International Journal of
Recent Innovations in Academic Research
Open Access, Peer Reviewed, Abstracted and Indexed Journal

E-ISSN: 2635-3040; P-ISSN: 2659-1561
Homepage: https://www.ijriar.com/
Volume-5, Issue-3, March-2021: 1-10

Research Article

Hybrid Assemblages, Practicing Places: Intercultural Research, Controversies and Recommendations in Global Urbanism

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Received: February 15, 2021 **Accepted:** February 28, 2021 **Published:** March 10, 2021

Abstract: Intercultural research is essentially complex, open-ended, encompassing a variable geometry of webs of transaction and interaction, and subject to self-organizing adaptive evolutionary patterns. In the field of urbanism, the manifestation of such complexity happens via several processes that we analyzed in the first part of this research. In the first paper, we analyzed processes of intercultural research as alliances, circuits and assemblages (participatory, transnational and transdisciplinary urbanism), as means to highlight the complex nature of intercultural practices and their implications. In this second paper, we focus on the controversies raised by complexity and intercultural research in global urbanism and offer some recommendations to overcome them. Learning, research and knowledge are collective and participatory processes (increasingly so across cultures and nations but also within bounded urban intercultural spaces), requiring alliance formation. Also, the formation of flows and circuits of research ideas across cultures are by definition intercultural processes of knowledge generation. Further, because disciplinary contexts have their own research cultures, intercultural research is a transdisciplinary process of assemblage. Alliances and circuits are not easily developed, and in fact usually face multiple challenges and drawbacks. A possible solution would be to adopt a transdisciplinary approach to urbanism in order to foster and expand intercultural research in the field.
Keywords: Complexity Research, Urbanism, Holism, Transdisciplinarity, Assemblages, Hybridization, Socio-materiality.

1. Introduction

In this paper on complexity in global urbanism we discuss controversies, problems and recommendations and we describe challenges that constrain, sometimes in significant ways, the processes of alliance and circuit formation that were identified in the first paper as the pre-conditions for intercultural research in urbanism. We also suggest as potential solutions (1) practicing places as a strategy to overcome borders and boundaries, (2) assemblages as hybridization and (3) transdisciplinary urbanism, where intercultural ties happen through translation, in the trade zones across research cultures and disciplines. Disciplines are understood as conceptual hubs based on history and path-dependence, not as self-contained, closed systems of knowledge and research. As possible research directions in the near future we identify (1) socio-materiality, (2) complexity and holistic urban research.

Even if the city as an intercultural milieu is conducive to the necessary cosmopolitan attitude that fosters intercultural linkages, as we saw in the previous paper, the challenges are formidable. The structuring of cities around borders and citadels, virtual and symbolic or cultural walls and ghettos, as well as the challenges to translation, adoption and adaptation of urban policies across distinct local planning cultures, are obstacles for the transferring of urban knowledge around the world and thus for the possibilities of effective intercultural research. Participatory urbanism shows the way forward as an intercultural practice for researching and analyzing urban problems. However, issues of

decentralization and devolution of powers, building trust, achieving fair representation, enabling resources and support systems, or building transparency through platforms of engagement represent potential limitations to this approach. The fading away of the Bilbao Effect and the limited impact of Dubaization are illustrations of several drawbacks in the materialization of circuits and so-called best practice adoption.

In addition, the sheer complexity of alliance formation and circuit efficacy, as well as the predominance of different epistemic cultures (with distinct conceptual sets) among participants in intercultural research, analysis and practice present substantial challenges to effective intercultural communication. The existence of different values and cultural contexts complicates efforts at interpretation and fair judgment among parties involved in practices of complexity and intercultural research. As Sanyal remarks:

> "There is no cultural nucleus or core planning culture, no social gene that can be decoded to reveal the cultural DNA of planning practice. Planning culture, like the larger social culture in which it is embedded, is in constant flux" [1].

Thus, the focus of inquiry for intercultural research in urban planning should be the continuous process of social, political, and technological change, which affects the way planners in different settings conceptualize problems and structure institutional responses to them. Sanyal states:

> "If planning culture is viewed in this dynamic way, in contrast to traditional notions of culture that are used to evoke a sense of immutability and inheritance, then we can go beyond "cultural essentialism," which, in essence, is exclusionary, parochial, and an inaccurate representation of history" [2].

