

MOBILE CITIES: The Tram and the Uses of Urban Space

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What kind of a city is Tallinn? What about Helsinki, Tokyo or Venice? There are several ways to answer such questions. One can concentrate on statistical facts about its population, *per capita* income, topography and the like. One can read about the history of the city or taste local dishes, dive into its nightlife and chat with those who live there.

It is also possible to find out a lot about a city by focusing on different ways of moving in it. By analysing how one gets about – by walking, biking, travelling by bus or subway – one can get a picture of what sort of values and activities, i.e. what sort of life is encouraged or discouraged in it. What is considered important and what not? What is possible and for whom? Of course, interpreting a city by knowing how its inhabitants get about is only one approach, and others are needed to make the picture more complete.

Different forms of mobility open up different aspects of a city, and it would be illuminating to compare different ways to get around in it. I suppose that Tallinn reveals itself much differently to a pedestrian than to a skateboarder. Venice is seen differently from its streets than from its canals. Here, however, I have to concentrate on one means only of getting about. My question is: what does the existence and use of the tram reveal of a city? And I am especially interested in knowing what kind of an atmosphere trams create and what this atmosphere indicates.

I would like to stress right at the outset, however, that I am not claiming that tram transport was adopted anywhere to deliberately create the sort of atmosphere I am going to describe. The reasons for its adoption are probably much more straightforward. But this kind of unintentionality does not mean that the tram is unable to create the atmosphere that I claim it can. Intentions – at least in the sense of conscious plans – tend to underdetermine consequences as well as interpretations. Moreover, I do not believe that what is actually ‘considered

important' or 'made possible' in a city can be controlled or even defined by any unanimously describable quarter. No single player can control every aspect of a city; no one can totalise it. What is actually made possible or important in a given situation through, say, the tram, might be unintentional and even unnoticed by some, but this does not mean that others might not see the possibilities and their importance.

My analysis is written especially with Helsinki, Finland, in mind, although my own experiences of the atmosphere created by trams in Tallinn, Hanover, Munich, Prague, Vienna and other cities are not necessarily very different from those of Helsinki. This does not mean that trams – not to talk about cities, of course! – are the same everywhere. Helsinki's trams are surely somewhat different from those of Prague, and I must leave it to the reader to generalise from my remarks if s/he wishes. Also, I am not claiming that the points I will take up necessarily apply exclusively to the tram; the tram is probably not entirely different from the subway or bus. Again, this kind of subjective comparison between trams and other forms of mobility will have to be made by the reader. My point is not to aim at universally valid conclusions about tram transport or cities but to introduce one viable point of view for making sense of the surrounding world with which we interact (and are a part of) and of this interaction itself.

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It is hard to name the atmosphere the tram creates, but it is also hard not to notice it. It is very distinctive, and it is different enough from that of the bus, private car or subway that it can easily be discerned. It seems to me that this tram atmosphere is a positive factor in a city, and I have not actually met many who strongly dislike trams, although I suppose that such antipathy is possible. I have not heard about demonstrations against trams, but demonstrations for trams and against cars have taken place.

Atmospheres are typically vague. The word 'atmosphere' indicates an affective, felt relationship with one's surroundings or environment. It cannot be pinned down by giving, e.g. the map coordinates of a certain place. One must experience the locale by oneself, individually, to grasp its atmosphere. Nevertheless, it is often thought that the atmosphere of a place is indeed *its* distinctive quality, it is not thought of as a totally subjective and idiosyncratic characterisation that says more about the observer than of the locale itself. Without claiming anything about its subjectivity or objectivity in a strict sense, the atmosphere of a locale

can, at least, be seen as a socially shared conception of it. Despite this, it is impossible to prove that a place has a certain atmosphere if someone does not perceive it. Be this as it may, it is one of the most important levels of being in touch with places, or whole cities. It is the level of liking, feeling at home, fearing, getting bored, being alienated – the level at which one knows whether one wants to be in a place or in a city at all. If it does not feel good, it does not help much if one knows intellectually that it has a proud history for example, although it is evident that knowledge of this history, quite like any other information, does affect the way one experiences the atmosphere. The experience comes about through many-sided interaction with one's surroundings.¹

Despite this vagueness, one way to deal with atmospheres is to discover what brings them about. Here it is useful to find out what kind of interactions with one's surroundings the tram promotes, and through this, how it makes the city feel as it does. I am not suggesting that everyone necessarily experiences the tram atmosphere as I do, of course. Someone might hate trams or perhaps even be afraid of them. Still, it is possible to clarify the factors that contribute to atmospheric experiences connected with the tram. I mention six intertwining factors, some including sub-points.

