

# **Porous City**

From Metaphor to Urban Agenda



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to Urban Agenda**

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## Porous City—From Metaphor to Urban Agenda

Sophie Wolfrum

In its iridescent significance, the term *porosity* develops from a descriptive and analytically employed metaphor toward the category of urbanist agenda. This has been a process over decades, but gathering pace in recent years. The source commonly referred to is a 1925 essay on Naples by Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis.

“As porous as this stone is the architecture. Building and action interpenetrate in the courtyards, arcades, and stairways. In everything they preserve the scope to become a theater of new, unforeseen constellations. The stamp of the definitive is avoided. No situation appears intended forever, no figure asserts its ‘thus and not otherwise.’” (Benjamin and Lacis 1925, 165–66) The description of morphologic features of the natural terrain has been transferred onto the architectural characteristics of the city: “as porous as this stone” Naples is located on and built of. “The city is craggy” (Ibid., 165). But these crags are full of caves and voids and holes. Porous crags: full of the lives of people. Soon afterwards, the authors transfer this observation to the social characteristics of Naples city life, which they observe strolling through the city on their visits, while in fact living on the island of Capri nearby.

The metaphor of porosity was almost immediately picked up by Ernst Bloch in his essay “Italien und die Porosität,” applying it to habits he observed in southern Italy generally. This text sounds much more stereotyped to the contemporary reader than Benjamin and Lacis’s. It is full of observations and descriptions of scenes of a premodern society. “Things and people have no borders (Dinge und Menschen haben keine Ränder)” (Bloch 1925, 512). This focus on the muddle of functions, not merely an inversion of private and public, inside and outside, more its intermingling (*Durcheinander*) and the cross-references to baroque features are still of relevance today (see Eduard Bru in the present volume).

The text on Naples is a piece of literature, beautifully written. This may have supported its spread. (The English translation is unfortunately less poetic.) Moreover, the method of close observation of details differed from all contemporaneous and previous reports on Naples by German writers. In this reportage, it is the flaneur who is affected by spaces of daily life but not by the canonical monuments of art history listed in the popular Baedeker travel guide. This special viewpoint of the flaneur presages Benjamin’s *Arcades Project (Passagen-Werk)*. In particular, the feature of interpenetration (*Durchdringung*) is in the focus of more contemporary reflections of different disciplinary professional origins (see Benjamin 2007; Fellmann 2014). This aspect is especially attractive for an urban agenda in the professional realm of our book, but it has also been regarded as a significant stepping stone to Benjamin’s epochal essay on media theory “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” (1936; see Fellmann 2014). Furthermore, the flaneur operates in a modest, sublimated everyday sense, as Walter Benjamin notes in this context: “Architecture has always offered the prototype of an artwork that is received in a state of distraction and through the collective” (Benjamin 1936, 40). Perception by distraction is again a line of thought which has been reflected on frequently in the theoretical architectural discourse.

“Irresistibly the festival penetrates each and every working day. Porosity is the inexhaustible law of the life of this city, reappearing everywhere. A grain of Sunday is hidden in each weekday, and how much weekday in this Sunday!” (Benjamin and Lacis 1925, 168) Interpenetration, permeability (*Durchdringung*)

is described as prevalent in Naples not only in private and public urban spaces but in the temporal rhythm of city life as well. It affects the entire conduct of life. Even the cafés are “true laboratories of this great process of intermingling” (Ibid., 172). Though Benjamin did not use the notion of porosity in his later writings literally, interpenetration remains an important pattern in his thought.

In the modernist period, by contrast, the tendency has been to separate and distinguish spheres of life and activities in society: night from day, housing from working, reproduction from production, transport from traveling, etc. Cities reflect these basic distinctions; thresholds are missing. The modernist city has been characterized by homogenous zoning classifications and solidifying borders. The contemporary city in the Western world, in Western-influenced areas, and in the postsocialist world, continues to be profoundly influenced by this mind-set. “Space and opportunity at any price” (“Raum und Gelegenheit auf alle Fälle”) is lost. Although Naples in the year of 1924, during the visits by Benjamin, Bloch, Adorno, and later famous German writers, might have been still a premodern city in many respects, porosity is adopted as a countermodel, a critique of the modern city. Working with the agenda of porosity opens up alternatives by focusing on interpenetration, superimposition, connectivity, and thresholds.

Porosity identifies qualities and architectural attributes that seem indispensable for the complexity and adaptability of urban spaces. As Amin Ash and Nigel Thrift put it, “porosity is what allows the city to continually fashion and refashion itself” (Ash and Thrift 2002, 10). They use the term *porosity* explicitly as a metaphor with regard to Benjamin and Lacis. Porosity is announced as one of four key metaphors with which to grasp the everydayness of cities: “transitivity, porosity, rhythm, and footprint” (Ibid., 5). However, in the text in question, porosity plays second fiddle to the term *transitivity*, though Benjamin’s writings on cities remain in the focus. They never really go into depth, and at the end of the chapter they state the shortcoming of metaphors for a theory of everyday urbanism due to their lack of methodological clarity (Ibid, 26). For them the focus is on everyday life, as it comes to life in the report on Naples. The porous city might enable typical urban ambivalences: distance and proximity, exclusion and integration, heterogeneity and homogeneity, anonymity and community. This requires significant urban spaces as well as, at the same time, a dense interweaving and use of these spaces. Richard Sennett, another scholar who uses the term frequently, understands the porous city as a place of radical mixture. He puts his finger on the wound and asks: “Why don’t we build them?” (Sennett 2015)

“Porosity results not only from the indolence of the Southern artisan, but also, above all, from the passion for improvisation, which demands that space and opportunity be at any price preserved. Buildings are used as a popular stage. They are all divided into innumerable, simultaneously animated theaters. Balcony, courtyard, window, gateway, staircase, roof are at the same time stage and boxes.” (Benjamin and Lacis 1925, 166–67) The last sentences are especially appreciated by architects. Here the ubiquitous analogy of city and stage is expanded by a perception of urban space via its performative characteristics. Space is generated by activities induced by these very specific architectural elements. Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis, however, observe the intertwining / interpenetration of urban spaces and the urban texture mainly from a cultural and social perspective. The layering and mélange of spaces, the perforation of borders, and the ambiguity of thresholds are perceived as specific urban qualities.

