

A Counter-example of Over-determination: The Critical Discussion of Cardiff Market

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Abstract. In the realm of contemporary urban landscapes, the dichotomy between apparent order and underlying fragility reveals itself. Richard Sennett's concept of "over-determination" highlights the perils of excessively determined urban development trajectories, urging a shift towards embracing "incomplete form" for sustainable evolution. This paper critically examines Sennett's framework, with a focus on Cardiff Market, a historic urban space. Through a comprehensive analysis of Sennett's theories, the paper delves into the complexities of over-determination and its impact on urban resilience. Cardiff Market serves as an exemplar of divergent urban planning, showcasing the potential of allowing organic growth within incomplete structures. The dynamic transformation of the market underscores its adaptability and resilience, validating the concept of incomplete form as a catalyst for innovative urban development. The paper contributes to an enriched understanding of the delicate balance between structured design and adaptive urban evolution.

Keywords: Urban Landscapes, Urban Evolution, Over-determination, Cardiff Market

1 Introduction

In the realm of global capitalism, the contemporary urban landscape exudes an appearance of order, aesthetic allure, and facilitation of urbanization. Yet, beneath this veneer of harmony lies a paradoxical reality of inflexibility, fragility, and transience. In response to this prevailing urban phenomenon, Richard Sennett introduces the concept of "over-determination" to unveil the inherent constraints and pitfalls associated with excessively determined trajectories of urban development [1]. This discourse endeavors to intricately expound upon the conceptual underpinnings of "over-determination" and undertake a comprehensive exploration of the rationales that render cities susceptible to brittleness and maladaptive tendencies. Furthermore, it ardently champions the indispensability of embracing the principle of "incomplete form" as an imperative facet within the paradigm of urban sustainable evolution.

In the framework of Sennett's theoretical framework, the lens is directed towards Cardiff Market, a bustling and diverse urban space embedded within the confines of a rigid urban setting. This exemplar is harnessed to elucidate the potentialities of designing public spaces that stand in deliberate opposition to the tenets of over-determination. Tracing its evolution from an 18th-century farmers' market to its contemporary incarnation as an emblematic, multifaceted marketplace, Cardiff Market unveils a narrative of organic growth devoid of undue control or over-regulation. It becomes a case in point for the manifestation of "incomplete form" through a process that amalgamates diverse functions with structures of varying vintage. While the

confluence of divergent functions unavoidably begets tensions, these conflicts do not encroach upon the resilience of Cardiff Market's fabric.

Central to the discourse is Sennett's seminal works, particularly "The Open City" and his collaborative endeavor with Sendra, "Designing Disorder" [2]. These foundations are complemented by the corpus of Sennett's wider oeuvre and the scholarly contributions of luminaries such as Jacobs and Harvey. This comprehensive approach seeks to judiciously assess the pertinence and confines of the "over-determination" thesis. In the analytical exploration of the Cardiff Market, the methodological arsenal incorporates perusal of the Cardiff Market website alongside rigorous fieldwork. This hybrid approach ensures the procurement of precise, all-encompassing, and objective insights that contribute to an enriched understanding of the discourse.

2 Main Discussion: A brief review of Over-determination

The concept of "over-determination," as proposed by Sennett in his work "The Open City," pertains to excessive and overly specific interventions and decision-making by urban designers within cities. Sennett [3] contends that the consequence of over-determination leads to what he terms the "Brittle City." The excessive specification of both form and function renders the modern urban environment particularly susceptible to decay. As observed, the average lifespan of new skyscrapers in New York is now a mere 35 years due to their rigidly defined functions and constrained appearances. The meticulous design and precise depiction of their visual forms and functionalities have curtailed space for imagination and the potential for evolution. Furthermore, the isolated nature of these buildings, lacking integration with other structures and social activities, deprives the urban landscape of its allure for pedestrians. These uniform and easily discernible edifices struggle to foster engagement and interaction with their users and visitors. Consequently, when the initial functions of such buildings wane over time, they are razed and replaced rather than renovated [4]. This pattern renders cities fragile, susceptible to fracture, and ill-equipped to adapt to unforeseen changes.