(1) The tram is very urban. It exists only in the city, only in surroundings with enough people to justify the economically rather heavy investment. When one sees the tram, one knows one is not in the countryside, normally not even in the suburbs. In Helsinki, many say that the city proper ends where the tram lines end, and some even decide where to live on the basis of whether it can be reached by the tram or not. Thus, the tram can be seen as a central epitome of urbanity, even more so than the subway, which often reaches the suburbs, but quite unlike, say, the car. For many, this sort of urbanity of a certain form of transportation is undoubtedly an advantage because it can be used as a means to strengthen their own urban identity. Professor Arto Haapala addresses this issue elsewhere in this volume. By using the tram, one shows and reinforces one's urbanity, one's habituated way of life that makes living in the city the right choice.²

¹ One might ask whether every place or area has an atmosphere or whether the word should be reserved for places and other things (and experiences of such) that have an exceptionally distinctive character. I am inclined to support the latter alternative.

² On the other hand, there are many who do (have to) live in the city but do not have an urban identity. This means that they do not feel at home there and do not know how to use the city. The city is not compatible with their way of living. In the same way, there are people who have an urban identity but who do not live in the city.

Thus, the tram experience, which means interacting with the tram and with the city by means of the tram, is only possible in an urban setting, which, for its part, indicates a dense and broad social and human-built physical environment. One factor of the atmosphere is the awareness of such a large scale and of an often multi-cultural society that one can know only partly, consciousness of the fact that one is surrounded by lots of different people, buildings and activities that coexist within a limited area. To some this means a possibility to hide in the crowd and remain anonymous, to others it is a threat because the whole is necessarily uncontrollable. To others still, this awareness generates excitement caused by variety and unpredictable surprises. This is not to say that cities without trams are less urban – crowded, busy, full of choices, noisy, densely built, often polluted – but that the tram, if it exists, is necessarily connected with the sort of urbanity I have described, and that if one wishes to experience it, the tram is one sure way to do it. But this does not yet reveal anything of how different people experience the urbanity they encounter: some like it, but others are annoyed by it.

It should be underscored that, say, uncontrollability as such is not an urban phenomenon only, for it is linked to nature as well, although there is no sharp borderline between these two. However, the types of uncontrollability are different in different surroundings. In the city uncontrollability and unpredictability are often caused by unfamiliar human beings, while in nature these reactions are caused by other factors. Urbanity and everything that comes with it are human, cultural and social phenomena, and so is the tram. This takes us to the next point.

(2) The tram is public, a part of a public transportation system. This means that anyone may use it and it is not very expensive. It is not anyone's own but to be used by all. The tram is thus a place where people inevitably encounter other people very closely, unlike in private vehicles. In many cities one can enter trams without anybody even checking whether one has actually purchased a ticket or not.

Because the tram is urban and public, it is very social. One does not really get to know anyone in the tram, of course, but the time spent together is still longer than when people simply pass each other in the street. When using the tram one has to know how to give and take space, how to show one is getting out, how to be polite, or impolite when necessary, and so on. Put simply, one

has to know how to be an urban social being. For some people, this is the gist of their identity. It is illuminating to bear in mind that every city has its own rules and codes that must be followed to be a member of that society. Thinking about the tram in particular, this means that one has to know which door to enter, whether one has to stamp the ticket, whether it can be purchased from the driver, what kind of people sit down where and who should stand, and so on. A stranger or a foreigner is normally very easy to spot even during a short tram ride because she or he does not know the rules well enough to blend into the crowd.