Regarding the porous city from an explicitly architectural perspective, porosity becomes a crucial spatial criterion, for Walter Benjamin and Asja Laci convey a specific appreciation of the architecture of Naples's historical center: everything merges together, is commingled. No figure is definite. There is no allocation of private and urban functions to defined places: "Here, too, there is interpenetration of day and night, noise and peace, outer light and inner darkness, street and home" (Ibid, 172). In our perspective on performative urbanism (Wolfrum and Brandis 2015), we have underscored architecture's potential for sensation and action as equivalent and complementary characteristics of its physical presence. In this sense, we see porosity as an attribute of urban spaces of all scales.

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In view of the widespread use of porosity as an urbanist urban agenda in the contemporary debate, we might notice that this adoption started earlier in Southern Europe. Paola Viganò and Bernardo Secchi were at the vanguard, inspired by the metabolism of water and soil in the dispersed landscape of the Po Plain. They frequently apply and develop this agenda in different urbanized European regions, for example in Flanders and Greater Paris. They use *porous city* almost as a general concept and spatial model, in which the "porousness of urban tissue" is only one of several desiderata target figures (Viganò 2009). Conversely, Stavros Stavrides focuses on porous borders, thresholds, passages, membranes, osmosis, and lived space. "Urban porosity may be the result of such practices that perforate a secluding perimeter, providing us with an alternative model to the modern city of urban enclaves. A city of thresholds. [...]" (Stavrides 2007, 174)

Porosity in its programmatic turn addresses both physical and social space, one of the few terms that incorporates both realms of urban space without compartmentalization (no pigeonhole thinking). Nevertheless, in the conceptual sense porosity remains rather diffuse. With the help of different approaches by authors from different backgrounds, this book attempts to explore porosity from a variety of perspectives.

- Reflections on the term—to what extent is *porosity* a useful term in architecture and urbanism? Its conceptual versatility is explored as well as the issues of working with an open metaphor.
- Urban architecture and design—related to border, membrane, threshold, intermediate space, and transparency. The focus is on elements of architecture in between which support or cause interpenetration.
- Producing space and acting—sensuality, temporary interventions, and negotiation bring performativity into focus and connects to the discourse on performative urbanism, which we initiated some years ago.
- Urban regulations and planning—related to legal frameworks, basic politics vs. tactics, exception, and tolerance—discussion of whether porosity in a programmatic sense can be achieved by urban planning. Or are conditions based on formalized urban planning inevitably contrary to porosity as a concept?
- Urban territoriality and strategies—discussion of the multiple connotations, simultaneity, complexity, diversity, and, notably, superimposition of urban landscapes in processes of suspension and/or transformation.
- Detecting porosity—this invites us to embark on in-depth analytical journeys that seek to explore the more hidden simultaneities and constellations in porous urban environments. Texts, photos, and drawings are used as research instruments that open up new perspectives on porosity.

Does this journey bring us to any defined end? The fuzziness and blurriness of the term *porosity* might just turn out to be its advantage. Clearly, it meets our desire for complexity. In this state of vagueness we may restart our exploration with Walter Benjamin (1950, 8):

“Not to find one’s way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. It requires ignorance—nothing more. But to lose oneself in a city—as one loses oneself in a forest—that calls for quite a different schooling.”

(“Sich in einer Stadt nicht zurechtfinden heißt nicht viel. In einer Stadt sich aber zu verirren, wie man in einem Walde sich verirrt, braucht Schulung.”)

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# Reflections on the Term



Does the term *porosity* develop from a descriptive and analytically employed metaphor toward the category of urban agenda? This chapter turns the statement “from metaphor to urban agenda” into a question in contradictory contributions. Though these articulate a multitude of contradictory arguments—not all of them approving—a tableau of elements nevertheless emerges to flesh out the term *porosity*.

The reference to Benjamin and Lacis’s essay (1925) in the literature is still frequent, though in many cases the essay has simply been mined to establish a relationship to the famous thinker Walter Benjamin while often ignoring Asja Lacis. Focusing on Benjamin resonates with his reflections in the unfinished *Arcades Project* (*Passengen-Werk*), with his poetic manner in writing about cities, with the flaneur as a practitioner and a figure of thought in perceiving the urban realm differently. Walter Benjamin himself did not stick literally to the term *porosity* in his further writings, as Dietrich Erben reveals in this book, criticizing the metaphor as being imprecise and its conceptual history too vague. Nevertheless, it has since taken on a life and force of its own. In the city of Naples itself, it has been unquestioningly inducted into the terminology of the urban design profession since then. Being attentive—as we editors of this book are—one cannot help but notice the frequency with which the term is now used in urbanist discourse.

*Porosity* invokes a panoply of interdependent connotations such as:

- interpenetration, superimposition, and multilayering of spaces
- integration, overlapping, and communication of spatial elements
- ambiguous zone, inbetween space, and threshold
- permeability, spaciousness, and ambiguity of borders
- coexistence, polyvalence, and sharing
- blurring, ambivalence, and even weakness
- provisional, incomplete, and even kaput
- openness of processes concerning coincidence, rhythm, and time
- the flaneur’s perspective and a performative approach to urban architecture

The visualizing aspect of the term is its key advantage. This helps to bridge the two worlds of our profession as urban designers and of urban everyday life—architectural features and qualities of the built environment on the one side and the socially produced space of a complex urban society on the other—the material and the social. The characteristic of a *Denkbild* “in which conceptual and pictorial understanding interpenetrate” (Erben, 28) turns out to be very productive. Porosity is one of the few terms with this complexity of double-connotation yet which still opens a field of associations fit for purposeful acting and room for maneuver.

