

Rethinking Density

Art, Culture, and
Urban Practices

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Unframing Urban Density: The Somaesthetic Cartography of Intensities

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Totipotency

The relationship between urban and architectural density suffers from a humanistic position that has been tainted by a troublesome view on its points of reference. Fredric Jameson summarizes the problem: “Architects who are seduced by this view of their vocation must then accept the human body as the ultimate criterion and build buildings to its scale. [...] The same set of values can of course also be detected in urbanism: ‘good city form,’ the ideal of the city somehow memorable and mappable (Kevin Lynch) and organized around the human body to a human scale—this is phenomenological humanism on the level of the urban itself.”¹

Jameson calls this phenomenological approach utopian, and its promise has outdated itself to a large extent. Yet what—if anything—could be an alternative point of reference to encounter and act within (urban) density? In their book *Earth Moves: The Furnishing of Territories*, Bernard Cache and Michael Speaks claim that in the appropriate setting, architecture is freed of its orthodox character as a functional sheltering and grounding entity; rather, architecture is (or should be) regained by a range of practices that favors “framing images in such a way that they induce new forms of life.”² In this view, a dynamic and fluid world emerge in the interpolated spaces between those images, in which architecture serves as the “enframing” actor, close to Heidegger’s concept of *Gestell*, which means to look “beneath” the structuring itself.³ According to Speaks and Cache, architecture first “isolates intervals (by way of the wall)”; it then “selects (using the device of the window) one of the vectors of this interval from the external topography”; and, finally, it “arranges this interval in such a way as to increase the probability of an intended effect.”⁴ This procedure could be considered an effect of enframing, rather than a cause. Apart from its essentialist tenure, the biggest problem with this reasoning is that the supposed reversal of the logic of causality is overlooking the effects of the effects, which in this case is the (metaphorical and physical) densification as a result of enframing. Any effect will become a new cause—in fact both cause and effect should be considered as being the same. In this view, density exists already before it exists, yet it is contingent if it would be actualized.

1 Frederic Jameson, “Is Space Political” in *Rethinking Architecture*, ed. Neil Leach (1979; repr. London: Routledge, 2010), 255.

2 Bernard Cache and Michael Speaks, *Earth Moves: The Furnishing of Territories* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), xvii.

3 Heidegger phrases *Gestell* in an active manner, where the word normally holds the meaning of apparatus or instrument. In this way *Gestell* gains a performative character; it actively gathers and structures with the intent to reveal and present.

4 Cache and Speaks, *Earth Moves*, xviii.

Density can be seen as a property-related entity, whereas *intensity* indicates a field of potentiality and relationality. Which does not mean that one is grounded in reality and the other is not. Central to my argument is the premise that the virtual and the actual are both seen as being reality, and that there is nothing beyond this reality. The actual exists and the virtual “subsists”; it can be energy, material, motion or a concept, but in any case it is real. The actual is always discrete and extensive (topographical); contrariwise the virtual is intensive (topological) and creative. We could consider the intensive as an independent ontological register, one that mediates the virtual and actual. Rather than redefining density in terms of causality, addressing this issue might benefit from a replacement of the essentialist reductionism by a relational inclusivism (intensive thinking). The starting point of this approach is the idea that everything is contingently obligatory and not logically necessary. The theorem of logical necessity suffers from the critical flaw that comes with the oversimplification of the complexity of forces, drives, agencies, and antagonisms that concretely form the fabric of life. The focus needs to be on life as a dynamic creativity (assemblage) rather than on the environment (territory) itself. Philosopher Brian Massumi explains: “It may seem odd to insist that a relation has an ontological status separate from the terms of the relation. But as the work of Gilles Deleuze repeatedly emphasizes, it is in fact an indispensable step toward conceptualizing change as anything more or other than a negation, deviation, rupture, or subversion.”⁵

Cinematic theory and practice has proven to be a helpful instrument for the analysis and understanding of (urban) density.⁶ Its reversal of the space-time axis supports the shift from an object-based vision to an intensity-based mode of exploration, from which many types of (urban) cartography can emerge. Not the Cartesian or phenomenological agency of mapping, but the onto-epistemological mapping of agencies.

