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## An agorology of everyday life

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## Introduction: An agorology of everyday life

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Let me start with two quotes describing the observation of squares made by two different eye-witnesses of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The first quote is written by the English traveler and writer Fynes Moryson. When visiting Padua in 1594, Moryson shortly notes that the city has five squares, all used for different but quite mundane purposes:

There be five market places: in the first the Gentlemen and Students meet and walke: in the second herbes are sold, in the third corne: in the fourth wood, and in the fifth straw. (Moryson, 1907: 152)

The second quote is made by an unknown eyewitness accompanying Francisco Pizarro to Cuzco. It is a description of the square of Hawkaypata, visited in November 1533, and describes an Inca drinking ritual from the perspective of a European visitor:

There were so many people and [they were] such good drinkers, men as well as women, and such were the quantities that they poured into their skins – for all they do is drink and not eat – that it is certain, without any doubt, that two wide channels more than half a *vara* wide, covered with slabs,...flowed all day with the urine of those that pissed into them, in such abundance that it seemed they were fountains. Certainly, given the quantity of what they drank and of the people who drank, this is not to be marveled at, though it is a marvel and a thing never before seen. (Unknown conquistador, cited in Protzen and Howland Rowe 1994: 239)

Squares have historically served different purposes, sometimes specific and single, but perhaps more often diverse and manifold. Sometimes they host ordinary events and sometimes extra-ordinary. The examples above were taken from two different continents, but in fact the ordinary and the extra-ordinary often coexist on the same square.

The main aim of this book is to contribute to the study of everyday life on urban squares as a field of research. This is done through four empirical examples, all focusing on different ways to describe and investigate the public life and space of urban squares (fig. 1). The four cases focus especially on the *urban material culture* and *spatio-temporal changes* of these squares. The squares are very different in character, but they are all located in the metropolitan and transnational Öresund region, a region that also has gone through extensive transformations during the last couple of decades. Our hope is to that the cases will contribute with some theoretical, methodological and theoretical insights to the studies of squares, and thus also to the study of urban squares as a potentially important research field of its own.

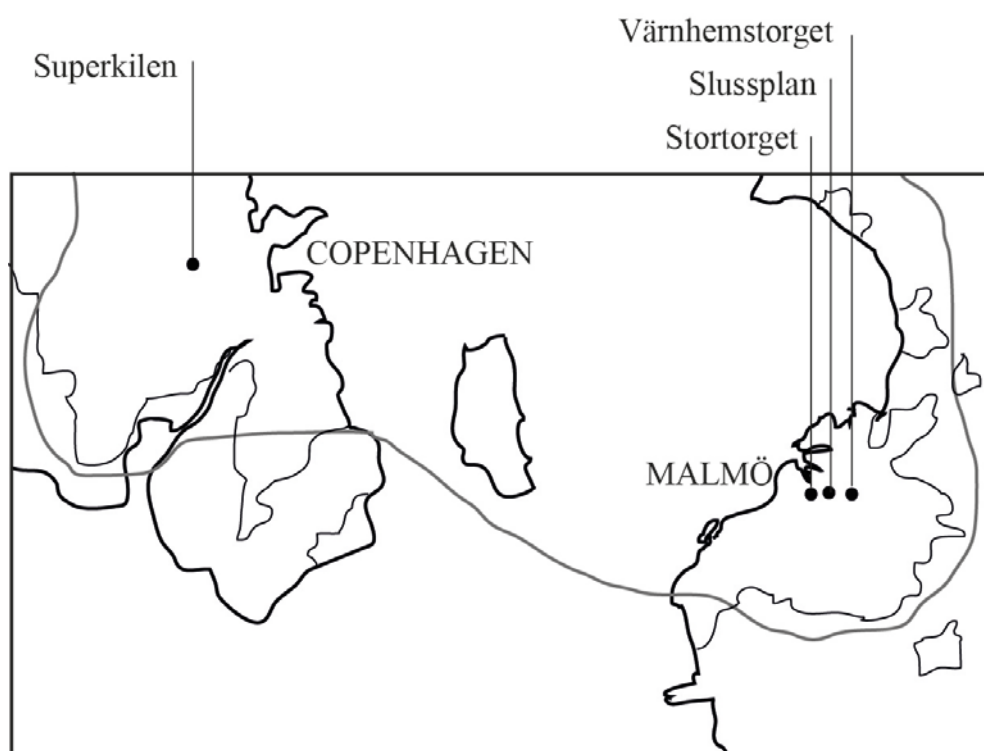


Fig. 1. The four squares investigated in this anthology.