Whether *porosity* can be “considered to be a fundamental architectural phenomenon” (Janson, 100) or on the contrary as “a piece of architectural terminology” (Erben, 30) might be interpreted as an academic debate from different theoretical perspectives, architect versus art historian. However, we abide by the term as urban designers on the side of architecture exactly because it is of practical relevance, even in terms of object and space, and yet has all the iridescent connotations of openness (see Bru). It is precisely these connotations which invoke qualities our cities and their architectural urban fabric desperately lack. Qualities we as urban designers can achieve if we are attentive. This opens a field of

analysis and operations which are critical of modernist planning practices and “refrains from the use of ordering regimes, thus enabling a polyvalence in design” (Koch, 20).

The contemporary city is still trapped in the modernist planning paradigm of zoning and cleaning up. If the “Naples essay is exemplary of modernism” and the figure of threshold might be paradigmatic of that (Erben, 28), we must, unfortunately, note that the modern formal urban planning system is completely unaffected by the threshold paradigm and is in fact dedicated to the contrary. It is located on the other side of the Janus-face of modernity. Following Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno (1947), we have to consider how desperately modernity is enmeshed in two opposing stances: one of efficiency and instrumentalization of reason and the other of open structures, connectivity, and transition. The legal system, however, is on the side of efficiency, it demands unambiguousness, is definite and rational. Thresholds are substituted by barriers, protection walls, and strict zoning regulations. Against this backdrop, *porosity* turns out to be a positive goal for urban design and the architectural features of urban spaces (see chapter 2, “Architecture and Urban Design”). No wonder the above list cloud of connotations refers much to the postmodern discourse, which has emphasized the multitude against efficiency. It is in this sense that Isaiah Berlin is referred to in *Collage City*: “A fox knows many things, but a hedgehog one important thing” (Rowe and Koetter 1978, 91).

At the same time, the idea of a porous city prevents us from falling back into modernist delusions of a perfect city to be achieved by urban design. “The porous city will never be completed.” Maren Harnack refers to the historicity of cities and praises the “messy city” (Harnack, 41), a tack which leads to Giorgia Aquilar’s contemplations on the advantages of the broken—*kaputt* (Aquilar, 42).

Stavros Stavrides contributes an explicit political position to the discourse within this chapter, bringing the mediating character of thresholds together with a political agenda of commons and the right to the city struggles. “Urban pores in principle connect and establish opportunities for exchange and communication, eliminating thus space-bound privileges” (Stavrides, 32). The double connotation of the *Denkbild* is extensively explored in terms of its social interpretation from the perspective of lived space. This line of reflection holds that a city of thresholds might contribute to a city as engine of tolerance. The porous city has already become an urban agenda in a broad political sense dedicated to an emancipating urban culture.

Paola Viganò’s contribution reveals the most programmatic and practically oriented application. She assigns porosity a productive role as conceptual metaphor within several projects undertaken by her office. The planning study *Greater Paris*, for example, is centered on porosity not by transferring it abstractly via directives, but more using the term as a mirror to reflect missing spatial qualities. Conceptual fields of planning and action are derived from a deep analysis of the metropolitan spatial structure and its problematic centralized hierarchical systems: “The absence of porosity became the inspiration for a metropolitan vision which translated into five main spatial strategies” (Viganò, 52). The “project of a porous city” (Ibid.) for *Greater Paris* is again, like the other Studio Secchi-Viganò planning studies, deeply rooted in a profound observation of the respective territory and its spatial structural deficits and potential.

This brings us back to the question of whether porosity may work as an urban agenda. We are aware that the history of our discipline is trapped in a frantic search dedicated to “abstracting the phenomenon of urbanity into conceivable analogs and metaphors” (Lehnerer, 170), while “the titles of the publications seem to be poetically evoking new urban forces [...] has by now filled the libraries” (Koch, 20).

Consequently, we intend to refrain from a fixed programmatic agenda proclaiming new preconceptions or putative certainties in favor of a tableau of the above-listed connotations.

All these terms focus on uncertainties and dichotomies and yet stand for qualities the profession can foster. In this respect, the agenda of the porous city might be entangled in a dialectical opposition. Most formal planning instruments, regulated by law, are intended to be as precise and reliable as possible (see chapter 4, “Urban Regulations and Planning”); an agenda might also have the intrinsic tendency to establish new ordering regimes. But the idea of the porous city is exactly the opposite: openness, connectivity, interpenetration. This may count as a categorical contradiction and is not without risk. But we do not regard this as an opposition of paradoxical character: one can insert weakness, for example, on one’s agenda without compromising one’s will to act. The intrinsic dialectical opposition of porosity as urban agenda encourages the finding of new forms of spatial solution, of new kinds of tactics, and promotes action, not least because the urban profession has a method at its disposal for dealing with the oppositions, contradictions, and wicked problems: that is design.

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## News from Naples? An Essay on Conceptual Narratives

Michael Koch

The porous city: a new concept for the revival of urban professions in view of the helplessness of urbanism? The profession has struggled with this challenge at least since the inception of postmodernism. The following essay will take up this trajectory. Sophie Wolfrum's initiative for this publication is a vigorous call for the overcoming of disciplinary boundaries and for the readjustment of professional instruments and competences (Koch 2012).