In its openness the tram can be seen as a moving, mobile stretch of road. One can even easily walk about within a tramcar if one wishes! A tram is a public place or a site in itself, but one whose location constantly changes. It is a moving urban space within urban space. It is important to notice, however, that on this stretch of road people are not responsible for driving or even walking but can relax, look out of the window, discuss, read, make phone calls and daydream without risking their health. One does not have to follow the traffic to survive, in fact even less so than when walking on the street. This means that one can focus on being social in a very direct, face-to-face way – or asocial if one chooses (which is a form of social life as well). Driving a car is a social activity, too, of course, but it is a different matter to stand, walk or sit right by one's neighbours and to see their faces very clearly, hear their voices and smell them than to communicate with others from behind a car window.³ It is much more complicated not to take others into account – to be social, part of a human community with its values and habits, to be sensitive to others' feelings – when they are physically near. All this means that on the tram, one interacts not only with one's material surroundings but also with other human beings with their own cultural habits. One encounters other people, not machines or mute natural phenomena, and this affects the atmosphere of the tram.⁴

Because it is a public place, the tram is also a place for social surprises. One can never know what sort of person will enter. This can make the tram frightening. If someone acting violently gets in, one cannot get out and escape before the next stop – although the presence of the driver may comfort a bit, unlike in the subway. At least in Helsinki there are certain lines that attract more misfits than

³ Social interaction of car drivers is interestingly analysed in Toiskallio 2002.

⁴ Obviously, not every urban and public place or phenomenon is social in the same way as the tram is: consider public toilets or parking lots, for example.

others. If one knows the city one can try to avoid nasty surprises, but if one is in a strange city it is harder.

(3) Even if the tram makes surprises possible, it also trammels. It is tied to the rails, fixed routes and timetables. In this sense the tram lacks the freedom of the individual car driver or the pedestrian. One cannot simply go anywhere with it. In addition, as the tram is often owned and run by the city and calls for heavy investments, it is not easy for an individual to influence it – its appearance, routes, furniture, timetables, etc. One has to settle for using the tram under given conditions. All these points refer to restrictions, and it can be thought that they make the tram passengers passive and limit their freedom.

However, I would respond, first, by saying that these restrictions simply let the passengers be active in a different way than a car driver, and here I refer back to the directly social nature of the tram. Secondly, they also make the tram easy to use and reliable, which also has a bearing on the atmosphere characteristic to the tram. This notion has three intertwining sub-points.

First, it is fairly hard to get lost using the tram, even in a strange city. The routes are usually reasonably clear, and one can normally take the same route back to the starting point if one has gone astray. The rails and the route are, to some extent, actually visible, not only on a map. Unlike on an underground subway, one can see where one is at all times. The fact that different lines may partly use the same rails does confuse the situation a bit, but compared to streets and their use by buses and other vehicles, this sort of common usage is minimal. The tram makes getting around simple.

Second, tram lines and stops make it easy to locate things in the city. If I want to explain to someone where my office is, it is very easy to start by saying that the University of Art and Design Helsinki is close to the final stop of tram line number 6. Also, I can say that one of my favourite restaurants is near the third stop after the central railway station on line number 3B. Knowing this, it is easy to find such destinations even if one does not know the address or the city very well.

Third, because the tram goes on rails that are often separated from the rest of the traffic it is not quite as vulnerable to the problems caused by rush hours as, say, the bus is. It is easier to rely on its timetables than on those of the bus – although this seems to vary a lot from city to city and line to line (Fig. 1).

(4) Quite like any other phenomenon, the tram engages the senses in its own

way. Here, I restrict myself to perceptions of pleasantness and unpleasantness only. Here, one can only state one's opinion and try to make it understandable, sometimes perhaps even acceptable for others. There is no way to *prove* or dispro-



Figure 1] Tram rails in Helsinki, 2002 (photo by Laura Uimonen).

ve an opinion, however. The pleasure something gives me cannot be accounted for in terms of truth and untruth, although ethical questions may be involved.⁵ Thus the matter of the pleasantness or unpleasantness of the sensations awakened by a tram takes us directly into the core of the concept of atmosphere. The general notion of (un)pleasantness to the senses can be divided into four sub-points, the first one connected with sounds, the next two with sights and the last with kinesthetic experiences. Here, I emphasise pleasant sensations.

