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Putting accessibility in place: A relational reading of accessibility in policies for transit-oriented development



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ABSTRACT

In order to facilitate sustainable development, a shift from mobility-based to accessibility-based planning has been suggested. However, if we rely on the modern conceptualisation of accessibility, such a shift would have limited results. As an alternative, this paper proposes a relational reading of accessibility, which questions the divide between mobility and place upon which the modern definition is based. It argues that the accessibility of a place is characterised by a specific coordination of presences and absences that depends as much on boundaries and exclusions as on mobility. If accessibility changes, so does the place. This interpretation makes accessibility a matter of priorities and provides a critical perspective on arguments for time-space compressions and progress. This is illustrated here using the example of a regional strategy for transit-oriented development in Sweden (Region Scania). For that case, the discourse on accessibility revealed simplified arguments for densification, progress and metropolitan ideals, contradicting the initial inclusive intentions of the strategy. Thus, there is a need to put accessibility in place so that a shift to accessibility-based planning facilitates a move towards social and environmental sustainability.

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Introduction

In recent decades, planning conducted in the second half of the 20th century has been heavily criticised, not least for its functional land use divides, car dependency, focus on constant progress and dual agenda concerning natural resources and landscape amenities. The discourse on transit-oriented development (TOD), which promotes densely built urban enclaves within walking distance of public transport nodes, illustrates the desire amongst contemporary planners to move beyond modern (and modernist) planning principles (Calthorpe, 1993). A crucial element for the proposed move towards sustainable development is a shift from *mobility-based* to *accessibility-based* planning (e.g. Bertolini, 1999; Curtis and Scheurer, 2010; Ratner and Goetz, 2013). However, with modern ideas of time and space deeply embedded in models, cartographic representations, planning practice and administration, such a shift would require much work and could not be achieved overnight. Graham and Healey (1999) argue that the dependency of Euclidean space within modern planning, anchored with “bed-rock concepts” which shift very slowly despite criticism, is a major obstacle to change. Therefore, they urge “new conceptions of place

and the city, based fundamentally on relational views of time and space” (1999: 629), in order to revise these fundamental concepts. This has in fact been the aim within the last decade of ‘turns’ within post-structuralist geography towards relational interpretations of, for instance, scale, space, mobility, nature and planning practice (e.g. Amin and Thrift, 2002; Massey, 2005; Murdoch, 2006; Sheller and Urry, 2006; Farías and Bender, 2010; McCann and Ward, 2010; Jones et al., 2013). However one key concept, *accessibility*, which is of particular importance since it captures the troubled relationship between mobility and place within modernity, has yet to be scrutinised from a relational point of view. In order for a shift from mobility-based to accessibility-based planning to be meaningful (and to be part of a greater shift towards sustainability), the idea of accessibility and its dependence on modern (or Euclidean) conceptions of space and time need to be examined.

Following the actor-network-theory-related discourse on portable knowledge and relational thinking (e.g. Latour 1999, 2005; Murdoch, 2006) and calls for relationality of place (Ingold, 2007, 2011; Malpas 2012a), the first part of this paper proposes a relational reading of accessibility. This is followed by a case study of regional planning policy in which TOD plays a central role. The case in question is used to examine how modern planning principles lurk within planning policies, not least due to the definition of

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accessibility. In the concluding part of the paper, the need to put accessibility in place in order for a shift towards accessibility planning to be meaningful is discussed.

Accessibility and place

This section discusses the definition of accessibility used in contemporary geography, its dependency on Euclidean space, and the need for a relational reading of the concept.

Euclidean space describes an infinite, homogeneous and non-temporal grid with the cardinal points as its cornerstones. Irrespective of their ambiguous or multiple character, phenomena are treated as bounded and inclusive objects that can never affect space as such. Rather, people and places are inserted into this matrix, like pieces on a chess board (Massey, 2005; Olwig, 2008). While its advocates consider Euclidean space an a-historical matter of fact, it nevertheless had to be *assembled* in order to work. Without instruments and incentives to map, measure and materialise Euclidean space, it would have remained an elusive idea (Livingstone, 2003; Latour, 2005; Metzger, 2013). Studying the gathering of Euclidean space reveals its dependence on a very particular idea of transportation, namely the ability of knowledge and goods to leave place and be transported without alterations, as “immutable mobiles” (Murdoch, 1998; see Latour, 1999, 2005).