As I have argued elsewhere, the critical flaw in the exploration of the relation between media typologies lies in the framing. If regarded as a medium—as was suggested above—architecture is already a crystallization of an intensity. The true potential lies in that which is not yet framed, not yet designated, therefore the critical weakness is the assumption that the common ground for the comparison of different media lies in the part that is (evidently) in the frame. The only way to approach the problem of enframing is to remain on the middle ground, being neither object nor subject, neither figure nor ground. Or as Deleuze and Guattari put it: “Proceeding from the middle, through the middle, coming and going rather than starting and finishing. [...] The middle is by no means an average; on the contrary, it is where things pick up speed.”⁷

The frame is thus by definition not the mutual denominator; rather, the emphasis should lie on what is *not* in the frame. We should focus on the meta-

phorical terrain outside of the frame—in this case specifically the state *before* and *from* which density emerges. In this field we find the intensities themselves (virtuality) before actualization and before densification. Intensities are non-actualized realities that are rendered visible by the media they are expressed in. Some would call this field “inspiration,” but this suggests a hylomorphic relation between the artist and the medium.⁸ I call this “meta-mediality,” which is a state where the form of content emerges, yet still without a fully crystalized form of expression. A next stage is what Daniel W. Smith refers to as “totipotency,” which is the potential (within the actualized) to assume different entities. This is not the actualization of potential—both the prior and the after are already materialized (form of content)—it is the shaping into another ontology of already actualized matter, or in this case it is non-specific density. Cartography is a useful instrument for the exploration of meta-media and totipotency, which reveals much more of density than focusing on density itself: the mapping of agencies. (Fig. 3)



Fig. 3
Michela Mattioni, *Untitled*, 2012

- 5 Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 70.
- 6 See Marc Boumeester, “Camera Eye: Cinematic Studio Research into Architectural Practice,” in *Architecture and Culture* 3, no.1 (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2015).
- 7 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of

- Minnesota Press, 1987), 25.
- 8 Aristotle considers every physical being as a compound of matter and form. Matter is what undergoes a change of form, a soul is a form (a specifying principle or cause) of a living thing. In the practice of the artist, the ‘ensoulment’ of matter is a human intervention, therefore under the concept of ‘hylomorphism’, human and matter are not considered to be on the same ontological plane.

Somaesthetics

How, then, is it possible to search for potential and totipotent density with an intensive (topological) outlook rather than from a (traditional) extensive (topographical) perspective? First, it is helpful to set this line of thought apart from the phenomenological standpoint. As I have argued above, both the actualized (that which is a present entity, tangible or non-tangible) and the virtual (that which has the potential to be actualized) are part of reality. A tree is an actualized outcome of a very long process of evolution; a car crash is an actualized outcome of an inherent potential that comes with motorism. Both actual states and their preceding potential are part of reality. Most crucial for the understanding of intensive thinking is that it entails the constant readiness to engage every situation (actualized or virtual) from within the milieu. That means to say, to regard each thing on the basis of its relation to others (its exteriority of relations), rather than to prioritize its properties. This leads to the constant awareness of the assemblages one is part of. Explicitly this means including the “observer” as part of the assemblage, because these observations can only be made subjectively. Intensive thinking involves the fullest possible spectrum of sensory information, making way for a total somaesthetic awareness. This means that any experience reaches us through a multitude of sensory channels, including the non-actualized. This subjective and whole-hearted engagement with other bodies (object, elements, life forms) in our surrounding environment means that we no longer speak of the experience of something (there is no external experience), but rather of experience as *being* something. This implies the abandoning of the phenomenological perspective. Intensive thinking can be a program to open up new ways in artistic and design processes, but it can also be purely a sterile exercise, with no need to push for a tangible outcome.

It would be understandable to associate the enhancement of senses and the extrapolation of knowledge gained by sensory learning with phenomenological thinking, yet phenomenology rests partly on a set of assumptions that are not in line with intensive thinking (and affect theory in general). First and foremost, there is the issue of consciousness as the unique mode of gaining awareness of experience, knowledge of experience and the charging of experience. There is no need or even a possibility to regard consciousness as the instrument of qualifying experience. Secondly, central in my argument is the call for a fundamental shift from the anthropocentric supremacy of experience *through* some type of understanding to a nonhuman specific multichannel “non-understanding” of experience. This involves the undoing of a reduction of the sensory involvement to an instrument of information transferal. And this needs a reestablishing of the somaesthetic experience as a self-standing and self-referential entity, which does not involve the conscious to be significant. The shift from the anthropocentric domain to an open ecological system is a movement that is not provided by phenomenology.

