



MOBILITIES DESIGN GROUP

Mission Statement Paper

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Background

Contemporary society is marked and defined by the ways in which mobile goods, bodies, vehicles, objects, and data are organized, moved and staged. These developments and their relations to social, cultural, economic, technological and architectural realms have been vigorously researched at the trans-disciplinary Centre for Mobilities and Urban Studies (C-MUS) at Aalborg University. Under the auspices of the ‘mobilities turn’ the local and global mobilities transformations have been researched (with great success). As an outcome of this research a new and emerging field of study, professional practice and research has been identified. This field will be termed ‘Mobilities Design’ and has been explored by key researchers within C-MUS for some years. Time has now come to articulate ‘Mobilities Design’ as a dedicated research field in and of its own. Therefore the ‘Mobilities Design Group’ (MDG) is now founded under C-MUS.

Rationale and areas of research activity

There is a need for research targeting the material, physical and design-oriented dimensions of the multiple mobilities from the local to the global. Despite its cross-disciplinary identity the ‘mobilities turn’ has not capitalized from the potential in exploring issues of material design and physical form. The exchange value with design is twofold; first this means getting closer to the ‘material’ which is needed if mobilities research can claim to have understood contemporary mobilities, second it means that the creative, explorative and experimental approaches of the design world becomes within reach to mobilities research offering new potentials for innovative research. Design research, on the other hand, might enter into a fruitful relationship with mobilities research, offering a ‘mobile’ lens on design objects and issues, including, but arguably not limited to, methodological insights, concepts of space and place, and relations between fixities and flows.

MDG works across disciplines mirroring the variations of C-MUS (e.g. cultural analysis,

communication studies, sociology, architecture, traffic planning, urban design, traffic engineering, digital technology, interaction design etc.). Moreover the MDG works across various methodologies but will have as the key focal point real-life, material and situational mobilities.

‘Mobilities do not “just happen.” Mobilities are carefully and meticulously designed, planned and staged (from above). However, they are equally importantly acted out, performed and lived as people are “staging themselves” (from below). Staging mobilities is a dynamic process between “being staged” (for example, being stopped at traffic lights) and the “mobile staging” of interacting individuals (negotiating a passage on the pavement).’

(Ole B. Jensen (2013) Staging Mobilities, p. 4)

The issue of how specific and concrete situations of mobilities may be experienced, organized, designed and orchestrated gives the research a particular affiliation not only to theories of the ‘mobilities turn’ but also to more pragmatic and experimental strands of research. Exploring ‘real effects’ and material conditions to the mobilities of the contemporary society demands a focus on in-situ experimentation with designs, artifacts, and technologies often within urban spaces or buildings.

Having said so it is important to underline that there are no dogmas and established theories or methods that MDG members must adhere to. Exploring ‘mobilities design’ means not only setting design at the center of investigations, it also means to apply a creative, open-minded and explorative attitude to research. MDG creates strong links to the educational programs under C-MUS (e.g. architecture and design, planning, medialogy, and the coming Master in Mobilities and Urban Studies) and will therefore contribute to furthering research-based teaching. Moreover, the experimental focus of MDG will reverse this situation so that design and experiments carried out within the curricula may inspire and stimulate ‘mobilities design’ research.

It is very important not to close the discussion of the delimitation and identification of ‘mobilities design’ as the field is only in its very early stages. Emerging articulation of the field is the key to having an open-minded and creative discussion. Having said so, there are a few key pointers to help delimit and define the area. One would be to seek inspiration and affiliation with the theories, thoughts and methods coming out of the ‘mobilities turn’. Moreover the focus on material design means that there will mostly be a focus on the physical settings for mobile practices. This does not rule out for example digital technologies and services, nor systems designs if these have affected