This implies developing a *mentally mobile attitude* informed by flexibility and creativity that is able to translate symbolic codes across fields of endeavor and practices. In urbanism, such disposition to translate can be expressed as "practicing places." For complexity and intercultural research, the notions that best capture such mobile disposition are "assemblages" and "hybridization." Research strategies, such as transdisciplinarity, also have the potential to cross over binary oppositions and overcome the challenges of alliances and circuits in urbanism.

2. Practicing Places

The walker in the city continually invents spaces by means of practicing the places in the built urban environment. According to Michel de Certeau, walking defines spaces of enunciation [3]. Similarly, geometry opposes itself to experienced anthropology, and so do maps (reifications, abstractions of the rich diversity of itineraries that can be practiced by individuals) in relation to tours. Power strategically establishes a place, an order, a particular distribution of stratified elements available for analysis, whereas resistance tactically articulates variations within such an order, and so practices spaces.

Practices of resistance become, then, "spatial stories," and through them there occurs "a constant transformation of places into spaces and of spaces into places." Spaces, thus, are thought of as open to human creativity and action. De Certeau believes that spaces can be more easily liberated than Foucault imagines, because individual practices "spatialize" rather than localize in repressive grids of social control. Space, therefore, is not simply a metaphor for a site or container of power [4].

Resisting means then marking out boundaries, for the symbolic creation and recreation of spaces is an act of partitioning and differentiating. In this sense, it also constitutes and act of foundation, "of creation of a field that authorizes dangerous and contingent social action" in a "fragmented,"

miniaturized," and "polyvalent" form. Resisting (spatial stories, practices, operations) also means transcending frontiers and crossing bridges. By privileging a "logic of ambiguity," the spatial stories of resistance represent "a departure, an attack on a state, the ambition of a conquering power, or the flight of an exile; in any case, the `betrayal' of an order," the "tour over the state," narrativity "in its most delinquent form" [5].

De Certeau conceives narrative in a quite broad way as creations of spaces (as opposed to established places), as description (as opposed to theorization), as an art (as opposed to discourse), and as a private knowledge that remains "on the margins...of scientific or cultural orthopraxis." It is "the status of a know-how without discourse." Not only all manifestations of popular culture (ordinary language, tales, games, legends), but also any kind of "spatial practice" (walking, incarceration, railway navigation), and also reading and believing constitute objects for narrativity. Narrating represents an avoidance of totalizations and a foundation of spaces (which, as we have seen, challenge the unifying thrust of places). Indeed, "deprived of narrations...the group or the individual regresses toward the disquieting, fatalistic experience of a formless, indistinct, and nocturnal totality" [6].

3. Assemblages as Hybridization

Literary critic Homi K. Bhabha introduces the concept of 'hybridity' against the containment of cultural differences and challenges all hegemonies structured through binary antagonism. For him,

> "... all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity. But the importance of hybridity is not … to race two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and set up new structures of authority, new political initiatives … The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation" [7].

Bhabha locates the origin of the notion 'cultural difference' and hybridity within colonial discourse itself where it is articulated as resistance to 'colonial authority'–a process by which in the very practice of domination the language of the master becomes hybrid. Bhabha states:

> "The field of signification of colonial cultural differences announces a modality of misappropriations of signs that produces a discursive instability at the level of enunciation; a productive ambivalence which deconstructs the fixity of the boundaries (coloniser/colonised) of colonial discursivity and construct hybrid identities" [8].

The notion hybridity or third space of Homi Bhabha is a floating metaphor for a critical historical consciousness that privilege spatiality over temporality; but the privileging of spatialization is not ahistorical and timeless rather he tries creatively to spatialize temporality. This is an envisioning of cultural politics of third space, an effective consolidation that helps to dislodge its entrapment in hegemonic historiography and historicism.

The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on- going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation. The "right" to signify from the periphery of authorized power and privilege does not depend on the persistence of tradition, it is resourced by power. Bhabha explains further the notion of "going beyond":

> "Beyond signifies spatial distance, marks progress, promises the future, but our intimations of exceeding the barrier or boundary – the very act of going beyond – are unknowable, unrepresentable, without a return to the "present" which in the process of repetition, becomes

> disjunct and distance – to live somehow beyond the border of our times – throws into relief the temporal, social differences that interrupt or collusive sense of cultural contemporaneity" [9].