Phenomenology recognizes the division of mental and physical properties. It would not fit my objectives to stick to the Cartesian duality, in which the separation between mind and matter is either fundamental (complete division) or derivative (permeable division). Under the reign of affect theory, properties are secondary; therefore, any division on basis of properties would not be adequate. Yet to adopt a monistic view would not serve either, as I already indicated that the central premise in my argument is that the realm of the virtual and the realm of the actual both stem from the same fabric. In fact, they are part of the same; the mind is the invention of the body and vice versa.

Cartography

With these propositions set, it becomes clear how this relates to our *intensive* take on density. The designated instrument for this is (cinematic) intensive cartography, which is clearly set apart from (extensive) mapping. Cartography creates a reality based on experience, while mapping creates a representation of a perception of reality. This is why cartography and cinema have much in common, yet cartography has the option to include all bodily senses (somaesthetic) in its experience. Massumi stresses that any theory of media or culture must take affect into account. Especially in the context of new media art and technology, the focus needs to shift from the taxonomy of object-related properties to the experience of movement and the interrelations between the senses. The significance of the structuralist signifier needs to make room for an “asignifying philosophy of affect.”⁹ Somaesthetics deal with reality, and its affects do not need to be based on systems of representation. Instead of creating a false duality between intensity and signification, we need to regard both as being operands that can act directly. This means that for something to act, it does not have to signify anything to be significant. Philosopher Baruch Spinoza considered “affecting” and “affected” as being a single force, drawing affect closer to proto-action. Proto-action can be seen as the aptitude to create capacity for affective interrelations, an alignment for an affording constellation that allows for singularity. For Deleuze and Guattari a body can be human or nonhuman, organic or inorganic, a social construction or a virtuality. This body has no meaning or veracity before its existence through external networks, connections, and affects. In other words, according to Deleuze, “The minimum real unit is not the word, the idea, the concept or the signifier, but the assemblage.”¹⁰ Architectural theorist Sanford Kwinter

⁹ Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 27.

¹⁰ “The utterance is the product of an assemblage—which is always collective, which brings into play within us and outside us populations, multiplicities,

territories, becomings, affects, events.” Gilles Deleuze, “On the Superiority of Anglo-American Literature,” in *Dialogues* (1977; repr. New York: Columbia UP, 1987), 51.

describes singularity as “those critical points or moments within a system when its qualities and not just its quantities undergo a fundamental change.”¹¹ A singularity *can* produce density, but this is only to be established a posteriori. Density draws on the deterministic domain of quantification to reveal its boundaries; intensity draws on the somaesthetic denominator of reality to reveal its capacities.

Cartography is an instrument to describe a relation between a body, its niche, and the assemblage.¹² Asignifying cartography falls under the “empirical umbrella” of intensive thinking, a mode of somaesthetic perception that is operating in both the physical and mental realms, or better put, in the virtual (that part of reality that is real, albeit not actualized) and the actual (that part of reality that is both real and actualized). To exemplify this we take a train ride from one station to another and describe this in terms of duration of exposure to a certain landscape. This could look like: 5 percent station, 5 percent urban, 10 percent urban sprawl, 60 percent grassland, 10 percent urban sprawl, 5 percent urban, and 5 percent station. We could produce maps and images to support this view and reproduce this as a depiction of reality. That is extensive cartography. Yet, if we would describe the journey in terms of intensive thinking, we need to take into account the assemblage of the spectator, including all non-actualized elements that work in that constellation. For instance, the mood of the passenger (in eager anticipation or sad departure) or the goal (travel as means or travel as end), personal interests (shopping addict or rural explorer), temperature (comfortable or not), crowdedness (nice girls/boys across the aisle or next to a smelly neighbor), weather conditions (beautiful snow or bleaching sunshine), and many more elements that form the experience of that journey. A map of the landscape in intensive terms then could show, for instance, 30 percent station, 10 percent urban, 0 percent urban sprawl, 10 percent grassland, 5 percent urban sprawl, 10 percent