the mobilities studied. The work within mobilities design need not be only situational in its focus, but we do believe that ‘setting the situation first’ or foregrounding the ‘mobilities in situ’ has the potential to avoid detached academic speculation. Needless to say, critical theory, realism, constructivism, phenomenology, action research, interactionism, assemblage theory, ANT, STS, non-representational thinking and many other streams of thought can be accommodated within this research. The key is however a keen interest in setting material and physical conditions in the guise of ‘design first’. The work done within MDG is not privileging a particular epistemology or ontology, neither a particular methodology nor a specific scale. (Foregrounding the situation does not mean to be ‘local only’. Actually, the notion of ‘scale’ as a fixed entity will be problematic within the thinking of Mobilities Design Group as such naïve fixations evades the insights into how any mobile situation is nested into scales often reaching from the body to the globe.) Problematizing the taken-for-grantedness of scale as fixed, and of mobility as simple acts of movement from A to B is thus a common denominator for the work within the group.

There is no fixed definition of the design concept that all group members must subscribe to. Having said so, we may still offer a point of departure for the ongoing dialogue and identification of ‘mobilities design’ by taking point of departure in the following statement by urban design scholar Kevin Lynch:

‘Design is the playful creation and strict evaluation of the possible forms of something, including how it is to be made. That something need not be a physical object, nor is design expressed only in drawings. Although attempts have been made to reduce design to completely explicit systems of search and synthesis, it remains an art, a peculiar mix of rationality and irrationality. Design deals with qualities, with complex connections, and also with ambiguities’

(Kevin Lynch (1980) Good City Form, p. 290)

This is most certainly not the only reasonable definition of design, but it serves the purpose of being articulated in explicit relation to material urban spaces and yet with an open mind to the non-material dimensions. Furthermore, this small quote illustrates that there are creative and art-related dimensions to design as well as rational and functional issues. The complexity and the cross-disciplinary dimension to design is essential in Lynch’s understanding, and this we are much inspired by. This tentative definition that will serve as a guiding line for discussions and explorations more than as a fixed dogma needs to be correlated and intertwined with the notion of mobilities. As the work is nested within C-MUS a definition of mobilities is less an issue of a lexicon definition than a reference to the research already undertaken in the center as well as the key

work undertaken by scholars such as John Urry, Mimi Sheller and Tim Cresswell. At the moment of establishment MDG is primarily working to gather interested C-MUS researchers and articulate in more detail the identity of ‘mobilities design’. As such, MDG works to topicalize the design of mobilities, to open, discuss and encircle a research (and professional) agenda for mobilities design. Then, the aim is also to reach out to external contacts within businesses (e.g. engineering consults, architectural companies, technology manufacturers etc.) as well as to other research communities, public authorities and civil society. The aim will furthermore be to create enough momentum to write research grant applications both to private funds as well as to the Research Councils.

Research issues and key scientific challenges

Since the field of ‘Mobilities Design’ is a new field it obviously does not make sense to create a closed and finalized definition as well as it will be counterproductive to the creative momentum we seek. But key scientific challenges and research issues are obviously guiding the work. Being hosted at C-MUS the Mobilities Design Group share many of the existing issues and challenges such as (see <http://c-mus.aau.dk/>):

- How are different types of mobilities produced and consumed?
- How do different types of potential mobility transform into actual mobility?
- What types of stratification are related to the production and consumption of mobilities?
- How do people, organisations and societies approach the demand for mobilities?
- What ideas and rationalities of mobilities can be identified?
- What are the sociotechnical dimensions of mobilities?
- What are the driving forces beyond the diverse productions and consumptions of mobilities?
- How do mobility policies relate to mobility practices in everyday life?
- How can mobility futures be explored?