### The Perforated New City

Architectural modernism claimed to take the lead in all matters concerning the city of the future, being convinced that the conditions in cities were appalling, while being motivated by an enlightened socio-political impetus. Furthermore, its proponents asserted that they had the necessary conceptual skills to generate the City of the Future by means of planning. Accordingly, legislative bodies provided the instruments that were understood to be required for this process. Although democratically legitimized, this may ultimately be considered a claim to omnipotent design authority. Research work that is critical of this approach has by now filled the libraries, seeking to define an appropriate relationship between social and urban reality. The titles of the publications seem to be poetically evoking new urban forces: *La ville éparpillée* by Gérard and Roux in 1976, *Métapolis* by Ascher in 1995, *La ville émergente* by Dubois-Taine in 1997, *Zwischenstadt* by Sieverts 1997, or *Multiple City* by Wolfrum and Nerdinger in 2008 (Koch 2013, 102ff). Since the flexible intermediate planning stage (*flexible Planzwischenstufe*) was introduced to the planning frameworks in the 1970s, the search for soft and adaptable planning instruments has been a continuous issue. New and predominantly informal planning instruments have been developed to make planning more effective through increased flexibility. Also, since the 1970s, the participation of groups concerned with planning (*Betroffene*) has raised awareness of the world of actors (*Akteurslandschaft*) through and in which planning is realized and modified. Later, in the wake of the work of Michel Callon, John Law, and Bruno Latour, and their actor-network theory approaches were developed in the hope of making planning more effective.

### Finally: The Porous City?

The editors of this publication suggest in the introduction that, if porosity as metaphor informs an urban agenda, "Porosity is adopted as a countermodel, a critique of the modern city" (see page 10 in this publication). Porosity of the city is here related to Walter Benjamin and understood as limiting or refraining from the use of ordering regimes, thus enabling a polyvalence in design. It is understood to produce additional scope for the new, for unexpected urban constellations and changes, as well as for spaces of resonance in which improvisations become possible. Hence, it is more about enabling urban practices and less about one-dimensional fixations on building or function.

We have to defend these theses on the porous city against being regarded as a promise of salvation in urbanism, against being misunderstood as a prescription for building the livable city of the future in view of the growing sociospatial and economic conflicts of resource allocation in our cities.

### Naples for All?

What does Naples stand for? For an urban utopia—at least from a Northern European perspective? For an urban dystopia from the viewpoint of the socially disadvantaged in Naples? Or simply for a

philosophical-ethnographic travel report which is rooted in the period of its origin? “During the mid-1920s the Gulf of Naples was a popular destination of German revolutionaries, nonconformists, and project makers of all couleur” (Später 2013). Reading Walter Benjamin’s text, a rather unromantic perspective on the realities of Naples is revealed: dominated by church and Camorra, at times quite frightening to the visiting traveler, marked by the struggle for survival, poverty, and misery. “With the pawnshop and lotto the state holds the proletariat in a vise. [...] To exist, for the Northern European the most private of affairs, is here, as in the kraal, a collective matter.” (Benjamin and Lacis 1925, 169 and 171) A faint degree of social romanticism, embedded in the spirit of the time, pervades when Walter Benjamin juxtaposes the “sober, open rooms resembling the political People’s Café” and the “confined, bourgeois, literary world” of the Viennese coffeehouse (Ibid., 172–73).

Yet it would be a misunderstanding to conceive of the Naples of Walter Benjamin as the prototype of a pioneering urban design, or of a true urbanity beyond time.

### The Beauty of the Big City?

There is a sense of fascination with this culturally different city in Benjamin’s text on Naples. The visitor’s experience of the city complements the common perception in one’s own everyday life, which all too often fails to recognize the ambivalences and opportunities of the city. Literature and art have always highlighted the personal, and at times painful experience of ambivalence as the main characteristic of the city (Endell 1908, Roters and Schulz 1987, Dethier and Guiheux 1994). Urban ethnography and urban sociology seek to develop an understanding of the respective phenomena. The concept of an intrinsic logic (*Eigenlogik*) of cities opens up the possibility of reconstructing the narratives that are of relevance for the production of identity (Berking and Löw 2008).

This fascination with the empathetic view from the outside seems to be suitable for discovering—within the existing city, which in many respects is often full of conflicts—something which is worth preserving.

Jane Jacobs (1961), Wolfgang Mitscherlich (1965) and Wolf Jobst Siedler (1964) turned against the planned destruction of the existing, lived, and inherited city. The latter author, as is well known, supported postmodernism in architecture with the belief that special window dimensions and architecture, designed to the so-called human scale, would be able to reconstruct the urbanity of the beloved, bemoaned European city that had been destroyed. However, if it is difficult for architecture to achieve exactly that—can architecture still contribute toward the beautiful or urban city, through generating porosity? The kind of porosity discussed here is embedded within the cultural context of Naples in a specific way. Despite that, we may propose that the urbanity we observe and value within everyday practices in other places requires similar kinds of open microspaces, ready for appropriation, as well as similar spatial constellations.

### Or Rather: The Perforated City?

This new variant of the European city emerged almost as a necessity from the processes of urban shrinking and the massive number of vacant buildings in Leipzig. In response to the physical and functional voids in the urban fabric, the concept of the perforated city was developed in 2001 (Stadtbauwelt 2001, Lütke Daldrup 2003). Once again, the task was to understand the city in a new way and to redesign it con-

ceptually as well as in terms of process. Based on the indispensable cooperation between relevant actors numerous laboratories of a coproduced city emerged. Both terms, *perforation* as well as *porosity*, are based on the idea of a nonplanned, nonintentional ordering structure that results from the emergence of voids in urban tissue or urban morphology. While the discourse on perforation led to the reinterpretation and reconceptualization of urban interrelations, the question of porosity is rather one that engages with the preconditions of urbanity from an architectural perspective and from the perspective of urban design.

As a response to *chaotic* processes of development, both concepts, however, call for the renegotiating of the roles of architecture, urban design, as well as planning.

