

Investigating the Importance of Psychogeography in Designing Urban Fabric

-Impact of the built environment on human mental health.

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ABSTRACT: This paper discusses the possibility of using the theory of psychogeography more than an analyzing tool for cities and regions. The physical built environment has affected and continues to affect the human psyche and mental health since its existence. The increasing number of mental health issues with today's generation is an alarming issue to be catered by experts from different fields. Though awareness and fast-moving lifestyle being the most visible and direct reasons for the stress, the surrounding environment in which the human race exists unknowingly impacts the human psyche in many ways. Psychogeography as a term brings these two factors together – the human psyche and surrounding physical environment – discussing their impact on each other. The main aim of this paper is to understand the term, in the discussion, further to explore ways in which it can be used as a designing tool along with a documenting and/or analyzing tool.

KEYWORDS: Psychogeography, Psychology, Human Mental Health, Urban Fabric, Urban Design.

I. INTRODUCTION

...you begin to realize that the important determinant of any culture is after all the spirit of place...

-Lawrence Durrell

“Psychogeography” a term associated with aspects across varied fields of everyday life, plays a vital role when talking about the environment a human brain perceives. The correlation and impact of the geographical surrounding on human psychology has been researched and discussed since 1955 when **Guy Debord** first coined the term. He defined psychogeography as *“the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals.”* (Debord, 1955).

With the rapid movement of people to urban areas and the increasing demand for urban development as well as re-development, psychogeography in the context of the cities and urban design is an alarming agenda. Studies in the past and present have proven a prolonged effect of an urban setup on the human brain and psyche (DeSilvey & Rose, 2008). Despite the studies and research, the well-being of the human brain has taken a back seat, when major urban issues like pollution, traffic, sanitation, sprawl and many more are discussed. (Ellard, 2015).

There have been designers, planners, artists and architects who have been bringing up the notion of psychogeography time and again, which cannot be neglected. Until recently, this theory has led to the evolution of varied ways of understanding a human brain's reaction to its surrounding context, to name a few initiatives in urban mapping, like ‘Lost London’ by *Emilie Giles*, ‘You are Here’ – mapping the Psychogeography of New York City, ‘Loneliness Map’ by *Ingrid Burrington*. The theorists, along with the evolving technologies, have introduced several mobile phone applications like Serendipitor, Dérive and Inception app, to propagate the importance of “good” urban design for human psychological well-being. (Beekmans, 2012)



Figure 1: Schematic diagram – Explaining complexity of Psychogeography
(Source: <http://www.phm.org.uk/whatson/what-is-psychogeography/>).

Despite the efforts put in by psychogeographers, the theory of psychogeography goes almost un-noticed, when tackling the upcoming issues in the field of urban design. The term, psychogeography till present has been used more as a documenting tool than a designing tool. The initiatives under the named theory have always been a critic of existing cities and scenarios. Right from the *Situationists Internationale* (Wikipedia, n.d.), started by *Guy Debord*, who initiated the notion of psychogeography, to authors like *Kevin Lynch* and *Jane Jacobs* in their books, have analyzed or documented an existing city based on the aspects of the theory discussed.

This paper discusses the practice of the theory of psychogeography, knowing its importance and need when designing the urban fabric across the world. Is the theory justified completely as a documenting tool alone? Are there any initiatives taken towards building psychogeography as a designing tool? Is it practically possible to use a subjective theory like psychogeography as a precursor to designing something as generic as urban design?

II. PSYCHOGEOGRAPHY AND URBAN DESIGN: HISTORY AND EVOLUTION

The idea of psychogeography started with an intention to design spaces and architecture which had a positive impact on human psychology and its well-being. This was very correctly quoted by the Situationists in an article from 1958, “We yield profoundly to its influence; we react to it according to our instincts instead of according to our aspirations. In a word, this world governs our way of being and it grinds us down.” (McDonough, 2004). The term Psychogeography evolved with the group of Situationists, mostly associated with the Paris riots of 1968. The founder, *Guy Debord* and his followers were a group of rational planners who believed involving public and residents in planning their cities (Chardonnet, 2011).