One testimony to the perennial importance of squares is the number of different perspectives and fields of enquiry from which the subject has been dealt with. The study of squares has arguably been a quite small, yet both persistent and diverse object of research. In urban and architectural history, we have books discussing

squares of different cultures and contexts through history (Zucker 1959, Webb 1990, Kostof 1992). In books on urban design (Moughtin 1992, Childs 2004), squares are often described as a form element of the city, discussed from an aesthetical (Sitte 1965 [1889]), or social (Whyte 1980) perspective, and catalogued from the perspective on geometrical types (Krier 1979), functional types (Stübgen 1924 [1890]) or just on the basis of empirical examples (Åström 1985; 1988; Gehl and Gemzöe 2001). Within the social sciences we have recently seen an increasing interest in the social and political role of squares. This includes studies on the role of squares for retail and urban competition (Warnaby 2013), for spectacles and events (Basson 2006), for religion (Burdziej 2005), for national identity (Sumartojo 2009), and of course for political performativity – like in many studies following in the wake of political events such as the riots of the Tahrir square in Cairo during the Egyptian revolution in 2011 (Butler 2011, Gregory 2013) or the Taksim square demonstrations against the Taksim Gezi Park project in Istanbul during 2013 and 2014 (Kuymulu 2013).

Perhaps we might soon see the advent of an *agorology* – the study of urban squares – as a research field of its own. It is true that the concept of agorology already has been used in research. In the field of macromarketing, agorology has been used to describe the study of market institutions (Mittelstaedt, Kilbourne and Mittelstaedt 2006). The concept was here introduced with reference to the functional complexity of the Greek agora, and to point out: “the interdependence of markets and marketing systems with other dimensions of civic life” (Mittelstaedt, Kilbourne and Mittelstaedt 2006: 131). However, even though the contextual aspect is deemed as vital, agorology here refers to a very rudimentary aspect of the agora, reducing it to discussions on economical aspects of the market place. In this anthology we suggest that agorology should and could be a much more open field of inquiry, focusing on the study of urban squares and all that this might entail. The aim here is, however, not to develop agorology as a possible general science – although this would certainly be an interesting task – but to investigate what hopefully could become a possible a subtheme within such an agorology – the quotidian life of urban squares, *an agorology of everyday life*. One way to start a description of such a field could be to visit the three-day study made by the French author Georges Perec on Place Saint-Sulpice in Paris during

October 18 to 20 in 1974 (Perec 2010 [1975]). Through-out his writing Perec was interested in the infra-ordinary everyday life and undertook several projects and studies of everyday life and spaces. Perec's studies can, as Sheringham has pointed out and discussed at length, here be seen connected to a tradition of French scholars interested in the *quotidien*, including thinkers such as Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau and Roland Barthes and Marc Auge, but also Michel Foucault, Jean-Luc Nancy and others (Sheringham 2006). At Place Saint-Sulpice, Perec takes great effort to describe the things and events that is generally not taken note of in topographical, journalistic or other reports on places. He lists objects, birds, bus trajectories, colors, commenting on things he drink, how people behave and even their body language:

I am now at La Fontaine St-Sulpice, sitting with my back to the square: the cars and people in my line of sight are coming from the square or are getting ready to cross it (with the exception of some pedestrians coming from rue Bonaparte).

Several grannies wearing gloves pushed some baby carriages.

They're preparing for the National Day for the Elderly. An 83-year-old woman came in, presented her collection box to the café owner, but left again without holding it out to us.

On the sidewalk, there is a man shaken, but not yet ravaged, by tics (movements of the shoulder as if he were experiencing a continual itching in the neck); he holds the cigarette the same way I do (between the middle finger and the ring finger): it's the first time I've come across someone else with this habit. (Perec 2010: 18 f.)

Perec's notes make clear how we ourselves are part of the quotidian, and his investigations becomes in a way as much a study of the observer as of the observed, or perhaps better put: it becomes a study of the relation between the observer as a fully embodied subject (eating, drinking, taking notes, etc) and the life on the square (cf. Sheringham 2006: 268 ff.).

Perec's work is an early and methodologically interesting study of the quotidian life on a square, but there are of course several other important examples, more closely connected to the academic field. Two early examples of such studies are William H. Whyte's studies of New York in *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (1980) and Perla Korosec-Serfaty's analysis of daily uses on the main

square of Malmö (Korosec-Serfaty 1982). More contemporary studies include Setha Low's account of two plazas in San José, Costa Rica, in *On the Plaza* (2000), and Gisa Weskalnys' *Berlin, Alexanderplatz* (Weskalnys 2010), where she follows the former East German square Alexanderplatz after the reunification of Germany. Both Low's and Weskalnys' books could be said to represent seminal and quite thorough examples of 'square ethnography'. Filipa Wunderlich's extensive and methodologically innovative studies of place temporality on Fitzroy Square in London should also be mentioned here (Wunderlich 2010; 2014). Most of these studies, as well as our own, share a focus on the everyday life of quite *centrally* located squares, and it should thus perhaps be noted that an agorology also need to include studies of peripheral or sub-urban squares (for a good Swedish example, see Olsson, Ohlander and Cruse SONDÉN 2004).

