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Urban Public as a Phenomenon of Communication

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ABSTRACT
The article describes the theory of German sociologist Hans-Paul Bahrdt, who characterizes a special form of communication in cities and urban places. This reflection on the phenomenon of communication in the urban public are traced from a system-theoretical perspective and further transferred on the concept of 'non-places' by Marc Augé. His comparison should provide information about which signs and communicative codes in the urban public are able to express the identity of the city and the people living in it. Finally, these considerations will be compared with contemporary approaches of architectural semiotics and urban design.

KEYWORDS
Urban Public; Communication; Representation; Urban Semiotics

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Urban public as a phenomenon of communication

The article focusses the relation between the urban public and the people in these cities that communicate via signs, texts, and images. Our nowadays cities are full of signs, billboards or screens all communicating a certain message to a passer-by: Where can I get some coffee and how much is it? Is the entrance to the subways on the left or on the right? May I enter the park in front of the palace? In this sense, the signs and texts and the social conventions associated with them are intended to organise flows or to facilitate circulation and coordination.

Furthermore, the architecture of buildings tells a message defining the character and meaning of a building: Is it a museum, a school, or a shopping-mall? We can read this character or meaning, because there is a variety of signs or symbols helping us draw a distinction between different buildings or places. On the one hand, the article tries to characterize the particular feature of (symbolic) communication in an urban public according to the theory of German sociologist Hans-Paul Bahrdt. On the other hand, Bahrdt's considerations are compared with contemporary approaches to show that present-day questions of an urban public were already problematized and theoretically discussed more than sixty years ago. Above all, however, this article aims to show one thing: Even though Bahrdt does not elaborate his theoretical considerations in depth, he nevertheless makes an exciting and promising attempt to combine a theory of communication and a theory of the urban public.

1. The open social intentionality of urban behaviour and the self-representation of communication

In his book *Die moderne Großstadt* (*The Modern Age City*) first published in 1961, German sociologist Hans-Paul Bahrdt develops a theoretical approach to give reasons for a seeming distinctiveness of urban centres and urban life. In the context of Bahrdt's considerations it is more appropriate to speak about an urban public sphere than about places of urban public,[1] because Bahrdt's concept of an urban public does not primarily describe concrete places, but rather a particular feature of communication. Following the concept of German sociologist Max Weber, Bahrdt calls the "incomplete integration" of social relationships in the city a necessary condition of the urban public. With "incomplete integration" he means that there is no – or rather: less – control to communication

1 For the differences between the terms "public sphere" and "public space", see the reflections of Setha Low, "Public Space and the Public Sphere: The Legacy of Neil Smith: Public Space and the Public Sphere," *Antipode* 49 (January 2017): 153–70, https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12189.

and social relations by norms and structures.[2] Bahrdt states that if social relations are characterized by incomplete integration, the individual's existence becomes more and more indeterminate, because it is liberated from the mediation by personal relations, like social or family ties. The form of interaction between two people as well as the individual opportunities to act in a specific way are no longer – or better: less – controlled and determined by social norms.

Bahrdt hypothesises that the individual in a rural environment is more likely to communicate and act in a known manner.[3] In this context the main emphasis is on the known and predictable manners of individual communication and behaviour instead of on the individual him- or herself. In contrast to that the behaviour in a bourgeois city is characterized by greater openness because the subject is increasingly confronted with the unknown. Since the individual has only little and sometimes even no knowledge at all to anticipate the reaction of others, Bahrdt assumes that communicating in such an incompletely integrated situation involves higher risks than in a fully integrated environment.[4] For example, sometimes, there is a lack of reasons to communicate at all. In other cases, communication will not work because you do not know your counterpart or there is no main theme of common interest, etc. The opponent's reaction in conversation is seldom arbitrary, but also never completely predictable.

According to Bahrdt the "representation" of behaviour and communication is necessary in order to increase the likelihood of successful communication in such a situation dominated by uncertainties. The representation of communication expresses the specific characteristics of the communicating individual.[5] Since no personal connection and less social rules determine the situation, communication depends entirely on the individual him- or herself. The individual has to convey an information with his or her statement, and, at the same time, the "representation" or "stylization" of communication emphasizes the communicative character of the statement and thus seeks to establish a connection to the other person. In communication with others, therefore, individuals must always communicate information of their own choice. But this information must also be comprehensible to the other person(s) and, above all, it must be connectable for them. Thus, the conversation should always establish and at the same time explicitly address a connection between the individuals involved.