⁵ If I find getting drunk every day pleasing to my senses, no one could prove to me that I do not really like it, although one could give me reasons why it might be ethically wrong, considering my children, or bad for my health and say that I *should* not like it. But if I still like it, I simply do, and there is no way anyone can say I'm mistaken in saying this. I could lie, of course, but then the question of truth would have to do with my statement, not with whether the experience is pleasing to my senses.

First, the tram is fairly silent, compared to buses for example. The sound is also very distinctive and, in my opinion, a nice mix of gentle humming, creaking and clattering. The experience is slightly different depending on whether one is on the tram or listening to it when it drives by. But in both cases, without that exact sound, the atmosphere would be very different.



Figure 2] A tram in Prague, 2001 (photo by Laura Uimonen).

Second, trams seem to be a bit too large to move on the city streets. This is one of the reasons why they really are a genuinely different alternative, compared to other vehicles in the city. This also makes them visually interesting to look at, and this side is sometimes accentuated by individualistic paintings or eye-catching advertisements (Fig. 2). Surprisingly, many simply state that trams look ‘nicer’ or ‘friendlier’ than cars.

Third, in Helsinki certain lines (3A and 3B) are actively recommended to tourists as a good way to take a look at the city. Because of its size, height especially, and fairly slow speed, the tram really is a good way to see the sights. When on a tram, one gets an idea of at least central routes used in a city. For a stranger it is thus a good means to start to get to know a city; and one does not have to listen to a tour guide’s chatter!

Fourth, the movements of a tram – starts, stops and turns – are usually smoother and slower than those of a bus, for example. This can be both seen

and felt and so it affects both the viewer and the user of the tram. For the user, it makes walking inside the tram fairly easy, and if one just stands or sits the slow rhythm is still easy to notice. Nothing moves quite in the same peaceful way as the tram does and this naturally contributes to its distinctive atmosphere. The tram is the whale of the urban sea.

Of course, if one thinks about the sense experiences connected with the tram, the tram also insulates the traveller from the weather, scents and smells, sounds, wind and rain behind the windows. In this way it reduces one's possibilities to experience the city, with all senses alert, as the pedestrian does. The fact that the latest models in Helsinki even have air conditioning has obvious advantages and disadvantages from my point of view.

(5) It can be taken as a separate point that, considering pollution, trams are less harmful to the city environment than buses or private cars. They do not spew exhaust fumes into the city's air, which is a relief to one's nose and thus to their – well – atmosphere, too. Of course, the energy they consume must be produced in one way or another. The electric power the city of Helsinki uses is partly produced by nuclear power plants, which can cause very serious environmental problems indeed, even if not necessarily exactly in Helsinki. In the end the only sure (although unrealistic) way to reduce pollution and energy use would be to get rid of motor-powered transportation altogether. But if one only thinks about its direct impact on the environment, especially as perceived by the senses, the tram is absolutely a better alternative than most other means of moving about. It is probably needless to underscore the influence of this on the atmosphere.

(6) My last point is that tramcars are not always new but instead often fairly old, which gives a sense of historical continuity and a hint of nostalgia to the whole system.

The first versions of the tram – public vehicles going on rails used in the city – were introduced in 1832 in New York, but only in the 1860s did the system really start to get popular in the US. In Europe in the 1880s, they originally were not electric vehicles but horse-drawn. One can imagine what it meant: they were expensive to maintain and use, but not very fast or reliable, and they could carry only some twenty passengers. At one point even steam trams were experimented with but without success, and only the electric version turned out to be the big breakthrough. The first one was introduced in Berlin in 1881 and soon it spread in other big cities as well. By the year 1900, they were fairly commonly used in

western cities.⁶

In trams, the history is visible in the present. The tram simply looks very different from the other vehicles in the city and it is often pretty old-fashioned, even the latest versions of it. More importantly, surprisingly old models are in active use (Fig. 3; 4). In Helsinki, the oldest models are from the year 1959 and in Oporto, Portugal, I took a tram whose wooden car must have been about a hun-



Figure 3] Old trams in Helsinki...

dred years old. It has been used by several generations, which creates the same sort of continuity to the city as old buildings do. In Helsinki as well, the oldest tramcars are actually older than many parts of the city.