Henri Lefebvre was one of the first philosophers who insisted on the important role of everyday life in society and thus also on its importance as a field of research and as subject in need of theoretical attention (Lefebvre 1991a [1947]; 1991b [1974]; 2004 [1992]). Everyday life and its recurrent, rhythmic, activities, has an important transformative and productive power. Taking Lefebvre seriously would also mean that such a theoretical attention cannot be rooted in the abstract categorizations that are so common in urban design. Kostof, for example, following earlier texts on the urban design of squares, makes two different typologisations of squares, one based on shapes - the triangle, the trapezoid, the rectangle, the L, the circle and the ellipse, the hemicycle – and one on uses – the civic center, the *place d'armes*, the square for games, for traffic and the residential square (Kostof 1992: 149-164). This classification echoes several others through history in the way that it focuses on form and function as two separated domains. An agorology of everyday life would imply the opposite, form and function, materiality and sociality, needs to be studied together. Any classification or sorting of squares needs to be done through lived space, and must thus imply a world of heterogeneous, socio-material actors rather than the abstractions and purification of the world into the categories of either forms or functions (Latour 2005).

Maurice Blanchot has (much like Pèrec) pointed out that everyday life is hard to uncover, indeed he sees it as one of its defining traits: "the everyday escapes: that

is its definition” (Blanchot, in Sheringham 2006: 16). One of the aims of this book is to find new ways of crafting presence (Law 2004), to make everyday life and its material and temporal conditions visible. The four cases of this book thus give quite different takes on urban squares, all representing different perspectives on how to study the transformation of everyday life and material culture.

The first article, “The Main square revisited – a comparison of daily uses on Stortorget, Malmö, between 1978 and 2013”, written by Mattias Kärrholm, reproduces Korosec-Serfaty’s comprehensive empirical study of the centrally located Main square in Malmö thirty-five years ago, and compare daily uses of the square between 1978 and 2013. The article investigates changes in place temporalities and material culture, but also uses the square as a means of discussing urban and societal changes at other scales, for example the relation between ordinary and extra-ordinary activities, and between absent and present users.

In the second article, “Discrete architectures - rhythms of public eating at Värnhemstorget in Malmö”, Paulina Prieto de la Fuente investigates the rhythmical activities of public eating at one of the most busy bus hubs of Malmö, and use these insights in order to suggest a new way of addressing and conceptualizing the question of urban design. Through ethnographic studies, including time-lapse studies, Prieto de la Fuente maps actors involved in situations of public eating (such as food, trash, birds, seating spaces). She then investigates how rhythmic, but non-continuous actors produce certain socio-material regularities on the square, constituting “discrete architectures”, and suggests how these might be further studied.

The third article, “Temporal agency and the gradual privatisation of a public square – the renewal of Slussplan, Malmö”, written by Gunnar Sandin, tells the story of an urban renewal process close to Malmö’s old city centre. Sandin follows the architectural proposal, the public consultation process and the different actions taken in the remaking of the square. Although official procedures for the inclusion of opinions from citizens exist, the planning authorities’ seem to find strategies of neglecting the interest of the citizens. Sandin goes on to



investigate the temporal agency of these strategies, and how they are enacted in the planning process and on the square.

In the fourth and last article, “The Fragmentary Demand – Superkilen at Nørrebro”, Ida Sandström discusses the efforts of producing a transnational space at Superkilen, Copenhagen. Superkilen represents a quite elaborated designerly way of addressing a heterogeneous community. Sandström here identifies three different urban design strategies put to play: designed fragmentation, designed confrontation and intentional spacing. She analyses the urban design through, for example, Blanchot’s idea of the fragmentary demand and Nancy’s thoughts on being-in-common, and relates it to situated examples and observations of the on-going everyday life on the square.

Together, these studies help us to see how the everyday life of squares, together with the materialities and architecture involved, play an important part in the production of public space. Two of the investigated squares have been radically redesigned, whereas two of the cases focus more on material transformations at other scales than that of the square itself. This difference allows for discussing aspects of materiality and everyday life at different spatio-temporal scales, ranging from micro-events altering in seconds, to decades of societal and governmental change, covering urban parts, regional extensions and trans-national scales. One aim is, as mentioned, that these studies, taken together, might open up for perspectives that could make the diverse and transformative socio-material practices of everyday life visible. Urban squares are often loaded with representational potential, they are strategic arenas of visibility and invisibility, they are important stages where relations between the ordinary and the extraordinary, and the struggles of absence and presence, are played out. This, we argue, is also why the life of urban squares makes an interesting study object when we want to learn more about public space transformation. Our hope is thus that the four studies of this book, in their own humble way, might open up for new perspectives on urban design and public life, as well as for the possibility of a more elaborated agorology of everyday life.

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