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2 Hans Paul Bahrdt, *Die moderne Großstadt: soziologische Überlegungen zum Städtebau*, ed. Ulfert Herlyn (Opladen: Leske + Budrich, 1998), 86 (translated by the author).

3 Ibid., 86–87.

4 Ibid., 88–89.

5 Ibid., 90.

2. Self-representation as a feature of urban places and communication

According to Bahrdt, in the bourgeois city these two factors – at first the incomplete integration and open intentionality of social relationships and, secondly, the self-representation and stylization of behaviour and communication – are necessary conditions of an urban public. This requires a theme of common interest, which stimulates communication and, at the same time, communication must be designed to be understood by all participants.

From the perspective of system theory, the phenomenon Bahrdt describes as the representation of communication can be understood as a self-description of the speaker, a self-reflection of his or her identity. From the level of a second-order observer a system distinguishes the border to its environment and communicates this observation.[6] This self-representation of the individual, the perception of one's own identity, can be verbalized, but also communicated through a multitude of other signals.

Accordingly, what Bahrdt calls "stylization" or "representation" of behaviour and communication is also described with other terms by Luhmann in his system theory of communication. Whereas in Bahrdt's considerations communication consists of the reference to the individual and a reference to the common of the participants, these two references are included from Luhmann's perspective already in the self-reference of communication. But – as Luhmann shows – communication always requires an external reference in addition to this self-reference.[7] And here we can find a blind spot in Bahrdt's idea of communication: Communication should not only refer to itself, but needs to speak about something else, an information outside of what is heard in the actual conversation. One must tell something new, an information that matters, in order to keep the conversation open to possible different trajectories. Otherwise, communication could end in pure self-references – which, of course, is possible, but should not necessarily be one of the goals of public communication.

With the concept of self-representation, Bahrdt primarily describes a feature of communication, but in some passages of his considerations one can find tentative attempts of Bahrdt trying to transfer this concept to the form of architecture or urban design.[8] He also concedes to buildings and certain quarters the ability of self-representation when he ascribes a "real social function" to the representative façade of bourgeois houses,

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6 Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems*, trans. John Jr. Bednarz and Dirk Baecker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 57; Niklas Luhmann, *Art qs a Social System*, trans. Eva M. Knodt (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 54–55.

7 Claudio Baraldi, Giancarlo Corsi, and Elena Esposito, *GLU: Glossar zu Niklas Luhmanns Theorie sozialer Systeme* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998), 89–90.

8 Bahrdt, *Die moderne Großstadt*, 163.

but he does not further elaborate on this approach.[9] Nevertheless, it must be assumed that the self-representation of buildings and urban places is shown in their structures or architecture as well as in writings, signs, and other messages that they provide to an observer. But the greatest deficit of Bahrdt's reflections remains that he does not at all address what concrete content these signs or symbols in public places convey – the buildings or urban structures only must represent themselves. This deficit can possibly be compensated by more recent considerations.

In his book *Non-Places* (1995) ethnologist Marc Augé deals with phenomena like Bahrdt's. In contrast to Bahrdt Augé does not describe a feature of communication but rather concrete spaces or sites. In his phenomenological approach he describes those sites as 'places' and distinguishes them from 'non-places'. He characterizes the place as the result of collective identity reflection and therefore in its materiality as a medium that can be used to observe this identity. Augé considers a non-place to be a place that has no identity and cannot be described as either relational or historical.[10] Places, on the other hand, are characterized by the fact that they are concerned with identity. These places have a history ascribed to them by individuals and the collective. Individuals as well as the collective refer to these places when they communicate their identity, or they use the place ritually for this purpose. For Augé, typical non-places are places of transport, such as motorways, airports, railway stations, or places of leisure consumption. These places neither disclose a (particular) identity and history nor connections for individual or collective relations. At this point, however, it must be objected, that the properties mentioned by Augé are attributed to places by individuals and are not inherent to the places themselves.[11]

By observing these places based on the description of their identity, history and relation, Augé, however, aims at precisely the same phenomenon that Bahrdt attempts to outline with his concept of representative communication: Bahrdt hypothesizes the fact, that the representative and reflected communication refers to something common as well as to one's own identity. These are precisely the qualities that Augé uses to distinguish places from non-places. Like Bahrdt and Augé, German linguist Wildgen notes that architecture is a semiotic artifact inhabited by humans.[12] But it is not a question of a building or façade being a semiotic artifact, but rather of *what* it represents. The non-places described by Augé all directly

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9 Ibid., 117 (translated by the author).

10 Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London and New York: Verso, 1995), 77–78.