In addition, one can see the latest design trends in forms, colours and materials in private vehicles – cars, bikes, motorcycles – very quickly, but not so in trams. They are slow to change simply because they are fairly durable and, on the other hand, expensive to acquire. New models are developed and introduced but they do not replace the old ones very quickly. Here, the past persists stubbornly.

⁶ On this history see Alameri 1979, pp. 51–69 and Herranen 1988.

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If a city has trams, there is a good chance that it is a city that wishes to provide means of transportation that are urban, public, social, restrictive but reliable, pleasing to the senses, environmentally-friendly, and history-conscious. Most of these qualities are, to my mind, worth encouraging, and it is easy to see that they could – and should – be combined with other aspects of the city as well, not only



Figure 4] ...and Prague, 2001 (photos by Laura Uimonen).

with its transportation system. They should characterise the city at large and, of course, they could be promoted by other means than by the tram alone. I say ‘should’ because, to my mind, this would help to make the city a good place to live, work and visit. Its opposite would be a city which values extreme individuality and freedom in transportation and elsewhere. Everyone can imagine where that leads.

All this means that the tram directs and limits the experience of the city in its own way, quite like other ways of moving do, but it also makes some experiences possible that cannot be had in any other way. Thus, this reminds us of the simple fact that every solution concerning a city leads to some limitations but also to some possibilities. It is a matter of planning to try to see where different solutions lead, although all the planning in the world cannot foresee everything.

In any case, planning ways of moving is a political activity concerning social life, a totality that affects us all.

To keep this in mind all of us – but especially those in power – need public, social places and situations that welcome all kinds of people, situations where it is impossible to omit others or to isolate them. The tram is one candidate for helping to make this happen. If the leaders do not want, dare or have time to use it – if the atmosphere it creates is not tempting – I think there's something sadly amiss either with them or in the city.

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Liiklevad linnad. Tramm ja linnaruumi kasutamine

Kokkuvõte

Missugune linn on Tallinn? Aga Helsingi, Tokio või Veneetsia? Neile küsimustele saab vastata mitmel viisil. Võib keskenduda statistilistele näitajatele nagu linna elanike arv, sissetulek ühe elaniku kohta, topograafia jm. Võib lugeda linna ajalugu puudutavaid materjale või maitsta kohalikke roogi, sukelduda linna öö-ellu ja vestelda nendega, kes seal elavad.

Linna kohta on võimalik paljutki teada saada ka erinevaid linnas liikumise viise uurides. Analüüsides seda, kuidas inimene linnas ühest kohast teise liigub – jalgsi, jalgratta, bussi või metrooga –, võib saada ettekujutuse sellest, milliseid väärtusi ja tegevusi, s.t missugust elu selles soositakse või takistatakse.

Erinevad liikumisviisid avavad linna eri aspektidest ja kindlasti oleks neid erinevaid viise huvitav võrrelda. Siinkohal keskendun neist siiski vaid ühele. Võtan vaatluse alla, mida tähendab linnale trammi olemasolu ja missuguse atmosfääri trammid loovad.

Siinne kirjutis peab silmas eeskätt Helsingit, ehkki autori kogemused trammide loodud atmosfäärast Tallinnas, Hannoveris, Münchenis, Prahast, Viinis ja teistes linnades ei ole tingimata Helsingist väga erinevad. See ei tähenda, nagu oleksid trammid – rääkimata linnadest – igal pool ühesugused. Helsingi trammid on kindlasti mõnevõrra erinevad näiteks Praha omadest, ja artiklis esitatud tähelepanekute üldistamine jääb soovi korral iga lugeja enese ülesandeks. Samuti ei väida ma, et kõnealused aspektid oleksid tingimata trammidele eriomased; tõenäoliselt ei erine tramm oluliselt metroost või bussist. Ka seesugune subjektiivne võrdlus trammi ja teiste liiklusvahendite vahel peab jääma lugeja hooleks. Artikli eesmärgiks ei ole universaalsete järelduste esitamine trammitranspordi või linnade kohta, vaid ühe praktilise vaateviisi tutvustamine, mis aitab mõtestada meid ümbritsevat maailma (millest me ise oleme üks osa), millega oleme vastastikustes seostes, ning ka neid seoseid endid.