Likewise Mobilities Design Group shares the focus on the following areas:

- The politics and sociology of mobility
- Everyday life and mobility cultures
- Discourses of mobility and motility
- Public domains and transit spaces
- Technology and urban mobility
- Aeromobility and air spaces

- International business travel and tourism
- Mobility regimes
- Sustainable mobility
- Changing (im)mobilities in a post-hydrocarbon world
- Power, interests and mobility
- Infrastructure and car cultures
- Mobility visions and futures
- Urban development and mobility changes: social structural conditions, power relationships, knowledge bases and decision-making processes
- Economic growth, environmental sustainability and ecological modernization: the case of mobility
- The influences of urban spatial structures on mobility

However, in differentiation to the C-MUS agenda all the exploration undertaken in the Mobilities Design Group related to issues like the above mentioned will ‘put design first’. In other words, the key challenges within C-MUS will be given focus and direction in order to explore the ‘materialities of mobilities’ (Jensen 2013). Next to these directly linked C-MUS themes there are many more directly design oriented issues and themes that will be explored in Mobilities Design Group. Some of these are:

- Place, space and mobilities
- Methods of mobilities design
- Urban infrastructures
- Organising mobilities – designing (with) active forms
- Coordination of actions and flows
- Travel experiences and architectural scenography
- Speed and Design – which design for which speed and vice versa
- Critical Points of Contact
- Fluid cities – solid cities
- Places and embodied mobilities
- Designing (dis)connections
- Nodes, nexus and networks

The forming of Mobilities Design Group is timely in respect to a vast number of grand challenges facing the design and planning of mobilities systems. From resilient cities, over climate change to dramatic demographic transformation patterns future urban development calls for new solutions. In this respect the foregrounding of design will point to new and innovative perspectives. Being inspired by ‘critical mobilities thinking’ (Jensen 2013) the Mobilities Design Group acknowledges that mobilities research need

to deal both with the ‘dark sides’ and *problems* of mobilities (e.g. social exclusion, systems failure, breakdown, vulnerability) as well as the *potentials* for creating new and unforeseen opportunities (e.g. new services, new forms of public interactions, and new experiences related to the increasing activity within mobilities).

Organization

The Mobilities Design Group is a sub-group to C-MUS. Therefore all MDG members are also C-MUS members. MDG can only accept C-MUS members (as members), but a number of external affiliation and association agreements are being made in order to create an international network of research into ‘Mobilities Design’. The MDG is organized from the bottom-up initiative of Ole B. Jensen (Coordinator) and Ditte Bendix Lannig (co-coordinator) and strives to keep administration at a minimum. Thus there are three levels of MDG organization. The administration and coordination is carried out by Coordinator and Co-Coordinator. Membership is open to all mobilities design interested C-MUS members. And thirdly mobilities design interested external individuals, companies, businesses, NGO’s, authorities, centers and networks may become associates to the Mobilities Design Group. MDG will host minimum two events per half year (semester) but will aim to keep a higher level of activity dependent on membership interest and participation. MDG will create an e-mail alias for members and one for associates. Next to this MDG will be put on the C-MUS blog as a separate entity under C-MUS.

Activities and events

Mobilities Design Group organizes minimum two events per semester. These may be of varying nature, such as:

- Theoretical Research Workshops
- Methodological Workshops
- Design Studios
- Design Workshops
- Writing seminars
- Study and reading circles
- Invited talks and research seminars
- Joint publications
- Joint research funding applications

This is an open list of ideas, and hopefully future Mobilities Design Group members will add innovative and creative events and activities to this list.

International collaborative partners, institutions and networks

The Mobilities Design Group is associated to the Center for Mobility and Urban Studies (C-MUS) at Aalborg University. As a part of articulating this new field of research the MDG has external associates that partly contribute to the dialogue and exploration of the field of ‘mobilities design’, partly are connected as partners for collaborative projects, funding applications, joint publications etc. The list of collaborative associates in this early phase of the work is the following:

- The Cosmobilities Network
www.cosmobilities.net
- CeMore (The Center for Mobilities Research, Lancaster University, UK)
www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/centres/cemore/
- mCenter (The Mobilities Policy and Research Center, Drexel University, Philadelphia, USA)
<http://mcenterdrexel.wordpress.com/>
- Pan-American Mobilities Network
<http://groups.google.com/group/pan-american-mobilities-network>

C-MUS, Aalborg University, March 5 2013

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