### Professional Consequences?

Key results of the debate on the perforated city were the insights that normative rules are easily degraded to wishful thinking and that the unsystematic nature of processes of urban transformation requires a playful and creative response (Doehler 2003). The porosity observed in Naples does not follow an obvious and easily reproducible ordering principle. Can we, despite that, produce the desired urban potentialities which we associate with porosity? By means of specific (micro)architectures and/or by the way such (micro)architectures are designed and realized? Different conflicting logics of spatial production interfere with each other in the urban domain, which results in a kind of city-conglomerate if they are not, or cannot be, synchronized. Or rather in a metrozone city? The term *metrozone* was introduced for the International Building Exhibition (IBA) in Hamburg to describe spaces that have resisted rational logics of development and that emerged at the edges of functionally ordered areas (IBA Hamburg 2010). They were analyzed for their urban potentiality (*urbane Potentialräume*), with the outcome that tailored concepts and strategies can convert them into new elements of the city.

### Transformative Learning

To achieve the desired qualities in the redesign or new design of city quarters along the principles of the postulated porous city, concepts and strategies are needed that are grounded in the situation and the context. To this end

1. Architecture as the art of building can contribute with innovative design proposals
2. Planning can offer appropriate concepts and processes for realization
3. Both disciplines can train specialist actors who are capable of acting and reacting in changing situations. This includes the ability to improvise.

As part of the related urban negotiating processes and collective processes of urban change the relationship of creativity and the issue of multiple authorship may be newly defined and reformulated according to the situation. Concerning the required specialist and personal skills we could speak of artistry and art, in line with the ideas of a *transformative science*. Art, in this context, is understood as being based on knowledge, experience, perception, imagination, and intuition.

### The Art of Building

Architects in their professional role are commonly understood as the specialists of the physicality and atmosphere of space, concerned with its structural integrity, use, and appearance—as well as its beauty!

As part of this, the question as to what extent architecture may directly affect human behavior is shrouded in speculative mystery (Kirstgen 2018). Recent research demonstrates, however, how different architectural attitudes, different architectural languages, have produced precisely articulated settings in different morphological contexts, and how they have contributed toward an enrichment of space (Pape and Koch 2018). In doing so, architecture may contribute to the production of urban narratives and support processes in which parts of the city are collectively appropriated. Architecture's capacity to contribute to the morphology of cities is also needed in the porous city. If the production of porosity goes hand in hand with the technical and material modification and adaptation of spaces, an intensive analysis of the context is needed. Moreover, appropriation presupposes everyday knowledge, which suggests that such spaces are generated in processes of coproduction. Among the many predominantly younger practices that are engaged in such work, I refer to the collective Assemble in London, who were awarded the Turner Prize in 2015. I would also like to mention the *Universität der Nachbarschaften*, a pioneering project in joint teaching and research initiated by Bernd Knies and his team at HCU (HafenCity University) Hamburg. To what extent the envisaged level of everyday, independent, and emancipative use of the provided non-predetermined spaces is realized depends on the financial resources and to a large measure on the legally granted scope of appropriation.

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### The Art of Planning

In the political process of conceiving and structuring our urban future, we also have to address the question of how to communicate the future potentiality of the “complexity and adaptability of urban spaces” (see page 10 in this publication) so that the issues involved are made available to the public, supporting debate and stimulating multiple actors in the required decision-making processes. To this art of planning belongs the convincing representation of future situations, as well as the making of proposals for process-based strategies of their implementation. In 2008 Paola Viganò and Bernardo Secchi drew up their urban development strategy for greater Paris under the title “La Ville Poreuse” as part of the “Le Grand Pari pour Grand Paris” competition, and translated their strategic proposition into sets of spatial concretizations (Secchi and Viganò 2011). Jean Nouvel and his very large team of renowned colleagues worked out their competition entry in an almost encyclopaedic manner. His key message is that concepts for a livable city have to be enabled through political decisions (Nouvel et al. 2009). The discipline of regional planning has also begun to focus more regularly on the visualization of planning intentions and the articulation of spaces, understanding that this way the connections between the spaces of everyday urban life and functionally organized spatiality become more apparent. This positioning of everyday space enables local actors to better grasp the dynamics at work and to connect to them in a productive way (Koch 2009, Thierstein and Förster 2008, Bornhorst and Schmid 2015).

### Artists of Space and Planning

Spatially analogous, model-like representations of concepts in architecture and planning acquire a new significance with the digitalization of our lifeworlds. Such models for spatial and functional explorations of urban development possibilities are made by and for collaborative working processes, in what we usually refer to as *workshops* or *life laboratories* (*Reallabor*). Practical experience suggests that in many different disciplines more than specialist knowledge is required from the specialist. They can make use

of their expert knowledge productively only if they have the required sensitivity and empathy, as well as communicative and social skills (Werner 2016, Disziplinaeregrenzung 2016). This means, in the broadest sense, a performer—a personality who shapes and supports the collective decision-making process with the same virtuosity and creativity as she or he does with the object in question to be designed. According to the findings of the *Prozess Städtebau* research project, which is part of the Swiss national research program 65 *Neue Urbane Qualität* (New Urban Quality), a new sensitivity is needed, for it is impossible to provide a best-practice recommendation for the best design of a process (Wezemaël 2014).

At the urban scale the notion of urban commons (*urbane Allmende*) embodies the necessity for public negotiation of spatio-functional frameworks (Franck 2011). The claiming of so-called new ground (*Neuland*) requires similar processes of communication and negotiation (Team E 2014, Crone 2014). On new ground projects, obstructive legislation could be experimentally removed to create a situative deregulation that can be filled with new sets of collectively established rules, which can then address the local development potential in a better way. Hence, our society should offer or allow spaces of experimentation, in which exemptions from restrictive and outdated rules can be realized to test the models of the future.

### Changing Perspectives

Many new fields of urban work have now emerged in practice (Disziplinaeregrenzung 2016). New curricula have begun to respond to this change. In a new understanding of urban design, the scope of design may be extended. Designing includes in the broadest sense the creative conception of participation and processes of coproduction. These are elements that are and have been relevant to courses in urban planning for some time. However, the diversity which we currently see in the urban practice of different actors, and which informs the present inquiry into a porosity of cities, may encourage us to further intensify and expand our discussion of such practices beyond disciplinary boundaries. It may also give us ideas as to how we could establish and test, in a step-by-step process, the teaching and learning programs that could generate the required skills and practical knowledge across the disciplines (Koch et al. 2018).