Soon *Debord's* motto of starting the group took a back seat when political figures and their strategies took over the discussions (Coverley, 2006). The entire drive of exploring a creative language for urban design faded after the first few years of the group's functioning.

Debord's idea of putting the local public on the boards of planning a city though sounds very simple common sense; many psychogeographers claim that even the contemporary planners have failed to understand his theory when designing a city (Parker, 2002). We see an early attempt by the group, where they used the principles of psychogeography, to design the growing areas of Paris forming new cities. This was the first and almost the last attempt back in history which portrays theories of psychogeography as a designing tool. The group led by *Gut Debord* looked into how the spaces were produced and felt. (Hartmann, 2003).

Later, *Ian McKay*, a senior lecturer in Southampton Institute, a learned on this topic and editor of the *Journal of Psychogeographical and Urban Research*, in one of his interviews, discusses good and bad examples based on the theory. He points out a Southampton council estate and commenting on the green spaces designed, states, “green spaces so wide that the wind cuts through you.” (Parker, 2002). In most of *McKay's* work, we see theories discussed are used for analyzing a space, region or city as a whole.

He says that planners create communities without understanding how the local residents want to live there, which in turn leads to residents breaking rules and policies set by the planners or designers. He says, “Only in transgressing the rules of the planned space can we find our own meaning and space. A good planner knows this and allows for this transgression of the plan by the individuals who have to live in the space. The good town planner may be one not

precious about the plan.” Here McKay talks about the importance of psychogeography as a method of designing by setting the demands of the users over the plans and policies.

Contemporary psychogeographers press on the countless experiences an individual has when moving through a space. Every individual will have a different experience based on their mindset and mood, thus making psychogeography a very subjective and perceptive theory. This new era of psychogeographers has formulated Debord’s theory into physically mapping the experiences of people through a city. Interesting methods like mood mapping, cognitive mapping, mental mapping, and many others are introduced, thus actually creating a map based on the user’s mood, memory and personal interpretations of the space and city.

Mental mapping is a person’s point of view and perception of its surroundings (Wikipedia, n.d.). This method is used by Kevin Lynch in his book “Image of the City”, where the method is used to analyze three cities of America (Lynch, 1959). The residents of the city participate to draw a map of the city from their memory. A map of the city is recreated from the resident’s memory and their perceptions are used to analyze the spaces in the city. The author further uses the maps to derive the factors forming an image of a place.

