → you are together with like-minded people, no homeless people or beggars
- → everyone trusts that the other guests are the same social types (same trust as in small country inns)
- → making social diversity less threatening and public space more secure

- Importance of the visual impression:
  → relying on facades: you cannot enter the magic castle
- → Tightly structured discourse about society: collective image of what modern people are and should be –and it exercises the spatial controls that reinforce this identity

- How would you categorize urban space in this example, according to how what I have talked about until now?

- How is "the distribution of the sensible" manifested in this space?

- What kind of spatialisation is present?

3. Urban interventions

- Art is hailed as providing a mode of critical exploration that may contribute to re-imaginations of urban space and cities, how we live in them and how they function.
- For example Rancière points to the potential of art to make visible, challenge and question the underlying structures of "the distribution of the sensible", and thus enable us to re-imagine it.

- However, in my opinion, this critical potential of the arts is often neglected in practice.
- This is due to a tendency of
  → constructing art as an effect or reaction to urban space, rather than making art

an integral part of creating urban space
- For example, art practice and urban interventions are often expected to provide "solutions" to urban problems.
- In this regard these risk becoming a tool for an "aesthetic power" (Zukin 1995), which controls, rather than questions, what should be visible and what should be sayable etc. in urban space.
- This can be illustrated in two different approaches to art in urban space:

1. Branding strategies & public spectacles
- Branding strategies and public spectacles are mainly used for creating, improving and restoring land values and meanings.
- Here sites and channels of public expression are turned into promotional and consensual spaces of spectacle.
- We are often obliged to be in an announced and pre-determined type of experience that do not open up for a critical exploration that looks for new relations and openings.

2. Artivism
- The term "artivism" refers to an activism that uses artistic means to promote, impede or direct change
- These interventions tend to be part of a moral judgement showing us what is right and what is wrong.
- Here we are often directed to agree and sympathise with what is presented to us as the "right" and often only alternative, and thus there is no opening for a critical exploration that looks for many different possible alternatives.

- In these two examples a dichotomy is created between resistance and power and art risks being constructed simply as either a mode of control for – or a mode of resistance against the city as a system.
- A limited spatial imaginary is here reflected in the framing of urban space as simply an exteriority or a backdrop that power or resistance are constituted against
- One can say that in all these examples then, the art practice is locked in the jigsaw puzzle version of spatialisation –meaning that it is locked to the conception of only one possible spatialisation/outcome
- The result is that a re-imagination of urban space is impeded by reducing, rather than opening up possibilities of new relations and forms that are not already given.

- So how then can urban interventions expand our spatial imaginaries and open up for possibilities rather than limit them?

- Now, this is where I return to where I started out: I think urban interventions can expand our spatial imaginaries by negotiating invisibilities.

Invisible Zürichs
- this is exactly what zURBS aims to do with our project "invisible Zürichs", which will take place at Gessnerallee from the 18th of October to the 15th of December.

Now, what is invisible Zürichs?
- a social-artistic urban laboratory that experiments with how we can re-imagine the urban within an artistic framework

- a social-artistic laboratory?
→ posing alternatives to the collective co-existence (=the social) in our cities, through creative and imaginative processes (=the artistic).

- an experiment?
→ Focuses on processes and on raising relevant questions rather than providing answers and ready-made products
→ What the different invisibilities in urban space have in common is that they are all processual and constantly needs to be negotiated as they are not necessarily physically manifested in urban space, but relies on in-tangible aspects such as perceptions, experiences, social orders and norms.

- re-imagine the urban?
→ Putting a focus on these invisibilities and questioning and negotiating them then, may help open up for new orders, structures and understandings.
→ therefore we want to question what we call "invisible urban givenness" (which is the same as "the distribution of the sensible" that I talked about earlier, deciding what is visible, sayable and hearable in urban space)
→ we will do this by provide understandings of urban space as defined by a radical openness productive of diverse and multiple outcomes, rather than as one fixed and given urban reality.
→ This way "invisible Zürichs" may help us resist the givenness of space and open up for a spatial variety that allows for new orders, functions, experiences and perceptions.

- artistic framework?
→ by focusing on the artistic approach to the urban we want to emphasize that cities are imaginary as well as real spaces, and that questioning how cities are imagined and how these imaginings are manifested in urban space is equally important for dealing with urban space as is technical control and rational planning strategies.
→ in this regard "invisible Z̈richs" is based on the book "Invisible Cities" by Italo Calvino. In the book the traveller Marco Polo describes fifty-five different cities to the emperor Kublai Khan. However, it turns out that they are all descriptions of the very same city, Venice.
- Our thesis then is that Zurich also consists of endless different realities and imaginations, which are mostly invisible for us. With invisible Z̈richs we want to make all this different realities and imaginations visible and this way open up for a spatial variety.

Now how exactly will we do this?

-"Invisible Z¨richs" consists of three interconnected elements:

- Workshops, Artistic interventions, Archive

Workshops:
Every week we will conduct workshops in different neighbourhoods in Zurich where we invite people to become urban researchers of their own city. The participants will be provided with a game-like exercises, that may help to question, see and discover their neighbourhood in new ways.

[pics from previous workshops]

With the help of the questions and exercises- the participants will collect traces of the invisible Zurichs. These traces may take the form of impressions, images, artefacts, drawings, stories, dialogues and memories that reveal their personal experiences of and perspectives on Zurich. Back in Gessnerallee they will build an alternative city archive out of all the things they have collected.

Archive:
- We will experiment with the role and function of the city archive.
- we want to construct an alternative city archive that has the capacity to bring into view elements of lived experiences that are often marginalized or not very recognized in the prioritisation of the text-based archive. These elements are for example bodily memory, oral history, as well as the traces of being in and experiencing the city.
- Furthermore we will give the role of the archivist to the people of the city, so that it is up to them to make the selection of what (hi)stories should be kept and what not

Gast-forscher:
During the two months we invite different artists, practitioners and scholars to:
1. explore and investigate Zurich through your own artistic practices in order to experiment with how we might re-imagine the city and its urban space.
2. work with the archive in terms of archiving your work for "invisible Z¨richs" in one way or the other, working with its content, or making artistic interpretations of it...

- Through these three elements "invisible Zürichs" wants to raise awareness and questioned the "invisible" structures of power that shapes and structures Zürich.
- This is done by creating a place where visitors and residents of Zurich can research, debate, confront and address one another as co-producers of their city.
- This way, the "invisible Zürichs" do not point to one "right" way of perceiving urban space in Zürich, rather it points to all the different alternatives, perspectives, opinions and ideas that are present in the city.

4. Sum up:
So to sum it up in some points, one can say that art practice can expand our spatial imaginaries and open up for spatial variety by:

- resisting any prescribed outcomes
- being realized on and from within urban space
- opening up for a collective process and co-production of urban space

- allowing people(audience/participants) to appropriate the story of the city for themselves and make their own story out of it
- experimenting with and critically explore urban space through imaginative means
- create not consume space
- question our surroundings and enable us to confirm or modify the conditions which creates certain possibilities for visibility and exclude others

This way art practice may open up for the co-production and appropriation of new forms of visibility and invisibility, and thus inform an understanding of urban space as defined by a radical openness productive of diverse and multiple outcomes, rather than as one fixed and given urban reality.