Making something travel as an immutable mobile requires much work. First, it needs to be ‘cut loose’ from its place-specific entanglements. Second, it requires established infrastructure for smooth travel. Therefore, in the process of abstracting knowledge to make it capable of travelling, its relation to place is replaced by a *position*, and the work invested in abstracting and moving the knowledge (or thing) from one place to another is reduced to a *trajectory* or a reference (Latour, 1999; see also Ingold, 2007). Disregard of the importance of place and the focus on black-boxed travel has far-reaching implications for knowledge that moves in other ways:

“Significant knowledge comes to be defined as information that can be circulated on technological systems [as immutable mobiles], as opposed to that which can be communicated only face-to-face. Types of discourse that do not fit the information model became devaluated as “emotional” and “feminine.” Truth becomes identified with information that is mobile, universal, contextless.” (Williams, 1993: 396).

Thus, based on its ability to travel, knowledge is classified as subjective or objective (c.f. Latour, 1993, 2005). Within modernity, the disregard of the place-specificity is not a regrettable side-effect, but an actual aim; by overcoming the isolation of place and providing universal knowledge, the modern idea of progress and enlightenment could be accomplished (Williams, 1993). This idea of progress is in turn closely related to that of time–space compression, which is dependent on the same kind of conduits of transportation allowing black-boxed travel; if the goods or message are lost or transformed during travel, the distant place will not have come closer.

Ingold (2007, 2011) contrasts the modern idea of mobility and time–space compressions (where mobility is conceptualised separately from the work, infrastructure and places required to make it happen) with a relational, enacted and place-related concept of *wayfaring* (where mobility and place-making are understood as interdependent). This distinction is of key importance in the present analysis, since the idea of time-spatial shrinkage has sometimes been labelled relational space, as though it were not based on the idea of absolute space, which it is intended to ‘shrink’. To separate these two discourses on relationality, Malpas (2012a) offers a useful distinction between the relationality of *mere positions* (e.g. studies of time–space compressions, i.e. based on

abstract space) and the relationality of *place*. The latter, in which *place* and *place-making* is part and parcel of the understanding of *mobility*, is the relational understanding of place employed in this paper. It is used below to examine accessibility.

Accessibility

Despite its importance within geography and planning, the concept of accessibility is rarely scrutinised. Seminal papers and reviews on accessibility provide only vague comments on the definition, as though discussing increasingly advanced measures and models could replace a definition of what is being measured (e.g. Hansen, 1959; Handy and Niemeier, 1997; Geurs and van Wee, 2004; Ferreira and Batey, 2007; Gutiérrez, 2009; Curtis and Scheurer, 2010; Páez et al., 2012). This is problematic, not the least since the concept *as such* (i.e. independently of measures and mapping exercises) plays an important role within planning. With only a marginal discourse on the concept, it is hardly surprising that definitions vary to some degree, but these differences are primarily due to whether the author has chosen a site, activity or network as the prime object of study. The shared assumptions about accessibility are apparent in the fact that the different perspectives (or measures) are regarded as complementing each other (e.g. Ferreira and Batey, 2007; Curtis and Scheurer, 2010) and in shared references to classics (such as Hansen, 1959). Therefore, rather than listing similar definitions, Handy and Niemeier’s well-cited description is used as an entry point for the following analysis of the concept itself. Those authors describe accessibility as:

“... the spatial distribution of potential destinations, the ease of reaching each destination, and the magnitude, quality, and character of the activities found there. Travel cost is central: the less time and money spent in travel, the more places that can be reached within a certain budget and the greater the accessibility. Destination choice is also crucial: the more destinations, and the greater the variety, the higher the level of accessibility. Travel choice is equally important: the wider the variety of models for getting to a particular destination, the greater the choice and the greater the accessibility. Accessibility is thus determined both by the patterns of land use and the nature of the transportation system...” (Handy and Niemeier (1997: 1175).

In short, the lower the friction of distance (counted in time, space and/or money), the greater the potential for interaction and the higher the accessibility. Consequently, mobility is a prime feature of the concept, so much so that mobility and accessibility are generally confused, according to Hodge (1997). In order to differentiate them, he suggests that mobility be regarded as an empirical fact and accessibility as a theoretical concept. In a similar manner, Hansen (1959: 73) views accessibility as “the *intensity of the possibility of interaction* rather than just a measure of the ease of interaction”. Ferreira et al. (2012) describe mobility as a “way to achieve accessibility”. What remains unresolved, however, is whether there is a *qualitative* difference between mobility and accessibility or, put differently, whether accessibility requires *anything else* but mobility. One answer would be that accessibility concerns spatial distribution. For example, with plenty of restaurants within a limited area, mobility can be low and accessibility to restaurants still high. Yet, following the definition of accessibility provided above, mobility is still *the* key factor: increased mobility could collapse time–space and compensate for a scattered pattern of restaurants, and thus provide equally high accessibility.

The definition above describes *points in space* with trajectories of black-boxed travel in between, so the travel itself does not contribute or change anything, but is only a means to bridge distances. This clearly illustrates what Malpas (2012a) defines as the relationality of mere positions. By definition, points and trajectories do not have spatial extensions and therefore there is no limit to how close

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