11 For example, highways can be designed to provide a special landscape experience and are then perceived as such by individuals, see Peter Merriman, "Driving Places: Marc Augé, Non-Places, and the Geographies of England's M1 Motorway," *Theory, Culture & Society* 21, no. 4–5 (October 2004): 145–67, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276404046065.

12 Wolfgang Wildgen, *Visuelle Semiotik: Die Entfaltung des Sichtbaren. Vom Höhlenbild bis zur modernen Stadt* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2013), 243.

show "their 'instructions for use'" and the "traffic conditions" they establish. These functionalities are "transmitted by the innumerable 'supports' (signboards, screens, posters) that form an integral part of the contemporary landscape", while the actual senders of these messages are becoming more and more invisible.[13]

The non-places of the modern-age city thus do not lack illustrative signs or representations of themselves. Rather, these places lack any expression of a collective identity, any historicity and individualized connectivity. In the non-places described by Augé, it seems difficult to establish any arbitrariness for making contact, which is not determined by social norms. In the non-places, all forms of social interaction are already predetermined by economic or other principles. This seems to be exactly what Bahrdt means, when he calls the openness in terms of the content of communication an essential component of communication in urban publics. In the signs that are presented in non-places, no individual identity or historicity is conveyed, and just as little commonalities are addressed. In this aspect, these places resemble what Bahrdt describes as the direct opposite of an urban public, when communication through signs and symbols in such places addresses nothing common and unifying. Because the behaviour in such places is primarily subordinated to economic purposes, such places also do not allow for an open social intentionality in the behaviour of the individuals.

In the 1980s, German sociologist Hamm also studied the semiotics of urban public places and its effects on the actions of individuals. He states that the analysis of spatial semiotics is the theoretical key to understand the relations between the physical environment in a city and the behaviour of individuals in it.[14] But what is most important and seems perfectly obvious from the perspective of a theory of communication: Hamm points out that both the sender and the receiver of a message must be able to recognize the same meaning in a sign. Otherwise, communication will not be pragmatic. The greater the social distance, the less likely the supply of common signs.[15] While this circumstance is manageable in most cases of interactive communication, in the sphere of complex cultural and social expressions it makes the real understanding of a message increasingly difficult.

13 Augé, *Non-Places*, 96.

14 Bernd Hamm, *Einführung in die Siedlungssoziologie* (München: Beck, 1982), 165.

15 Ibid., 162 and 165.

3. Urban public as a phenomenon of communication

In contemporary approaches to a theory of urban public space, implicit references to such sociological assumptions about the semiotics of architecture and phenomenological considerations such as Augé's characterization of non-places appear frequently. These approaches confirm Bahrdt's considerations in many cases, but also partly contradict them. For example, Klamt shows that the strict differentiation used by Bahrdt between places in public ownership and private places cannot necessarily be sustained.[16] As Klamt describes, many places in today's cities can, in principle, serve the function of public urban space. The places of urban publicity must not only be in central squares, streets, or parks, but can also be created in peripheral areas of the city. Most importantly, Klamt emphasizes that an urban public space in a political sense can emerge not only in publicly owned places, but also in private places such as pubs and rooms of cultural or political associations.[17] This fact shows that the strict difference between public and private spaces used by Bahrdt is no longer necessarily true today: The main question is whether these spaces allow an open social intentionality, represent themselves and enable or support the self-representation of individuals.

A comparatively more recent approach comes from Parkinson, who, like Bahrdt, shows that the structure of a city influences the emergence of an urban public. Parkinson deals with the effects of public space on the phenomenon of democracy, describing both factors that favour the emergence of an urban public and factors that rather limit the emergence of an urban public. In his view, the assumption that the physical structure of a city determines the behaviour of its inhabitants is now generally accepted.[18] Therefore, in the following, he is interested in analysing the effects of concrete structures. Parkinson judges "that certain kinds of space encourage encounters while others do not". For example, "proximity encourages interaction and the development of community". On the other hand, there are "other city forms" that "encourage transit" and thus can hinder the development of neighbourly relations.[19] These places that encourage transit are exactly what Augé addresses when he gives examples of his distinction between places and non-places. Bahrdt also devotes large parts of his reflections to the fact that car traffic in particular has massively transformed the places of the urban public where citizens meet and communicate with each other.[20]

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16 Bahrdt, *Die moderne Großstadt*, 89 and 117.

17 Martin Klamt, "Öffentliche Räume," in *Handbuch Stadtsoziologie*, ed. Frank Eckardt (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2012), 777, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-94112-7_34.