Hence, the going beyond is the spatial act of intervention to revisit and reconstruct subjectivities in order to inhabit multiple positions of subjects as an enunciation of cultural difference. Thus Homi Bhabha's notion hybridity/third space is akin to the notion of "assemblage" developed by Deleuze & Guattari [10]. Both notions connect spatial concerns with cultural politics to provide multiple identities challenging all the binaries which are part of homogenization and universalization of human existence with singular analytical categories. Intercultural research in urbanism has the potential to overcome the barriers to alliances and circuits through an ontology and epistemology developing around the complex idea of assemblages or "rhizomatic research cultures" [11].

4. Transdisciplinary Urbanism

The iconography of complex assemblages is akin to transdisciplinarity, which is a particularly well-suited strategy for intercultural research in urbanism. Since Berger and Luckmann we know that reality is socially constructed [12]. People and groups interacting in a social system create, over time, concepts or mental representations of each other's actions, and that these concepts eventually become habituated into reciprocal roles played by the actors in relation to each other. When these roles are made available to other members of society to enter into and play out, the reciprocal interactions are said to be institutionalized. In the process, meaning is embedded in society. Knowledge and people's conceptions (and beliefs) of what reality is become embedded in the institutional fabric of society. Reality is therefore said to be socially constructed.

However, the social sciences by themselves cannot adequately come to terms with the ontology of reality, in particular urban reality. Leading urban researchers such as Manuel Castells, Janet Abu-Lughod and Saskia Sassen have recognized that the reality of the city cannot be understood from a single disciplinary perspective. Also, in two joint sessions of the British and American Sociological Associations held during the course of 2001, the conclusions pointed towards a necessity for interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinarity to enrich the perspectives within urban sociology [13]. Even if it seems appropriate to prescribe interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinarity for urban studies, this strategy would not solve the conceptual and epistemological problems of a field that faces the massive ontological transformations brought about by conditions of planetary urbanization. We are in need of a new perspective that goes beyond disciplines: a transdisciplinary perspective.

Because urbanism engages, both as a discipline and as a profession, with broader societal concerns (e.g. situated knowledge, participatory design, everyday practices), it therefore seems obvious that hybrid modes of inquiry ought to be part of the knowledge landscape. Whereas *inter*disciplinary knowledge is located in scholarly environments, *trans*disciplinary knowledge production entails a fusion of academic and non-academic knowledge, theory and practice, discipline and profession. Several attempts have been made towards less reductive approaches to space and design; approaches that no longer *choose* between theory and practice as the ideal locus for critique, but, instead, allow critique to be processed in ways that are more complex and more entangled; approaches that advocate hybrid modes of inquiry and research.

One can think of the hybridization of nature and technology, engineering and the social, facts and values, human and non-human, and the explicit attention to agency in science and technology studies (STS) and ANT, actor-network-theory [14]. Such approaches have in common their suggestion to approach urban issues not according to predefined ideologies or (critical) theories but to study them as a problem of the outside – as situated, complex gatherings of all sorts of agencies, where the notion of transdisciplinarity can be applied meaningfully.

5. Future Research Directions

5.1. Socio-Materiality

Socio-materiality reveals the inherent complex nature of empirical reality and the need to account for such complexity in our analyses. Actor-network theory and assemblage materialist approaches propose to overcome what Alfred North Whitehead named "the bifurcation of nature" expressed in the secular dichotomy nature-culture [15]. A step in this direction can be helpful in efforts at developing meaningful intercultural research on the ecological crisis and sustainability in the Anthropocene [16].

Within urbanism, materiality and assemblage thinking have found friendly ground [17]. After all, the built environment is an inescapable material reality to be grasped from the outside, through "the observation of concrete materials, not the workings of the mind in isolation" [18]. Jane Jacobs already observed that buildings, streets and neighborhoods work as dynamic organisms, changing in response to how people interact with them [19].

Materiality aims at knowing not by defining the objects but instead by becoming sensitive to the immanence of vibrant matter itself, its influences, results and consequences. In this vein, French sinologist François Jullien has stated that "a wise man does not have ideas" that are independent of matter [20].

