

Designing for a City of Lies

Submission by Søren Rosenbak

BIO

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RESEARCH NOTE

The human experience is increasingly becoming an urban one. In the imagining and design of future urban life, "smart cities" remains as one of the key monikers, and in a way battlegrounds. A large part of this discourse is fuelled by digital urbanism, the lacing of tech into the urban fabric, real-time sensors, face-recognizing CCTV etc. By now the technocentrist slant on "smart cities" has been challenged from a number of sides. I'm currently finishing my PhD in design as critical practice, which sets out to prototype a pataphysically infused critical design practice. Subscribing to a research-through-design methodology, one of my design research projects has explored smart cities within this program, in particular the underlying notion of data as truth, and the way we're able to engage the collective imaginary of a city. Here I won't elaborate on pataphysics, but rather focus on the project itself.

Sarah Barns (2012) points out that "the city has been imagined both as an idealised space of utopia, or a dystopian space of upheaval, dislocation and disease, continually wrenched apart by the seemingly unstoppable forces of technological transformation" (p.151). In this sense, the city can be understood as a locus for our imaginaries, perhaps even one of their prime spaces of negotiation. Barns traces its idealized nature back to the Ancient Greeks, and argues that the city "[a]s a leitmotif of the utopian imagination, (...) has served to articulate hopes for a better society: the urban geography of the public sphere itself has itself been seen to express the ability for individuals to come together as a public or polity" (ibid).

The symposium The Imaginary Polis hosted by Copenhagen Polis Centre, Jan 7-10, 2005 was dedicated to the topic of the imaginary polis—an entity that doesn't exist as a tangible reality, but as an imaginary construct in minds of the Ancient Greeks of the Archaic and Classical periods.

The proceedings to the symposium was later published as a book, which is introduced by the symposium host and editor of the volume, Mogens Herman Hansen, a classical philologist and classical demographer. In the introduction, Hansen makes the distinction between the conception of the polis concerning what it ought to be (the utopian polis and idealised historical polis) vs. what it is.

In the case of the former, he describes the imaginary along a shift from an ideal society, speculations on future poleis, to the idealised society, a glorification of historical poleis. A broad range of the utopian poleis in Ancient Greece has survived to this day, one of the most famous perhaps being Plato's ideal societies. Hansen observes that when the utopia concerns a polis specifically (a micro- rather than a macro state), the purpose is to deliver a model that acts as a point for reform (ibid. 11), what he elsewhere describes as a political program. In other words, this is something very close to the way we currently use renderings of future urban life (plazas bustling with modern architecture, technological solutions, and stereotypical human interactions), in order to visually communicate our program for a better city. The glorification of historical poleis mainly rests on praise for historical constitutions, as seen across the four main references: Sparta, Crete, Athens, and Epizephyrian Lokroi. In the case of Sparta, its ideal constitution is most often ascribed to Lykourgos, who on his part is said to have copied it from Crete. Here, Minos, the King of Crete, was said to have received the legislation of Crete from Zeus himself. Across all the four idealised poleis, Hansen makes the point that they were largely in disarray, when, around the fourth century, they were held up as model poleis. To stay with Plato as an example, in his *Laws*, he simply assumes that the institutions by Lykourgos and Minos are still intact. Against this notable discrepancy between an idealised past clashing with a present reality, which in turn draws on the idealised past in creating its ideal futures, Hansen concludes: "It seems as if those who spent their time imagining poleis were out of touch with historical realities. They were, to some extent, dreamers" (ibid. p.15). This is highly interesting, if we reverse back to Barn's (2012) earlier statement and ask ourselves how this dynamic continues to influence the role we continue to ascribe to cities as "locus of imaginaries, perhaps even one of their prime space of negotiation"?

From the discussion of Plato, Hansen turns his attention to what the imaginary polis *is*, here denoting the concept of a polis, in other words what it is without referencing a specific polis. We can think of the way we talk of *the smart city*, rather than *the smart city of London*. This is not an easy task, as testified by Hansen's search through the poems, tragedies, dramas, historical accounts, a journey that once again takes him to philosophy (in reality Plato and Aristotle), as "the most important genre for an investigation of the imaginary polis" (Hansen, 2005, p.18).

Specifically Books 3-6 of Aristotle's *Politics* presents a wealth of information shedding light on what the imaginary polis is. However, Hansen makes the important point that polis in Aristotle's conception, like anything else, conforms to his physics and metaphysics. Thus, understood as a substance, the Aristotelian polis is divided into matter and form: *politai*, in Aristotle's understood as ὄλη: matter, raw material, also more generally "a member of a city or state (πόλις), a citizen, freeman" and *politeia* (πολιτεία, "a concrete, the body of citizens" in Aristotle's terms, also generally "the condition and rights of a citizen, citizenship") understood as εἶδος, "that which is seen, form, shape, figure". While this conception of what a polis *is*, is consistent with Aristotle's thought and principles as laid out in *Physics* and *Metaphysics*, Hansen points out that this is problematic in the way that this likely differs from what he calls a more common or ordinary view (Hansen, p.19). He goes on: "To use Aristotle's view of the *polis* as evidence for what the Greeks thought a *polis* was maybe perhaps be as dangerous as it would be to use the German philosopher Hegel's conception of the state as evidence for the nineteenth-century concept of state in general" (ibid.)