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## Porous—Notes on the Architectural History of the Term

Dietrich Erben

The architectural history of the word *porous* probably began as a medical history. A brochure published by the Deutsche Linoleumwerke Hansa on the occasion of the Berlin Tuberculosis Congress claimed as early as 1899 that the synthetic material linoleum had been discovered as a countermeasure to “porous” sources of danger. It bears the clumsy title *Linoleum, the Ideal Flooring for Hospitals, Clinics, Welfare Institutions, Schools, Hotels, Business and Private Spaces*. It reads: “One of linoleum’s principal qualities will appear to the practical doctor as particularly valuable from the beginning: namely, the absolute impermeability to liquid and solid materials of any kind.” Natural materials such as wood or stone could not “compete with the seamless linoleum floor” because they are “porous, and the many seams offer many more accumulation points for unhealthy substances than are compatible with our present ideas of proper health care and nursing” (quoted from Aschenbeck 2014, 118). The brochure signals a declaration of war by the impermeable on the porous.

Thomas Mann’s novel *Der Zauberberg* (1924; *The Magic Mountain*) also leads to the porous realm of tuberculosis. Here, the term is extended from an individual building element to the entire building. Again, as with synthetic linoleum and natural material, the opposition between health and disease plays a role. Hans Castorp, the protagonist of the novel, reads an English book on ocean steamships at the beginning of his journey to the Davos tuberculosis sanatorium. On the way to the mountains, however, he lays aside the book that promises oceanic vastness and healthy sea air, “the cover soiled by the soot drifting in with the breath of the heavily chuffing locomotive.” Then, in an “already faded” sunset the sanatorium confronts Castorp as “an elongated building [...], topped by a copper cupola, and arrayed with so many balconies that [...] it looked as pockmarked and porous as a sponge” (Mann 1924, 38 and 44). The use of metaphor in the description, right at the beginning of the book, gives the reader a presentiment that the patient seeking recovery will be absorbed by the sanatorium, as it were, and will remain there for long years. The keyword *porous* conjoins the sick person and the sanatorium building; or—in more general terms—individual and institution are set in relation to one another.

In order to discover the porous one did not have to travel to Naples, like Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis, who wrote their famous essay on the city while staying on the island of Capri. The term and its architectural connotation were already in use elsewhere. They were, as the opening quotations show, in the—discomfitingly contaminated—air. But it is due to Benjamin and his traveling companion, the Latvian-born, Moscow-trained theater activist Asja Lacis, that the terminological reflections on the *porous* have become so notorious. The Naples essay was written in the autumn of 1924 and it was published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in August 1925. Its literary reception began immediately, after Ernst Bloch in the same year generalized the terminology to “Italy and Porosity” (“Italien und die Porosität”) in direct reference to Benjamin (Bloch 1925). Today, it is gathering unprecedented momentum in various disciplines. This terminological commerce is, however, quite contrary to the tantalizingly sporadic use of the term by Benjamin himself. In his writing, it develops no systematic presence, and ekes out a lonely existence in the Naples text. In his entire oeuvre, the term appears only once more, in passing, in the *Arcades Project* (*Passagen-Werk*; Mittelmeier 2015, 57). It may, therefore, well be that the notion and object of the porous, as they emerge in the thought figure (*Denkbild*) of Naples, were essentially inspired by Asja Lacis, since it is precisely the aspect of the both public and theatrical staging of the private which plays the decisive role in the porous. During his stay on the island of Capri, Benjamin devoted himself above all to his work *Der Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1928, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*). In it,

he also addresses the allegory of the theatrical, which is reflected as contemporary experience of the cityscape of Naples.

It is essentially two aspects that constitute the poetic fascination of the Naples text—firstly, the process of introducing the metaphorical content of porous into the text itself, and subsequently the extension of the leitmotif of the porous by way of a three-step approach: from material to space to culture. Both aspects have been mapped out by research on Benjamin in the last few years (Ujma 2007; Bub 2010; Fellmann 2014; Mittelmeier 2015, esp. 38–64). In dubbing porous “the inexhaustible law of life in this city, reappearing everywhere” (Benjamin and Lacis 1925: 168), Benjamin and Lacis seek to use the linguistic style of their essay to make this reconnaissance of the city comprehensible for the reader as well—indeed, they literally expose the reader to the pores, the cavities, and the interstices in the text’s trains of thought. The text, in a word, is anything but systematic. The fact alone that the typewritten draft was set down as a monolithic block, uninterrupted by paragraphs, suggests a deliberate inaccessibility. It contains neither expository thesis, nor concluding synthesis. The authors’ observations follow no stringent logic, nor are they concerted into a linear chain of reasoning. Rather, the material is loosely assembled. The shape of the text is as porous as the porosity of the white spaces around which it revolves.

Benjamin’s and Lacis’s reflections turn on these lacunae. However, they do not leave them empty but fill them with their imaginations. The space they talk about is founded on the material, and is then expanded into the structural scenery, which in turn is the stage of social activity. The porous is magnified—from a feature of the building materials via the description of the organization of architectural space to the interpretative category of urban culture: “As porous as this stone is the architecture. Building and action interpenetrate in the courtyards, arcades, and stairways. In everything they preserve the scope to become a theater of new, unforeseen constellations. The stamp of the definitive is avoided. No situation appears intended forever, no figure asserts its ‘thus and not otherwise.’ This is how architecture, the most binding part of the communal rhythm, comes into being here: civilized, private, and ordered only in the great hotel and warehouse buildings on the quays; anarchical, embroiled, village-like in the center, into which large networks of streets were hacked only forty years ago.” (Benjamin and Lacis 1925, 165–66) And elsewhere, this idea is further modified: “Porosity results not only from the indolence of the Southern artisan, but also, above all, from the passion for improvisation, which demands that space and opportunity be at any price preserved. Buildings are used as a popular stage. They are all divided into innumerable, simultaneously animated theaters. Balcony, courtyard, window, gateway, staircase, roof are at the same time stage and boxes.” (Ibid., 166–67)