We need not produce a conventional, rationalist theory to explain intercultural research in urbanism. As Beauregard and Lieto have shown [21], we need to aim at something different and perhaps more necessary and effective: to give meaning to new materiality by fostering a new sensitivity, orientation and disposition towards the central role of non-human elements in intercultural research within urbanism and urban planning. Urbanists as intercultural researchers would need to be both craftsmen of good ideas (by gathering knowledge, people and material things) and public intellectuals (by forming alliances around matters of concern).

A new focus on materiality in intercultural research would focus on the role of non-human entities (plans, documents, arguments, expertise, buildings, etc.) in how planners envisage the connections among norms, technologies and life-worlds through networks of human associations, technologies, natural ecologies and places, sites and settings [22].

In spite of a new focus on matter, intercultural research needs to be sympathetic to inclusive epistemologies that affirm ontological realism while giving room for the shaping role of the knowing subject via perception, imagination, memory and affects. This is important because the pretensions of pure objectivism in some interpretations of ANT, rejecting or downplaying the crucial role of the mind in shaping human understanding and inquiry, are hard to defend. It is crucial to not misrepresent the causal capacities of non-human objects while effacing the significance of the capacities of human beings. Human attributes such as intuition, affect and emotion are the pulse of socio-materiality [23].

A relational approach in intercultural research is not qualitatively different from conventional sociological or technical applications of network analysis, which are mainly devoted to mapping connections among network members. However, it is possible to suggest that "network" would work in intercultural research as a metaphor conveying the complexity of trying to capture the multiple and changing relational dimensions of always-mobile assemblages.

Socio-materiality is not widely embraced among planning theorists. The reason might have something to do with humanism and post-humanism. It certainly has something to do with the misconception that ANT proposes to make non-humans into humans, thus ignoring the very precise

definition of an actor that ANT deploys -- which is, itself, a theoretical extension of the notion of "affordances" [24]. The idea of "affordances" refers to the properties of matter, these properties being what influences how humans interact with things. Affordances, as applied to both things and places, are properties that allow a person to do some things and not others, but are not fully constraining.

5.2. Complexity and Holism

The relational thrust in complexity approaches leads to holism and avoids reductionist perspectives. Thus, intercultural research can be said to be holistic when a transdisciplinary research strategy is used to account for problems that are global in nature, such as sustainable megaproject development, where megaprojects need to be conceived as complex disruptive innovations. Development processes in the built environment have significant environmental impacts, and thus attaining acceptable levels of environmental sustainability needs to become a priority for planners, developers and other stakeholders. However, the attainment of environmental sustainability does not in itself ensures megaproject sustainability, a goal that needs to be pursued holistically. One way to do it is to use the notion of "key or multiple success factors" [25].

This notion is not new in the field of project management and, in fact, constitutes one of the topics most discussed by specialists. It is increasingly important "to evaluate projects and their impacts at different times and based on multiple criteria in order to fully evaluate their performance. Success is often driven by political and/or power-related factors" [26]. Due to the strongly political nature of the stakeholders throughout the supply chain and their different underlying objectives, the success factors usually considered no longer seem sufficient. This configuration requires innovative governance solutions that align the interests of the different stakeholders in a complex environment with a large number of key actors [27].

By following the notion of "multiple success factors," we contend that there are a number of requirements that need to be met in order to achieve sustainable megaprojects: environmental sustainability (sustainable infrastructure delivery and sustainable development zones); sustainability in design and planning; sustainability in megaproject management; institutional sustainability; and socio-economic sustainability.

Thus, a megaproject can be defined as sustainable if it is planned and executed to account for the capacity, fitness, resilience, diversity and balance of its urban ecosystem. We take the view of sustainability as an organic process including environment, economy and community: form and efficiency -- environmental factors in design, architecture, engineering and construction -- as well as policy -- urban plans and practices that explicitly aim at maintaining and improving the social and economic well-being of citizens [28].

The notion of "strategic urban planning" has become paramount in efforts to address sustainability challenges in urban environments [29]. This notion involves a holistic approach to problem-solving in the area of sustainability that implies placing the idea of complexity at the forefront of analysis and action. Complex thought, education and knowledge, in Edgar Morin´s understanding, take into account contextual, global and multidimensional factors to devise strategy conducive to more fruitful action. Morin states:

> "Pertinent, knowledge must confront complexity. Complexus means that which is woven together. In fact there is complexity whenever the various elements (economic, political, sociological, psychological, emotional, mythological …) that compose a whole are inseparable, and there is inter-retroactive, interactive, interdependent tissue between the subject of knowledge and its context, the parts and the whole, the whole and the parts, the parts amongst themselves. Complexity is therefore the bond between unity and multiplicity.