Fig. 4
Martje Roks, Untitled,
2012

urban, and 35 percent station. This is a reversal of the space-time axis: there is no prerogative of either time or space to be linear or continuous when it comes to experience. This type of cartography is very close to the instrument of cinema; all elements are only measured against their own capacities, and no single piece of information about the whole body is ever discarded. No reduction of information is applied (as in the case of representation), nor is there a privileged scale. Yet the relationality of the body has become the main indicator of analysis. This is why it is called asignifying cartography; it does not signify (represent) anything else, yet it maps what is significant, or singular. It shifts the perception from the illusion of objectivity to an empirically embedded, embodied, extended, enacted, and affective perspective. As feminist theorist Karen Barad argues: “agential realism grounds and situates knowledge claims in local experiences: objectivity is literally embodied.”¹³

Deleuze and Guattari offered us the “body without organs” as an abstract machine and an instrument to put intensive thinking into action. To comprehend the strength of intensive thinking as a mode of analysis and major nexus in synthesis, it is imperative to understand the concept of flow. Flow as I describe it here it here, is not only the type of surplus energy that arises from the organization of matter (e.g., aquatics) or the patterns formed by the collisions of different types of energy (e.g., thermodynamics). Flow is not only the statistical chain that produces different phenotypes on the basis of identical genotypes; flow is not only the stream of people that make their way through the rainy streets to do their Christmas shopping, or the organization of goods and labor that provides for that. Flow is all that and much more. It consists of both the virtual and the actualized and manifests itself through becoming, which is indiscrete and contingent as opposed to noncontinuous and essential. It operates not on the level where the action is taken, but on the level where the ability for taking action is created.¹⁴ (Fig. 4)

11 Sanford Kwinter, *Architectures of Time: Toward a Theory of the Event in Modernist Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 13.

12 “What distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real. The map does not reproduce an unconscious closed in upon itself; it constructs the unconscious [...] The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation. It can be drawn on a wall, conceived of as a work of art,

constructed as a political action or as a meditation.” Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 12.

13 Karen Barad, “Meeting the Universe Halfway,” in *Feminism, Science and the Philosophy of Science*, ed. Lynn Hankinson Nelson and Jack Nelson (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 179–80.

14 See Andrej Radman and Marc Boumeester, “The Asignifying Affordance of Assemblage: Enactive Embodied Embedded and Extended Urban Cartography,” in *Architectural Journal 8* (Beijing: Architectural Society of China, PR China, 2012), 13–23.

Practice

In this last section, an example will be given of the way intensive thinking and somaesthetic (cinematographic) cartography can be put to use in a design process. I have been working with these notions and theories in the context of educational programs in the field of art and design for many years, and it is essential to mention that the completeness of these theories and their heuristics could only have evolved through the intensive collaboration with my students.¹⁵ Pedagogy in the traditional sense would include methodology of transfer that takes a strong part of representation to be effective. I therefore believe that we can only use pedagogy in its most *unessential* way. This means that learning needs to be caused by direct experience, allowing for a multitude of outcomes, and not work toward a predefined result. This type of learning is called “pedagogy of the senses”. Philosopher Inna Semetsky draws on Massumi when she explains this concept: “Experience is not confined to a personal Cogito of a Cartesian subject but represents an experiment with the enviroing world: we can, and should, learn from experience. Experience is that quasi-objective milieu which provides us with the capacity to affect and to be affected; it is a-subjective and pre-personal.”¹⁶

Obviously this type of learning has many practical obstacles, yet I have proved that under the right conditions it is possible to actually facilitate this type of learning within a traditional learning framework, such as a university or art school. Rather than to introduce another fixated paradigm in design education, it would be best to go to the core of the argument. This means that we don’t need to translate most of the abstraction for them to be useful in design education. We turn to design *to the power of philosophy* and not to the philosophy of design. Learn by teaching; teach by learning. Many educational methods are based on knowledge and skill development that is directly related to either medium-specificity or tradition, which is classifiable as “property-lead” thinking. Set against the backdrop of the parameters introduced earlier, it makes much more sense to organize education along the lines of relational thinking. Do not ask what a medium *is*, but ask yourself: What does a medium (or a notion or a concept) *do*?

