

Workstattgespräche: Histories of Planning

02 April, 10:30-12:00 Richard Baxstrom: What Does a Plan Want? Fragments of a Response from Kuala Lumpur

You are about to hear the third interview held as part of the working conversation series „History of Planning“ presented by Departement III Artefact, Action and Knowledge at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Berlin. The interviewee is Richard Baxstrom, lecturer in Social Anthropology at the School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh. He is author of *Houses in Motion: The Experience of Place and the Problem of Belief in Urban Malaysia* (Stanford University Press 2008)

Questions are asked by Dagmar Schäfer and Nina Lerman.

Dagmar Schäfer: Today is April 2nd, and I am delighted to have Richard Baxstrom here, Social Anthropologist from the University of Edinburgh, who has already told us a little bit about his ideas about planning yesterday. Richard, you are working on urban anthropology and your region of interest is Malaysia, and the city of Kuala Lumpur. Yesterday we had a very interesting session on your work and I hope that today in the interview we can just grasp and record some of the main points. So let me give you as much room as possible by throwing back at you one of the ideas that you brought up yesterday -- the almost provocative statement that a plan is an image. Why do you think that's a useful comparison or a useful way of thinking about plans?

Richard Baxstrom: What I was trying to do: considering what a plan was in the context of the work I was doing in Malaysia, the sort of ethnography of an urban neighbourhood that was subject to a great deal of change and transformation due precisely to something like a plan: modernisation plans, specific plans to redevelop the neighbourhood. Understanding the plan as kind of a dispersed and almost abstract discursive object didn't seem to capture people in the neighbourhood themselves. But they could engage and did engage in something like the plan. Also I wanted to understand it [the situation] from the point of view of other planners how the plan works as an image – an image that emerges from the thought and the expertise, the expectations and the sense of the planners themselves -- how that [E/N thought, expertise, expectations and sense] in fact are also formed as an image. I was trying to actually form the plan as an object of study in a way that I didn't think of plans as 'discourses' or even an assemblage without saying anything else. Because I do take a lot of inspiration from Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) who talks about assemblages but he talks about them a bit differently, [namely] as they do come together as objects (Deleuze, Felix Guattari: *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis 1987). I was trying to work with that [definition]. Also plans seem to just epistemologically behave a bit like images in a way that they demand our attention. They have a certain force based on the materiality that ascribing to an image and that someone like W. J. T. Mitchell has ascribed to an image when he asks: *What do pictures want?* (Chicago Press 2004) And so I am drawing from a very unusual source to talk about a very particular kind of image and how it then has force, how it can do some of the other things that I claim, for example dominate the present rather than addressing itself entirely to a future – a future to come. Of course the future does figure into this but I have claimed that is actually a lack in the present; that what we should really focus on if we want to understand how plans work or what they are, [and] how they actually do operate in this present. What they [i.e. plans] seek is a certain kind of attention or even domination of that present. An image seems to be just a more consistent way of understanding the 'more' – dare I say empirical way - of understanding what it was.

Nina Lerman: You also use words like 'virtual' and 'material' and 'thought' all in connection to the image and the manifestation and negotiations that you talked about. Could you maybe talk more about that cluster of vocabulary and how you see it?

Richard Baxstrom: Part of this redefinition would be [to think about] a plan -- which is not necessarily sketched out as a sort of discursive object but nevertheless functions as so -- [in terms of]: Where does it exist? Quite often it does exist in the bodies of the people who are actually either subject to them or trying to make them or trying themselves to plan in relation to what is going on around them. I am not trying to exclude 'thought' from this formulation. Now I am not a psychologist and anthropologists are not necessarily interested in mind and thought in precisely the same way as some other adjacent disciplines would be. But I think to exclude 'thought' in relation to action -- to the individual action -- is also a mistake. What flashes up -- that then sort of delimits the actions that we see in the way people do live -- would be an image in the mind. And so this is why I talk about it [i.e. plan, plan as image] as a virtual object to come.

Nina Lerman: What do you mean by virtual?

Richard Baxstorm: A virtual object. The potential for action is also embedded in the object. And that is kind of a **Deleuzian** understanding of what virtual is. So the virtual is almost more than the actual. Because the actual is here but the virtual has its potentiality also folded into it.

Dagmar Schäfer: One of the other things we tackled yesterday and that I would like to hear a little bit more is your idea about the role of future in a plan. You mentioned already that this is something that was not so relevant for your actors but was relevant in the way in which they planned out things. Can you specify?