Indeed, this last point stresses the question: who gets to define what the city is, let alone what it should become? The question becomes all the more pressing concerning the asymmetry between the gargantuan private and public powers currently shaping the urban environment, and the growing number of diverse citizens living with the effects. The concern is explored in a contemporary context in a Wired article titled: "Alphabet Is Trying to Remake the Modern City, Starting With Toronto" (Marshall, 2017), discussing the case of Quayside area of Toronto, a twelve acres urban area currently being developed by Sidewalk Labs, a company owned by Alphabet (which also owns Google). Indeed, in this massive undertaking one of the key issues at stake concerns whether Sidewalk Labs will be able to make the city work for all, as pointed out in the article by Sarah Kaufmann, who studies transportation and technology at New York University's Rudin Center for Transportation: "I think the company needs to show that it can provide city services that are not restricted to white, male millennials (...) That means serving the elderly, the disabled, the poor—all populations that cities serve and private companies do not (ibid.)" The article further contextualizes Quayside in a history of similar master-planned cities, noting how they have not worked out historically, citing a BBC interview with urban scholar Richard Burdett on the case of Oscar Niemeyer's modernist vision that is Brasilia: "The problem is that it's not a city. It's that simple (...) The issue is not whether it's a good city or a bad city. It's just not a city. It doesn't have the ingredients of a city: messy streets, people living above shops, and offices nearby" (Banerji, 2012). I'm very fascinated by this tension between what a city *is*, and what it *could/should become*, as it is a distinction that lies at the heart of speculation, as seen in

design practices such as speculative and critical design, design fiction and more. With any proposal/speculation of what the city could *become*, we're necessarily implying some understanding of what the city currently *is*. Without any such base in reality (in whatever way we define this), any argument for future urban development loses its weight, just as design fiction without any substance and contextual grounding becomes a shiny surface with no critical relevance. Importantly, substance here is not meant in the Aristotelian metaphysical sense of matter and form, which in a smart city rhetoric easily could translate into the real-time collection of troves of data somehow rendering an unfolding truth. This takes us back to the point of asymmetrical forces negotiating the urban future, as we can ask who holds the data understood as truth? And as the inverse: what would a lie mean in this context, and who gets to lie?

This dichotomy of truth and lies stands as one of the many dichotomies which design in a way thrives from playfully navigating (Redström, 2017). As in the example of the smartphone application iSee, mapping out "paths of least surveillance" based on the location of CCTV in the urban landscape, subverting the single optimal path from a to b by offering other counter truths. In my project, titled *Designing for a City of Lies*, I decided to explore the notions of lies as data, specifically lies about a city as told by its citizens. I conducted a series of experiments prototyping a haphazard protocol for collecting lies from citizens. Any encounter would open with the question: "Tell me a lie about [city]", to then proceed into a discussion, and then finally a direction to somehow experience the lie unfold in the city. This location would then serve as a place of the next encounter and so forth. The project culminated in the final two-step experiment, which took place in Hasselt, the smartest city of Belgium, where 1) a series of lies were collected by a group of workshop participants, compiled into a data set, to then 2) be used as a material for prototyping new urban futures back into the city by another group of workshop participants. This lies data set then co-existed alongside the five smartness parameters employed by Agoria, Belgium's largest employers' organisation and trade association: Average kilos of household waste per inhabitant (2013), megawatt of energy consumed per inhabitant (2012), number of renovation permits in urban areas per 1000 inhabitants (2014), number of ICT companies per 1000 inhabitants (2014), and the sum of PM2.5 concentrations of PM10 of O3 and NO2 expressed in nanograms per cubic meter (2013). Some of the lies collected in Hasselt were:

All parking spaces in Hasselt are for free.

They're very good at solving problems (of homeless people and drug addicts).

The dirtiest city.

Hasselt is a city of fashion.

There is a big cultural hall. Japanese garden. Very interesting part of the city.

Hasselt is not cozy.

You can't find anything good to eat in Hasselt.

Hasselt will fuse with Genk. Hasselt has the most ugly buildings.

The number of places in Hasselt that are not cozy are increasing.

The project specifically builds on a pataphysical formula by Rene Daumal: “To know x = to know (Everything-x)” (Daumal, 2012, p.7-8). In this sense, Designing for a City of Lies is about carving out this negative space (Everything-x), rather than asking citizens the much more familiar: “Tell/show me what the city is” (design probes), “what is the best thing about the city” (surveys) etc. to then swiftly move on to speculative designs, such as architectural renderings. I’m very curious about how it might be possible to connect this approach to the notion of more-than-human futures, both in this sense of posing a data set of lies, and also in the way of engaging humans and non-humans in the imaginary dimension of the city—to actually negotiate the collective imaginary that steers the extrapolation from now to then.

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