

Authors:

Jønson, Skrumsager Frederiksen, Visholm

Working around the wall and under the surface

- Developing a psychodynamically informed technology to study unconscious aspects of the experience of townscapes in urban planning and architecture

I. Psychodynamics and urban planning – a creative meeting between two disciplines – following the unconscious

Visible and invisible walls are parts of processes of connecting and disconnecting people. In the urban setting, constant encounters with physical others on roads, pavements, bicycle lanes, in places, buildings, and rooms can be seen as a potential threat to the individual but also as a potential relation. Walls as physical barriers and as symbols and structures are everywhere in the city and are hindering or supporting contact between individuals and also between individuals and their own otherness. How do these dreams of the future and defences against otherness manifest themselves in urban surroundings and how does this influence or communicate with individuals, provide dreams and reality, and contain or deny aggression, separation, security or protection etc.? This paper describes the process and preliminary results of an attempt to design a cross-disciplinary technology to explore unconscious aspects of the experience of urban spaces. Building on findings from an ISPSO research workshop in Copenhagen 2017, the main idea is to explore whether psychoanalytic/psychodynamic exploration can contribute to an in-depth understanding of urban spaces and their dynamics next to behavioural studies and big data on human movements in urban surroundings and architectural design.

The paper is inspired to both the transferral of the psychoanalytic approach from the traditional analytic setting/the consulting room and to the use of technologies related to psychoanalysis/-dynamics by e.g.:

Feelings as data on organisational states. David Armstrong's suggestion to look upon feelings in organisations as information and not as disturbances provides inspiration to see clothes, rooms, and tools in urban spaces as information/pieces of intelligence/data on the state of the group and of the urban space.

The identical origin of the unconscious processes in both organisational analysis and psychoanalysis.

Anton Obholzer describes that the main difference between psychoanalysis and organisational analysis is the delimitation of the field of observation, i.e. the scope of the observation. This inspires to opening up another field of psychoanalytic observation, namely urban spaces.

The dream, not the dreamer. Gordon Lawrence's take on the social dreaming technology and the dream of the individual as a communication of the state of the social/collective and not of the individual. In this context, focus is on the unconscious aspects of thoughts and feelings of generalised humans in the urban spaces and not of the specific individual.

II. Method: Observations, reflection groups and depth hermeneutics

The method includes individual observations in urban spaces, on-site reflection groups, followed by transcription of reflections and analysis of the texts. This analysis relies heavily upon the depth – hermeneutical culture analysis developed by German psychoanalyst Alfred Lorenzer with the aim to explore social and cultural processes with psychoanalytic methods. According to Lorenzer, texts do not reveal their hidden unconscious meaning directly, but need to be analysed with psychoanalytical understanding and to be 'run through one's personal experiences' in order to reveal scenes and interaction forms that can be understood in and brought to a social context – what Lorenzer refers to as 'scenic understanding.'

III. Five cases from Copenhagen

Applying the method on five specific locations, The Town Hall Square, The City Council Hall, Nørreport Train Station, Dronning Louise's Bridge and The Ministry of Transportation in Copenhagen led to exploration of spaces and places and their dynamics with findings such as anxiety-provoking, containing, authoritarian, guilt/shame dynamics etc.

References:

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Authors Bios:

Anette Højgaard Jønson, MSc in International Business Administration, MSc in Organisational Psychology. Organisational consultant, eksternal lecturer at Roskilde University. ISPSO member, OPUS member, NAPSO board member.

Tove Skrumsager Frederiksen, MSc in Engineering, MSc in Organizational Psychology. CEO of a public-private urban development partnership Køge Kyst P/S. Køge Kyst is transforming a former harbour and industrial areas in Køge into a sustainable and dense town district. She has 25 years of experience in urban and infrastructure planning and construction in Greater Copenhagen. ISPSO member, NAPSO member.

Steen Visholm, Professor, MScA (Psychology), Ph.D., Institute for People and Technology, Roskilde University. Director of COP and MPO. Staff member OPU/IGA. Chair of NAPSO, OPUS associate, ISPSO President, Review editor Organisational & Social Dynamics.