According to Benjamin and Lacis, the permeability of the porous arises on all spatiotemporal levels: Thus the sacred becomes profane; profanity is transformed into transcendence; the broken, through its reutilization, is once more rendered whole; thus ensues a dissolution of the difference between holidays and weekdays, and a blurring of the oppositions between waking and sleeping, childhood and adulthood. In its topography, the buildings of the vertical city grow out of the rock caves, crypts, and catacombs; public and private spheres overlap in apartments, streets, and plazas, in domesticity and theatricality, in house and activity. The porous is permeated by the “streams of communal life” (Ibid., 171), it is a material image of the “communal rhythm” (Ibid., 166). The porous therefore forms the antithesis of the permanent and final. “What is enacted on the staircases” occurs not, however, thanks to given stage directions, but to a quasi-instinctive social creativity of the participants: “Even the

most wretched pauper is sovereign in the dim, dual awareness of participating, in all his destitution, in one of the pictures of Neapolitan street life that will never return, and of enjoying in all his poverty the leisure to follow the great panorama” (Ibid., 167).

Benjamin’s and Lacis’s *Denkbild* is, as this particular term for the text genre suggests, a metaphorical construction in which conceptual and pictorial understanding interpenetrate. Concrete observation and terminological concepts enter into a reciprocal relationship in the attempt to capture the city in the totality of overlapping phenomena. As with a picture, there is a visual juxtaposition and temporal simultaneity of observed details. In this regard, the Naples essay is exemplary of modernism. Just as modernist authors and artists were concerned with open structures, they were also interested in the form of transitions between the individual phenomena. Thresholds, frames, and borders are the keywords in this respect. The natural sciences wrestled with the theory of relativity, prompting one of their protagonists, Arthur S. Eddington, to treat the threshold virtually as an existential metaphor. He depicts, in *The Nature of the Physical World* (1928), the crossing of a threshold as an elementary struggle against the physical conditions of atmosphere, gravity, and the Earth’s rotation. In the sociopolitical sphere, the nation-state and internationalism stood in complementary opposition to one another: While the modern welfare state concerned itself with citizens only within its national borders, it was in simultaneous sympathy with the idea of supranationalism, as manifested in the establishment of the League of Nations in 1919. The ambivalence of borders and transitions was also addressed in the area of cultural theory: the French ethnologist Arnold van Gennep introduced the concept *rites of passage* in 1909 to describe ritual threshold markers in the individual life cycle. The sociologist Georg Simmel was interested in the picture frame as aesthetic border, in his eponymously titled essay (1902). Sigfried Giedion, in his photo book *Befreites Wohnen* (1929), elected “light, air, movement, opening” as the ideals befitting the modern residence.

Walter Benjamin, too, belongs to the threshold explorers and border crossers of modernism. As the tracer beam of a torchlight the search for transitional phenomena pervades his work. At times he finds enigmatic formulations in a language where conceptual reflection and visual imagination merge. In *Berlin Childhood* (*Berliner Kindheit*) loggias are the thresholds of the house: Here “they mark the outer limit of the Berliner’s lodging. Berlin—the City God himself—begins in them. The god remains such a presence there that nothing transitory can hold its ground beside him. In his safekeeping, space and time come into their own and find each other. Both of them lie at his feet here.” (Benjamin 1996–2003, 3:346) Elsewhere, it is a riverbank: “Every architecture worthy of the name ensures that it is the spatial sense as a whole, and not just the casual gaze, that reaps the benefits of its greatest achievements. Thus, the narrow embankment between the Landwehr Canal and Tiergarten Street exerts its charm on people in a gentle, companionable manner—hermetically and Hodegetria-like (*hermetisch und hodegetrisch*) guiding them on their way.” (Ibid., 2.1:69–70) The last two terms, which mean as much as *mysterious* and *pointing the way*, are as archaic in their modern use as the content they stand for.

With Benjamin, as is known, it is the familiar figure of the flaneur to whom thresholds reveal themselves. Even before working on the *Arcades Project* (*Passagen-Werk*), there are exceedingly poetic statements to be found in a review of a novel from 1929 (Ibid., 2.1:262–67): The city appears as makeshift “mnemonic for the lonely walker,” who also possesses the sensitivity “for the scent of a single weathered threshold.” The flaneur, as the great threshold seeker, “is familiar with the lesser transitions” between the two poles of city and dwelling. “The primal image of *dwelling*, however, is the matrix or shell,” where the

conciierge acts as one of “the guardians of [the] rites of passage.” Elsewhere, Benjamin refers to the house as “a lap and labyrinth” (*als Schoß und Labyrinth*) (Benjamin 1980–82, 3:390) in which the fireplace also counts as a threshold (Ibid., 3:388). This mysterious world of passages and passageways, which is to say, *passages* in the literal sense, Benjamin also finds in the type of building of the same name. For the flaneur, the passage is the place of fulfillment, for the passage does not reveal its secrets, it is an “underworld” in which experience remains ambivalent (Benjamin 1927–40, 873ff).

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As indicated above, Benjamin completely lost sight of the porous during these investigations. He quite simply lost the word. Benjamin’s friends, his intellectual associates and his traveling companions to southern Italy, including Theodor W. Adorno, Siegfried Kracauer, and Alfred Sohn-Rethel, never went in for the porous anyhow, although they were, in their descriptions of city and landscape, as well as in their art criticism, often attending to the same phenomena as Benjamin (Mittelmeier 2015). In the Naples text, the porous therefore is a product of the exclusive temporal, spatial, and personal constellation of the journey to southern Italy. On the other hand, one can only speculate as to why Benjamin gave up on the term after the journey. Even etymologically, the word *porous* necessarily leads one to a vagueness or, more precisely, a cleft. According to its Greek origin, the word *porós* signifies as much as *passage* or *opening*. The pore, therefore, is not only an emptiness or a given lacuna, but is so in a relational function to the environment—it is there to be permeable. Its purpose is to connect a front with a back, an exterior with an interior, although it does not itself have any substantial materiality. The pore is a thin medium.