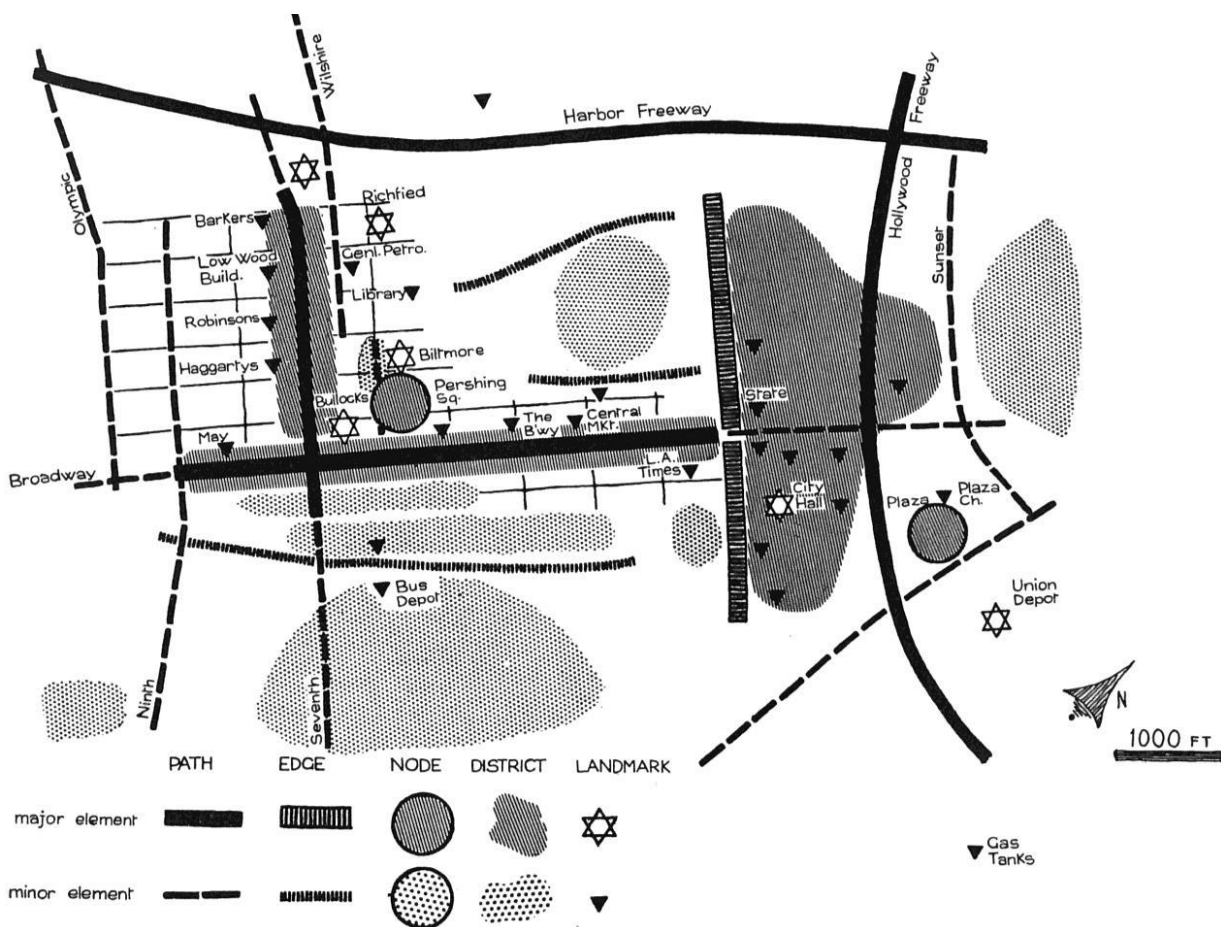


Figure 2: Mental Map for the city of Los Angeles
(Source: Lynch K., Image of the City)

Psychogeography as a tool is used to document an existing city, basically mapping the non-visual senses. Despite the strong inferences drawn very little is seen on the designing front.

Cognitive mapping another method derived to map human psychology in a physical environment, maps a place based on their experience. Cognitive maps are place – oriented, mapping the difference in human behavior with a change in location. This method is similar to that of mental mapping, with irrelevant and unimportant information excluded. Thus, cognitive maps and actual physical map can be absolutely different (Tolman, 1948). Despite such a strong method of mapping a human brain reaction for a place, almost negligible is seen when one talks about its implication in terms of designing or redeveloping a place.

Robert MacFarlane in an article, *Psychogeography: A Beginner's Guide*, says "Unfold a street map... place a glass, rim down, anywhere on the map, and draw round its edge." He then asks the user to walk along with the circle keeping as close to the curve possible. The author seeks a record of the experience gained by the user, in whatever favorable medium for the user. It can be as varied as sound recordings, photographs, noise and smell mapping, interviews, diagrams and so on (MacFarlane, 2005).

III.PSYCHOGEOGRAPHY: AS A DESIGNING TOOL

Despite the efforts put by psychogeographers across the timeline, to explain the importance of the psychological well-being of humans, the theories established by psychogeography are completely neglected by the planners when designing a city.

A movement was started by the followers of Guy Debord, *Derive*, which also meant to drift along with the city without any functional purpose of being in a space. They analyzed a city based on factors of attractions and commented on the lack of attention towards creating such places (Wood, n.d.).

