



Transdisciplinary Urbanism: Three experiences from Europe and Canada



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ABSTRACT

The decreasing pace of urban development in economically-troubled Europe allows time for urban practitioners and actors to re-think planning action and its outcomes. In Canada where urban development seems unstoppable, contemplative breaks are as important. From the rubbles of recent environmental and economic crises around the world, in this article we discuss the emergence of a new theoretical approach in urban design and planning that is at the intersection of Socio-Spatial Research, Complexity Theories of Cities, and Urban Activism: Transdisciplinary Urbanism. We deploy three relevant, research projects we have been engaged with to analyze issues, challenges and limitations of Transdisciplinary Urbanism. The time frame of these interventions spans almost a decade.

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Introduction

In a recent conference at the Bauhaus-University Weimar, French sociologist Alain Bourdin (2012) has problematized the disciplinary limits of “urban studies” and “planning” as separate fields of inquiry. According to him (Bourdin, 2012), while planning “has not found its ways to innovate itself”, urban studies, on the other hand, has not engaged “in finding solid concepts for the notions deriving from action” (Bourdin, 2012). For Bourdin, the main limits of urban studies lie in the lack of interest of its scholars to create concrete tools to solve real, everyday urban problems as the opposite of merely contesting injustices.

In recent years, as the result of major economic crises around the world and growing awareness of the exploitation of the environment and climate change, disenchanted citizens have demanded to be more hands-on in deciding about and influencing their living environments, while public authorities retaliate by drawing lines of jurisdiction (Pask, 2010). In the field of architecture, some have advocated for a radical change aimed at expanding design practice into a “socially and politically relevant field” (Gamez & Rogers, 2008: 23). Here the idea is to develop a new architectural education curriculum to include public-service practice, similar to the long-established curricula in law and medicine (Fisher, 2008: 10–12).

At the same time, in the heterogeneous field of urban studies, many are starting to side with urban activists and artists to bring about the change that mainstream planning has failed to deliver. According to this view, public space has become the focus and location to organize artistic and cultural interventions that aim at questioning, amongst others, the current land use program, social and political injustice, and ultra-liberal privatizations of public commons (Hou, 2010: 7–11). However, many questions arise about the use of art in urban studies, such as, “how the extensive critical theoretical work on urban space and processes of urbanization of recent decades [...] may further inform artistic practice, performance and intervention?” (Pinder, 2008: 733).

In this context, we have sought to explore the potential of troubled, leftover, or Augéan “non-places”¹ in Helsinki, Tallinn and Toronto with the help of inhabitants, informal users, local organizations, and artists. Working both in the field of urban studies, and having developed collaborations with various organizations (the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation of Germany, the University of Art and Design Helsinki, the City Institute, and SKETCH Working Arts in Toronto), we independently tried to incorporate elements of performative arts in our research to encourage and facilitate self-organized, multiple discourses that could help us unravel compelling socio-spatial issues. In the central railway station of Helsinki and an outdoor place in Toronto, temporary living rooms became cases for studying the dichotomy between public and private as well as to challenge certain socio-spatial exclusions against homeless queer youth in Toronto and minorities with ethnocultural backgrounds in

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¹ We refer to the analyses by Marc Augé (1995) of what he calls *non-places*.

Helsinki. In Tallinn, urban art interventions provoked people's imaginary and reactions towards the role of Russian-speaking minorities and socialist peripheries in Tallinn.

The common denominator of all three interventions is their attempt to reconcile, referring to [Francois Dosse \(1999\)](#), exact sciences, social sciences, and philosophy and advocate for a new transdisciplinary paradigm. The transdisciplinary framework envisioned in our three case studies is similar to that suggested by [Gibbons et al. \(1994\)](#) in their "Mode 2" of knowledge production, i.e. a dynamic framework in which multiple players combine empirical and theoretical knowledge to solve applied problems. [Dosse \(1999\)](#) notes that the social sciences are witnessing "a genuine transformation" where terms such as chaos, process, meaning, complexity, and self-organization are slowly replacing the classic concepts of structure, static, combinatory, and universal. In this new framework, Dosse claims that the task of the transdisciplinary-scholar is to clarify, rather than dissect, the "judgments of fact" from the "judgments of value".

We see Transdisciplinary Urbanism (TU) as a new, emerging methodological framework according to which social and action researchers, artists, animators, performers, activists, and local communities come together to study uncertainty, chance and open-endedness, and to transparently renegotiate power structures in urban space. TU builds upon the social aspects of Urbanism; it connects different theories and practices, and crosses disciplines in order to study and improve everyday life. The disciplinary crossovers entailed by such practices push inhabitants and professionals out from their comfort zones, encouraging co-operation and co-creation in non-predetermined ways.