In both—the meaning as a functional concept and the thinning out—lies the intellectual appeal of its derivations, *pore*, *porous*, and *porosity*, but it also entails an almost inevitable blurring of the words. Its terminological history demonstrates how the lacunae of the words acquire gravity, as it were, through the incorporation of cultural meanings. As is also revealed through Benjamin’s and Lacis’s thought figure of Naples, the porous becomes semantically charged: *porous* is the old and the has-been. The term is associated with morbidity and mortality. The feature described with it characterizes the cultural physiognomy of the South as opposed to the rationality of the North; it is a category of experience not of knowledge.

The fact that Benjamin wavered in his conceptualization may also be gauged by the fact that, on the one hand, he identified porosity with modernity in the *Arcades Project* (*Passagen-Werk*), the sole reference apart from the Naples essay: “The twentieth century, with its porosity and transparency, its tendency toward the well-lit and airy, has put an end to dwelling in the old sense” (Benjamin 1927–40, 221). Elsewhere, however, he put the premodern city’s “intoxicated interpenetration of street and residence” in opposition to the “the new architecture” which “lets this interpenetration become sober reality” (Ibid., 423). These aporias may explain why Benjamin steered clear of the concept after Naples. In addition, the notion of *constellation* opened up the prospect of a conceptual alternative, which can already be found in the passage from the Naples essay cited above. This change of terminology involves a fundamental change of perspective. While inherent in the porous is its origin in the sphere of the natural material, which ultimately represents a given static state of affairs, the astrological origin of the term *constellation* (of the planets) is widely forgotten. It signifies a dynamic principle, allowing both material and social aspects to be incorporated equally, wherein constellations tend toward open-ended functional relationships with a barely limitable number of variables. It is precisely the suitability of this concept, being more practical for social-scientific analysis, which determines that *constellation* gained ascendancy over

*porous* as a term with both Benjamin and his intellectual comrades-in-arms such as Adorno (Mittelmeier 2015, 57–64).

It seems that there is a balance between skepticism and sanction toward the porous in the subsequent history of the term. Occasionally, one enters the lexical field of the porous deliberately—or one consciously bypasses it. In the Naples literature of sociological and literary-scientific provenance, the porous has by now inscribed itself as a topos in the diagnosis of the present (Larcati 2001, Savonardo 2003, Anand 2016). It is usually employed with reference to Benjamin, and both the word and its use carry a risk of contentlessness and a disintegration of logic toward meaninglessness. From the outsider's perspective, one is led to formulate naively: *porous* is a passepartout which permits one to paint in the most colorful hues. Enthusiasts for the concept are opposed by the skeptics. Among them is Bernard Rudofsky, who settled in Capri in 1932 and was very familiar with Benjamin's work. The catalogue for the famous exhibition he curated, *Architecture without Architects*, concerns the guiding theme of thresholds and boundaries within habitats, as well as within the transitions to their environment, but he refrains from the porous (Rudofsky 1964). Christof Thoenes, who, as an architectural historian, has provided the most subtle interpretations of the architecture of Naples, did likewise when talking about Neapolitan stairs as public-private spaces (Thoenes 1983).

If architectural language makes the distinction between categories, technical terminology, and metaphors (see Forty 2014), one can ultimately say that *porous*, within this vocabulary, has a primarily metaphorical value with a wide frame of association. The present volume is on the trail of the concept's potential for creative stimulus from the perspective of urban design. One may however doubt, in view of the abovementioned discontinuities in its terminological history, that the porous can be considered a piece of architectural terminology or a basic concept (*Grundbegriff*) of architecture (in this sense, Janson 2016, 35). This cannot be valid if, according to the classical conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*), a basic concept is understood as a category which is irreplaceable for the understanding of reality and which, precisely for this reason, must remain controversial and therefore always contains the historical potential for development (Koselleck 2006). In architectural language, a comparatively limited set of categories could be considered in this way (space, function, materiality, planning, design, etc.).

Analytical development of the term *porous*, however, is still pending, and the question of what this might involve remains open. In a continuation of the conceptual tradition so far, an elaboration of the porous within architectural anthropology would be conceivable. This methodological perspective concerns the comprehensive integration of architecture into the contexts of body/corporality, fellow human/society, and environment/culturality (see Erben 2017, 101–8). Such an anthropological integration already reaches back into the conceptual tradition. Ludwig Feuerbach, for example, writes in *Towards a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy* (1839), in connection with the philosophy of the subject which he drafted and directed against idealism, and in which he binds the body to the subject again: "The I is by no means 'through itself' as such 'open to the world,' but through itself as a bodily being, that is, through the body. [...] Through the body, I is not I, but object. Being-in-the-body means being-in-the-world. So many senses—so many pores, so much bareness. The body is nothing but the porous I." ("So viel Sinne—soviel Poren, soviel Blößen. Der Leib ist nichts als das poröse Ich." Quoted in Pegatzky 2002, 81) In the present, as is well known, this very conception of the subject has been deeply shaken. If, therefore, reproductive medicine is likewise used to multiply parenthood, and allow it to be distributed among up to five

people, then there are “porous boundaries” between parents and child (Bernard 2014, 83), according to the findings of Andreas Bernard. Here, the institutional relationships of kinship and parental authority as well as of social intimacy and biological proximity are put to the test. Starting from such anthropological fragments of the porous, an architectural anthropology of the porous would still have to be developed. Whether the term *porous* is still plausible would then remain to be seen.

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