Debord in "Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography" says, "The sudden change of ambiance in a street within a space of a few meters; the evident division of a city into zones of distinct psychic atmospheres followed in aimless strolls (and which has no relation to the physical contour of the ground); the appealing or repelling character of certain places – all this seem to be neglected." (Debord, 1955).

This prolonged ignorance towards psychogeography has led to the forming of many boring cityscapes leading to depression, addiction and disease-related stress amongst the users, as said by Colin Ellard in one of his interviews (Rojc, 2015).

Until recently when the issue with psychological health, due to migration and urban boom, has come to surface and is noticed by the new era of geographers and urban designers, when discussing the upcoming developments across the world. As a very first initiative towards using the theories and findings of psychogeography, we can see a few experts prioritizing human well-being at par with other issues like traffic, pollution, sanitation, and drainage.

Neurologist and a learned in the urban environment and its design, Colin Ellard, also a professor at the University of Waterloo, Canada, has initiated lab research to deliver spaces with a positive impact on the human brain. At the Urban Realities Laboratory, Ellard and his team analyze the human behavior by virtually creating the designs and mapping its effects on the users (Ellard, 2015). In his interview, he talks about virtually creating something as huge as a streetscape or urban space to something as detailed as an interior of the space to map the effects of the design on the human psyche; thus taking a step towards creating more sensitive spaces and environments (Rojc, 2015).

The author of the book, "Places of Heart: The Psychogeography of Everyday Life" talks about the alarming need of considering the human psyche while designing our cities (Ellard, 2015). He also mentions the rapid development and emergence of technology across the world, and its benefits towards assisting urban designers, planners, psychologists, and psychogeographers to test their designs in a virtual setup before actually creating them physically.

IV. CONCLUSION

Psychogeography: more than the aftermath of a city.

Seeing the use of psychogeography throughout history, the theory has been used as an aftermath for the cities, whether unplanned or planned. "Urban designers need to understand what makes the city experiences good and act as a broker between the needs of different groups." Said Nigel McGurk, a professional planner, and land manager with a company named Countryside Properties (Parker, 2002). He argues further saying the planning policies should be flexible enough for the designers to provide what is actually needed, demanded and used by the product user.

Ellard when talking about his virtual laboratory and his initiatives in Ontario, in an interview, expresses his doubts, about the level of similarities attained in the virtual spaces and actual spaces through the experiment (Ellard, 2015).

The cities should be allowed to grow organically as per the needs and requirements of the residents with some basic laws weaving the entire fabric of the city together (Parker, 2002). Urban designers should work in collaboration with the public thus designing based on user demands rather than forms and plan, "opening themselves and cities up to the possibility of experiencing higher moments of life" (Parker, 2002).

McGurk further concludes with a practical approach, with a challenge for the urban planners and designers to establish the true meaning of "Public Consultation".

Psychogeography has its deep roots in history thus portraying its presence since the beginning of urban development and development boom. Despite a huge amount of study done on the topic and many theories established by experts in the field, we find it difficult to declare or nominate any city or region to have a good or positive impact on the human psyche and mood.

The possible reason one could think about is the subjective character of human psychology, which depends on a list of aspects affecting the individual experiencing the place; to name a few aspects would be, traditional impact, lifestyle, perceptions, interests, cultural and religious beliefs, momentary mind-sets and mood of the user.

A good mix of complex activities and features would lead to a better space, catering demands of varied people visiting the space, as seen in the Lowry Museum in Manchester, which Mr. McGurk suggests to be a good example of psychogeographic design. The museum offers a platter of activities like exhibitions, shops, cafes and meeting places, thus guiding the user through the un-traveled and un-visited spaces (Parker, 2002).

Ellard in his interview states that not every space and street can hit the sweet spot for the user. But what is important, is the average, daily experience of a pedestrian through the urban jungle which should be targeted and thought about by the designers and planners (Ellard, 2015).

The overall impact of a city, having a vivid mix of characters and images, is judged by the repetitive impact of a particular experience throughout the city. Designers should bear in mind the analytical working of a human psyche when designing a space, street or an entire city.

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