18 John R. Parkinson, *Democracy and Public Space: The Physical Sites of Democratic Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 71.

19 Ibid., 73.

20 Bahrdt, *Die moderne Großstadt*, 160.

In a summary, Parkinson mentions three dimensions with regard to which urban space can promote – or rather limit – the emergence of an urban public: "it can be (a) absolute, physically preventing, or mandating certain action; (b) suggestive, encouraging certain kinds of behaviour at the expense of others; and (c) symbolic, triggering a sense of identification or recognition, which in turn impacts on such things as political efficacy".[21] Of course these three dimensions can also occur together. While the first and the second dimension seem to be what Bahrdt means, when he describes places that allow (or rather inhibit) an open social intentionality of the individual, the third dimension exactly seems to describe what Bahrdt means, when he states that not just communication in the urban public sphere must represent itself but also the architectural structures of the urban places must represent their identity. According to Parkinson, public buildings or spaces can thus represent a collective symbol of identification, which can therefore also convey common political or social contents. The symbolic dimension of a place can then be characterized with Augé's description of a place as an expression of a collective identity with a specific history and individualized connectivity. Thus, on the one hand, it is the physical structures of the city, and on the other hand, the specific symbols, messages, and meanings within it that encourage the emergence of communication in the urban public.

But the symbols and messages in a socially and culturally highly heterogeneous structure such as a city must in principle be connectable for everyone and thus always emphasize something in common. For this reason, in public places the question always arises as *which* social collective's identity the place is referring to and in which way. As systems theory shows, communication always means selection, because there is always something that has not been told.[22] Also, the symbols and sometimes subtle meanings of the semiotics in public places can rarely be seen as communication as in the case of spoken or written language. The significance that individuals ascribe to these symbols and signs in the urban public is subject to permanent change. As Jürgen Hasse puts it, these meanings are only produced or 'performed' by the subjective actions of individual persons. For this reason, 'the' meaning of the urban public and its symbols cannot be interpreted in a denotative sense, but rather results from a "deep murmur of meanings". This 'deep murmur of meanings', in Hasse's opinion, does not complicate communication, but rather favours it, because it offers a multitude of very different connectivity options.[23] This seems once again to be exactly what Bahrdt means when he demands not only that the public places in the city represent themselves,

21 Parkinson, *Democracy and Public Space*, 77.

22 Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 39.

23 Jürgen Hasse, *Die Wunden der Stadt: Für eine neue Ästhetik unserer Städte* (Wien: Passagen Verlag, 2000), 56–57 (translated by the author).

but also that they offer a certain openness to the various social or cultural intentions of different individuals.

4. Conclusion

Hans-Paul Bahrdt published his sociological considerations sixty years ago. In addition to concrete architectural, spatial theoretical and urban planning considerations, he describes in large parts the phenomenon of the city in terms of communication and the behaviour of individuals. Bahrdt emphasizes the necessity that the buildings and places in the city also represent themselves, but that the places also allow different behaviours of different individuals. This circumstance is immediately apparent in the non-places described by Augé, because although they are shaped by a multitude of information and messages, these messages serve primarily to navigate individual behaviour. The more recent approaches to urban sociology and spatial theory described above seem to support Bahrdt's fundamental considerations to a large extent.

With this in mind, urban places can also be designed as special places of publicity and communication. According to Huning, their characteristics include, for example, qualities of residence such as seating, but also a certain size and structural openness for different persons and groups who meet there, come into contact with each other, perceive each other and represent themselves to each other.[24] These considerations show that Bahrdt's approach can be translated into a design of direct physical structures of public places, which then have an effect on communication in these places. But these places must always be open for a variety of different possible uses. Places of public communication in Bahrdt's sense would be those that allow an open social intentionality of behaviour. Bahrdt assumes that if in social situations there are not so many things that two people have in common, the individual is more likely to be asked to communicate his or her own identity and refer to the identity of his or her counterpart.[25] The experience of the unknown then makes it more likely for the individuals to reflect their identity as well as their communication. For this reason, an encounter with the foreign and the unknown in places that allow communication with others is essential for the creation and future existence of an urban public. The city must offer places to communicate publicly about the community to *all* its inhabitants and, at the same time, the city itself – its structures, buildings, and their surfaces – must be a medium of communication.

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24 Sandra Huning, *Politisches Handeln in öffentlichen Räumen: die Bedeutung öffentlicher Räume für das Politische*, Originalausg, 14 (Berlin: Leue-Verl, 2006), 202.

25 Bahrdt, *Die moderne Großstadt*, 87.

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