Richard Baxstorm: The future was always addressed to some degree in any form of planning that we are discussing here: certainly in the more formal city plans of developers or other agents of the state. A particular kind of singular future is gestured towards in the plan. But even consciously, at times, I wasn't convinced that this was why they were making plans. They instrumentally felt that the plans was actually enabling them to do something in the present. I use Jalan-Jalan (a specific plan related to the KL Monorail Project) as an example of planning as a way to dominate the present. If this [i.e. future] simply drops out then it doesn't really constitute the plan in any formal sense. Part of the image we form [of/in a plan] is a particular picturing of futures. This is not the same thing as a fulfilment of that future or even an expectation that it can be done. This kind of expectation quite often was not there. [Let me relate this thought to] the judgement of success and failure of a plan -- which might not be as interesting to some social scientists who are trying to understand it as a form of process or its relation to other elements of life. It [i.e. the issue of failure and success] is a very important point to argue with many others who look at a place like Malaysia and say that "they can't run their affairs", "they can't plan", "they cant fulfil what a plan actually is". I am trying to argue that they do [i.e. can plan successfully] but theirs is a different gesture to the future. The future has to be there as something to be addressed. I phrased it as almost a desire that drives it: that which mobilizes this specific thing in relation to others. But just because it is mobilized doesn't mean you have to fulfil the figure of the future that are sketched or pictured in the image. That by itself is not a judgement in my view of its operationalized content or the effects as it were. Of course, it is true in Malaysia and true in very specific ways that I have tried to document much more carefully.

I hope the work that I have been doing is interesting not so because it is Malaysia, but because it actually has some correspondence to how plans work anywhere.

Dagmar Schäfer: There is a particular trajectory or idea of modernity in that [story of Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur] in that the future plays a role. What role does the materiality of the site play for your actors and for you in your analysis?

Richard Baxstrom:

The materiality of this city could be quite a decisive factor on both ends. On the one hand Brickfields, for example, became the space in which a series of plans was carried out because of its geographic location in relation to the railway-lines and the river and also in relation in legal terms to the vulnerability of most of the residents to displacement. Factors like that I would consider to be elements of materiality. They were key to the telling of this particular story. If we go to the materiality of the city, on the other end would perhaps be the individual subjects within the neighbourhood and experiential affective qualities that I try to talk about in my work. Just the sense of the buildings could have a big impact. The fact that they would disappear quickly had a decisive impact in how people would then understand their relation to the actions in these plans. This kind of materiality was quite key. If we wanted to extend this into great details, we could be even talking about the architecture. This could be of relevance because new buildings were taking to replace a particular kind of style that the old existing buildings had – the new being quite ‘orderly’, the other being quite illegal and quite ‘ramshackle’ (in fact the ‘ramshackle’ had its own order, this order that was not recognized across the board). I wouldn’t subtract these factors as key elements of telling this particular story or any story of this kind. One would have to attend to the kind of textured overlapping detail of the materiality of the space to get at larger questions of planning and its existence and how it exists and works. This is quite daunting to the researcher because there is so many ways that you can go.

Nina Lerman: I was thinking about the sense of future along the lines of plans functioning as almost propaganda in places and in stories. Their function in the present is to rearrange rather than to do anything material. But on the other hand there is a train station and a monorail. There are buildings of a particular style and other places where buildings go away. It sounds [from your description] that the continuity of those structures in Kuala Lumpur is less reliable than in many other cities: given this notion that you can tear things down easily. Still, once a train station is there then in the at least present and foreseeable extended present - if not long-term future – that is the train station. It creates a certain amount of future materially.

Richard Baxstrom: But again that future is really quite unstable, even for a project of the size and national importance of [a train station], it could very easily have simply not happened. I was fortunately present in the neighbourhood, when the main hall of the station itself was built. All the other associated commercial developments were still [on the brink] -- maybe, maybe not. The train station itself had been hidden for months behind large, corrugated very tall steel fences. And then, in the middle of the night, suddenly – and I am not exaggerating this: they had the whole place lit as they always did -- the corrugated steel came down in a couple of hours and there it was!

And it was shocking -- literally shocking: Nobody had anything to say. Nobody was happy, nobody was sad, we all just sort of stood across the street and stared, because it was a shock. Why is that shocking? Considering the plan that existed, considering that you could kind of follow it and yet this future was not to be believed in a certain way. I wanted to understand that in more than just as a turn of phrase: You had to see it to believe it. There is much more to be done with a statement like that. Things would just appear out of nowhere. There is an account in my book more or less with people walking out of their home one day and a green space -- an unofficial park that had existed for nearly 60 years -- had been paved over. You would think that people [of the neighbourhood] would notice. They didn't because it was so chaotic and noisy. Construction on other projects was going on all the time. It was not unusual to have construction going on at two or three in the morning. And then it just disappeared. And then it just reappeared, just as quickly as this one time. I would call it a political pushback, only after you got over the shock of this. This [sudden change] was characteristic of life, of everyday life. A machine for planning is a virtuous thing.

End of Interview.

