



Spatial chaos and the city of the 21st century

session: 19th October (Friday), 6 pm

venue: Emilia Auditorium, Emilii Plater 51

guests: Filip De Boeck, Joanna Kusiak, AbduMaliq Simone

moderator: Kacper Pobłocki

The session is devoted to the most intriguing contemporary urban phenomena in countries of the South, where the basic terminology for describing cities has come to be redefined. The dichotomy between “chaos” and the Modernist idea of “spatial order” occurs to be inadequate to address the challenges ahead. Could it be that the vision of well-ordered city space is just another utopian dream?

The meeting conducted in English and in Polish.

Filip De Boeck

ODRRE HSA NO IPMORTNCAE?

Taking as a starting point Belgian artist Ann Veronica Janssens' 2011 Geneva installation, in which the order of the letters in the phrase 'l' ordre n'a pas d'importance' is shifted around without losing meaning and legibility, I would like to reflect upon the organisers' starting point that the opposition between the modernist notion of order and its anti-thesis, 'chaos', is no longer adequate to describe present and future urban challenges. And yet, it is a dichotomy that continues to inform the politics of urban transformation, expansion and renewal in many places around the world.

One of these is Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, that will be taken as an example here. Tropes of chaos, urban dystopia, pathology and disorder have come to be routinely applied to this city, which is itself the historical product of the modernist planning ideals of Belgian urban planners and architects during the colonial period. But whose 'order' and 'chaos' are we talking about? Since 1960, the city has indeed grown away from the order of the colonialist modernity that the Belgian colonizer imposed upon the city's surface. In the process, the urban residents of Kinshasa have invented very different modes of ordering in and for their city.

They have destituted former orders and contested official definitions of what public space and sphere are meant to mean. And while the Congolese government tries very hard to resurrect these former models through its so-called 'revolution of modernity' which was launched by President Kabila earlier this year, the inhabitants of Kinshasa have also been busy with substituting and recharging these former orders with all kinds of different meanings, thereby infusing the city with their own norms, rules, ownership regimes, infrastructures of affect, and architectures of feeling. In this way, every day again, people invent and reinvent what it means to be and be together in the city.

Joanna Kusiak

Warsaw: The Orders of Chaos

As Kiril Stanilov once noted, chaos is a zeitgeist of post-socialist transformation. Indeed, in the urban discourses after 1989 chaos became a notorious word, ever returning in daily conversations, press commentaries and academic papers. However, “chaos” as a theoretical concept not necessarily belongs to a modernist dichotomy of order/disorder.

As an academic non-notion, chaos is rather a post-modern chameleonic word which, to stick

to the Hegelian language, has its cunning. This cunning makes certain kinds of systemic violence appear accidental rather than generated by the system itself. The key to understand it is the difference between (i) "chaos" as a term used in public and political discourse, (ii) chaos as a structural condition of power relations between distinct pockets of order and (iii) chaos as a creative force of bottom-up insurgency of citizen reinventing the framework of vernacular urban life.

Using the examples from contemporary Warsaw, I will scrutinize the use of the term "chaos" in Poland and single out its particular contexts, functions and political uses. The aim is to show what distinct social phenomena and power relations are hidden beneath the superficial impression of chaos and how a "chaotic mode of domination" is being created and recreated against "chaotic insurgency" of urban citizen. Referring to the preceding speakers and their research in the cities of Global South, I want to open the debate how the experience of Eastern Europe may be relevant to contemporary urban debate, hitherto mostly focused on the North-South axis.

AbdouMaliq Simone

Learning to be Jakarta: spatial practices and urban majorities

When people inhabit a city, they situate themselves and are situated through the intersections of infrastructure and technical systems, and the particular domains and modalities of occupation—settlement and work—that are configured by them. At the same time, people are also inhabited by the city, as a kind of possession, endowment, capacitation and series of conundrum. People figure themselves out through figuring arrangements of materials, of designing what is available to them in formats and positions that enable them particular vantage points and ways of doing things.

What it is possible for people to do with each other is largely a question of what it is that exists between them, and how this "between" can be shaped as active points of reference, connection and anchorage. Infrastructure exerts a force—not simply in the materials and energies it avails, but also the way it attracts people, draws them in, coalesces and expends their capacities. Thus, the distinction between infrastructure and sociality is fluid and pragmatic rather than definitive. People work on things to work on each other, as these things work on them. This is the way they learn how to be in the city, how to be many things in the city.

It is this process of urban learning that is being taken apart as dense mixed-income, mixed use central city districts across the Global South are being taken apart, and residents of many different ways of life are dispersed into more generic and segregated sites. Given all of the changes in consumption, political practice, infrastructure adaptation, and social life that will be required over the next decades in response to climate change, it is crucial that new processes of urban learning emerge. As Jakarta demonstrates, that learning is connected to the particular characteristics of the space in which it is to take place.