The following example of a design studio (MSc) was called “The Assignifying Affordance of Assemblage; A Heuristic of the Energetics of the Exteriority of Relations” (or AAA for short) and rolled in 2012/13. The AAA project consisted of a colloquium, introductory lectures, collective viewings, collective field work, and studio sessions. This graduation studio had as its topic the redesign of the faculty of architecture itself, which had been destroyed by fire in 2008. The choice for this subject was not to indulge in a type of self-glorification—on the contrary. By focusing on the exact topic where the education took place (intensive), by incorporating the mental and physical properties of

the learning environment in the process of learning, we wanted to close the circle as much as possible (as described above). After an extensive theoretical introduction of several weeks, the participants started by mapping the site and its larger setting. Initially this was done on basis of an exploration of the senses, in an exercise called the “six-minute workshop.” During this workshop, participants were asked to explore the area for one minute using all of their senses, one at a time. That meant concentrating on one sensorial input as much as possible (by blocking others, for instance). The territory was mapped on the basis of the five most common senses, and the sixth sense. The results were noted and discussed afterward. This extraordinary perception is seen as a purification of the general perception, not hindered and spoiled by overflow and (mis)interpretation through sensory replacement. With this I mean the notion that information gained through one or more senses is wrongfully extrapolated to be valid for all senses. In other words, something looks disgusting, therefore we automatically assume it will smell or taste disgustingly as well, or the other way around. This perceptive dissonance or perceptive resonance is blocking opportunities to explore in and through design. The next stage was to incorporate this mapping in their cinematographic cartography. After the first attempts, the participants were asked to remake their mapping according to a set of obstructions defined by tutors every time anew. The purpose of this procedure was to “rid ourselves of ourselves,” to become able to embrace our constraints (the Nietzschean *amor fati*), just as long as it needed to expand the initial tracing into a somaesthetic mapping and finally into an intensive cartography.

In this way the cartography became less and less extensive, making way for an exploration of extrinsic capacities/tendencies, rather than intrinsic properties. Chiseling away the number of dimensions instead of adding them, allowed the participants to act within the realm of the affective (connectivity and heterogeneity) in an unprecedented free and provoking way. The attunement to the rates of change is a crucial step toward the mapping of agencies, which is not to be confused with the agency of mapping.

Many of the designs focused on the way education was organized and made propositions on how to facilitate different ways of educating, both in the pedagogical way as well as in physical interventions. The participants worked collectively but were individually responsible for specific sections of the process. This studio was not about producing specific outcomes since there was

15 This work took place in the design studios of the faculty of architecture of the Delft University of Technology, at the Royal Academy of Arts and a number of other art and design institutes.

16 Inna Semetsky, “Deleuze as a Philosopher of Education: Affective Knowledge/Effective Learning,” in *The European Legacy* 14, no. 4 (London: Routledge, 2009), 443–56.

no distinction between the process, content, and production. Intensities and densities changed places continuously. Nevertheless, it produced very concrete results, almost all with an unprecedented openness and inclusiveness. The designs incorporated all elements (both actualized and virtual) that influenced the site, turning the static notion of site-specific design into a type of “scene”-specific design, without boundaries or preconceptions.

Conclusion

At the end of this essay, the issue of perceiving density has hopefully gained more depth. As an alternative to the extensive tracing of density, I have offered an intensive cartography that has proved to be functional, both in theory and practice. Density is thus perceived as the temporal outcome of a process of actualization, as fluid and affective as the flows it emerged from. The determining factor for the formation of any type of allocated density arises from the somaesthetic experiences of the users/designers and its common ground is found by the negotiation of its somaesthetic values, instead on basis of program or functionality. This nevertheless produces highly functional programs. For this, we need different instruments that no longer center the human as a standard for measurement. Reality is not confined to that which is actualized, and the artist or designer should be able to “step out of the equation” to sense what is true potential. The asignifying cartography of intensities serves as the somaesthetic denominator in urban density, unlocking its potential by “unfocusing” on that what happens before and outside the framing.

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