In this paper, we contextualize this view and discuss TU also by leveraging the experience and knowledge of working in Finland, Estonia and Canada. The multiplicity and recursivity of urban discourses and the lack of a framework to deal with fluctuating urban demands have been the starting point of three projects that we developed, between 2005 and 2014, in Helsinki, Tallinn, and Toronto. Before 2008, both Finland and Estonia were expanding economies, with Finland being a hub of the ICT industry, and Estonian GDP growing at a rate of 7% annually. On the one side of the Gulf of Finland, the city planning department of Helsinki boasted self-confidently over the future of urban development in the capital region ([Rizzo, 2008: 125](#)), busily organizing international competitions to redevelop its inner harbors and to provide a fashionable vision to the newly created "Greater Helsinki". On the other side, Estonian business organizations were advocating ultra liberalism, privatization of State-owned urban stock, and deregulation of planning. In Canada the situation has been one of boom ([OECD, 2014](#)), especially in Toronto, a city with a robust economy with transnational links (approximately half of its population is foreign born), and a dynamic public sphere, albeit with social inequalities and evident socio-spatial polarization ([Boudreau, Keil, & Douglas, 2009; Hulchanski, 2010; Galanakis, 2013](#)).

In this paper, our aims are to: clarify the theoretical and methodological baselines of TU (Section 'Transdisciplinary Urbanism'); analyse aims, tools and results of three independent, transdisciplinary interventions (Section 'Transdisciplinary Urbanism in practice: Connecting theory with empirical data'); and discuss the relevance and issues of such interventions for TU, also highlighting limitations and unresolved aspects (Section 'Discussion and Conclusions').

Transdisciplinary Urbanism

Background

Recently, urban scholars have begun to discuss the growing popularity of transdisciplinary modes of knowledge production in

architecture and urban planning, highlighting three major, recurrent elements i.e. integration between theory and practice, ethical concerns, and the "importance of experimental, *designerly* modes of inquiry" ([Doucet & Janssens, 2011: 2](#)). For [Doucet and Janssens \(2011: 1\)](#) transdisciplinary modes of knowledge production are characterized by hybridization, i.e. the loss of dependency from a specific disciplinary compartment. [Després, Vachon, and Fortin \(2011: 34\)](#) add that "transdisciplinary research includes at once what stands between disciplines, across disciplines and beyond any discipline". Transdisciplinarity is about the articulations, rather than the relations, between disciplines: "the whole is more than the sum of its parts" ([Ramadier, 2004: 432](#)).

Indeed, the exponential growth of both web-based interaction tools, physical sites where knowledge is created, and the recombination of extremely specialized fields in new knowledge entities have facilitated the emergence of a new form of knowledge production that [Gibbons et al. \(1994\)](#) have labeled "Mode 2". As the opposite of "Mode 1", in which knowledge is eminently a contribution to compartmentalized disciplines, Mode 2 of knowledge production is characterized by transdisciplinarity, i.e. working within an evolving and dynamic framework in which empirical and theoretical knowledge are combined and where multiple players (e.g., universities, research agencies, informal agencies, private firms, NGOs, etc.) contribute to the creation of such knowledge ([Gibbons et al., 1994: 5–6](#)).

Transdisciplinarity can also be seen as an evolution of multi- and inter-disciplinarity. However, unlike these latter, transdisciplinarity does not seek to solve the paradoxes generated by the endless dissection of knowledge in smaller disciplinary units. Rather than aiming to the "unity of knowledge" ([Ramadier, 2004: 431](#)), by acknowledging the inherent complexity of the subject, transdisciplinarity directs to master the paradoxes. Building upon this, within Transdisciplinary Urbanism (TU), urban studies and design provide the theoretical and empirical foundation to conduct proactive (but *not* pre-determined) investigation of the effects of change in urban space becomes possible. TU researchers and the many actors working and living in the city work within the dynamic framework that is represented by contemporary politics, this latter shaped by unpredictable, constructive and destructive cycles ([Holling & Gunderson, 2002: 34](#)).

Intersections I: Transdisciplinary and Social-Spatial Research

TU concerns socio-spatial issues of multi-layered urban phenomena. Our approach is inspired by known methods of research in everyday life notably by [De Certeau \(1988\)](#), [De Certeau, Giard, and Mayol \(1998\)](#), as well as [Lefebvre's \(1991\)](#) analysis of conceived, perceived and experienced space. In addition ethnomethodology ([Garfinkel, 1967](#)) with its focus on the field of study and its actors includes research principles relevant to what [Hoggart, Lees, and Davies \(2002\)](#) discuss as action research, i.e. when researchers intervene and bring change into the field of their study. With TU thus we recognize that urban research does not need to be only and always reflective; researchers may also aspire to bring social change. Research without such a quest for change, although valuable, is not necessarily impartial or socially relevant.

The grounded theory approach ([Glaser & Strauss, 1967](#)) offers another insightful perspective on the relationship between the researcher and the researched. When practicing TU, urban interventions guide researchers to theories that assist the critical understanding of the field and its stakeholders, and of the theories themselves. With this in mind, TU aims to generate "theory that fits the data," rather than "data to fit the theory" ([Layder, 1996: 45](#)). While the aim of urban research may not be to develop grounded theory, it is part of our contribution to knowledge to link

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