> Developments proper to our planetary era confront us more frequently, ineluctably with the challenge of complexity" [30].

Complex knowledge also factors in the centrality of the knowing subject in analytical endeavors, the uncertainty of the knowledge enterprise itself and the incompleteness and undecidable nature of *homo complexus´*s human action. Through complex knowledge, the holistic quality of urban planning naturally leads to a transdisciplinary conception of theory-building and practice development.

Thus, a possibly fruitful way to apply the notion of strategic urban planning would be to propose a transdisciplinary paradigm to address urban challenges. A transdisciplinary way of thinking would cross traditional disciplines and would modify the classical notion of science. A new vision fostering sustainable principles requires a rethinking of human values, and a reconsideration of the integration among the flow of perception, experience and consciousness. It is impossible to imagine a single solution to the problem of sustainability, but many complex, interrelated and evolving solutions [31].

To avoid current destructive human behavior, we need to develop a new collective perception of human relations towards the valorization of a new set of attitudes and behaviors or towards a different prioritization of the set of current values. Holistic and unified knowledge, as an instance of intercultural research, can deal with complex global problems of sustainable development.

6. Conclusions

This research work (presented in two papers) asked how is intercultural and complexity research made possible in the field of urbanism? The research has identified (in the first paper) alliances, circuits and assemblages as the forms of collective research, learning and knowledge, and as the conditions of possibility for intercultural and complexity research in urbanism. We discussed the city as an intercultural milieu, where participatory urbanism and alliance formation, between researchers and citizens, take place. Then we discussed urban policy travel, a form of transnational urbanism (where intercultural means international) that is based on circuits, flows and networks between creators of knowledge, ideas and policy and receptors and adopters.

In this second paper we discussed controversies, problems and recommendations and described challenges that constrain, sometimes in significant ways, the processes of alliance and circuit formation that were identified in the first paper as the pre-conditions for intercultural research in urbanism. We also suggested as potential solutions (1) practicing places as a strategy to overcome borders and boundaries, (2) assemblages as hybridization and (3) transdisciplinary urbanism, where intercultural ties happen through translation, in the trade zones across research cultures and disciplines. We proposed disciplines to be understood as conceptual hubs based on history and path-dependence, not as self-contained, closed systems of knowledge and research. As possible research directions in the near future we identified (1) socio-materiality, (2) urban governance as complex and holistic.

We found that, even if the city as an intercultural milieu is conducive to the necessary cosmopolitan attitude that fosters intercultural linkages, the challenges are formidable. The structuring of cities around borders and citadels, virtual and symbolic or cultural walls and ghettos, as well as the challenges to translation, adoption and adaptation of urban policies across distinct local planning cultures, are obstacles for the transferring of urban knowledge around the world and thus for the expansion of intercultural research.

Participatory urbanism shows the way forward as an intercultural practice for researching and analyzing urban problems. However, issues of decentralization and devolution of powers, building trust, achieving fair representation, enabling resources and support systems, or building transparency

through platforms of engagement represent potential limitations to this approach. The fading away of the Bilbao Effect and the limited impact of Dubaization are illustrations of drawbacks in so-called best practices. In addition, the sheer complexity of alliance formation and circuit efficacy, as well as the predominance of different epistemic cultures (with distinct conceptual sets) among participants in intercultural research, analysis and practice present substantial challenges to effective intercultural communication. The existence of different values and cultural contexts complicates efforts at interpretation and fair judgment among parties involved in practices of intercultural research.

Advances in intercultural and complexity research in urbanism are tied to developments in the area of assemblage research cultures, particularly in developing new ontologies and epistemologies that would allow for the possibility of shaping transcultural value sets, even if partial or temporary, and resolving the conundrum and wicked problem of complexity. We can expect advances in such approaches and research strategies in urbanism in the coming years that help understand the transdisciplinary, multifaceted and indeterminate nature of urban reality.

Conflicts of interest: Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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Citation: Gerardo del Cerro Santamaría. 2021. Hybrid Assemblages, Practicing Places: Intercultural Research, Controversies and Recommendations in Global Urbanism. International Journal of Recent Innovations in Academic Research, 5(3): 1-10.