Sendra and Sennett [5] assert that "The technologies which make possible experimentation have been subordinated to a regime of power which wants order and control." This symptom of over-determination precludes their creative application, despite the expanded resources available today [6]. While advanced construction materials and technological capabilities enable the construction of high-tech skyscrapers, achieving vibrancy remains challenging. This paradox exemplifies the dilemmas faced by urban development in a globalized context. Driven by the pressures of global capitalism, urban development has prioritized economic efficiency and effectiveness, with the quality of urban life commodified. As articulated by Harvey [7], "In the past three decades, the neoliberal turn has restored class power to rich elites." The proliferation of affluent individuals has led to the increasing commodification of cities, often resulting in monolithic architectural plans at the expense of public space. This trend has given rise to more gated communities and privatized areas within the cityscape[8]. Consequentially, people are isolated from one another, and social interactions are stifled. The resulting cities exhibit a veneer of orderliness, yet remain lifeless, rigid, and uniform in their design.

Contrary to the pitfalls of over-determination, embracing urban diversity, complexity, and even disorder is advocated by Jacobs as a means to avoid urban chaos. She posits that "the intermingling of different urban uses represents a highly developed and complex order"[3]. This

sentiment is echoed by Sennett[4], who underscores the value of introducing controlled chaos into urban life to better equip individuals to navigate unforeseen urban challenges. Sennett [2] argues for a "particular physical form that is 'incomplete' in a particular way." This concept counters over-determination by intentionally designing public spaces that are incomplete, allowing for diverse groups and individuals to engage in various ways. The enhancement of public space function relies on city users, while the city itself serves as a platform for potential opportunities[1]. Within these "incomplete" and non-over-determined cities, urban occupants can seize unexpected possibilities, exercise creativity, and navigate the complexities of urban life. Simultaneously, this approach injects a wealth of possibilities and diversity into the urban fabric, thereby bolstering resilience in the face of change. Unfinished and partially unplanned urban spaces manifest as timely and sustainable structures [5].

Simone [8] extends this notion of "incomplete form" to encompass its "availability to specific functions and agendas." In contemporary society, sustainable urban development mandates that projects extend themselves into a larger context as an affirmation of their functions. For instance, a café strategically placing seating outside the building, within an unstructured space, engenders a realm of possibilities that can stimulate neighboring residential and pedestrian areas. This synergy enables values to emerge through mutual integration and promotion. Conversely, institutions such as schools that are demarcated from their surroundings impede cooperative opportunities, thereby diminishing the populace's capacity to address intricate challenges. Moreover, the expansion of the incomplete form inherently confronts unanticipated scenarios for which explicit preparation is untenable. Negotiation, adaptation, and concession over extended periods emerge as essential components in navigating such circumstances. These processes underpin the gradual evolution of a city's resilience and tenacity.

Nonetheless, Amin raises concerns that "Some people might come to develop solidarity with others as well as with the city through such engagement, while others will not, depending on background, disposition, expectations from public space and response to the commons.[1]" This assertion underscores the inevitability of adversarial conflicts within the social amalgamation induced by incomplete forms, posing a challenge to Sennett's stance against over-determination[2]. These conflicts may engender the erosion of public space and yield unintended outcomes. While orderly urban designs may superficially project harmony, they often yield lifeless, monotonous environments. Jacobs contends that subpar conditions exclusively afflict neglected pockets of the city, such as dilapidated housing or abandoned parking lots, precisely because they lack genuine diversity. Jacobs provides a solution by advocating the alignment of diverse functions with varying building ages, a symbiotic fusion that precludes monotony without overt representation, thereby nurturing authentic differentiation. Confronting the challenges posed by over-determination can indeed be met through effective integration.

3 Main Discussion: A critical scrutinization of Cardiff Market

Cardiff Market serves as a compelling illustration of the concept of "over-determination" within an urban context. Situated in the vibrant Castle Quarter of Cardiff's city center, this iconic

Victorian market stands as a testament to historical continuity. Comprising two floors and accessible from St Mary's Street and Trinity Street, near St John's Church, Cardiff Market's legacy stretches back to the 1700s, maintaining its presence over centuries. Its original location once hosted Cardiff Prison, complete with gallows at the entrance to St Mary Street. Figure 1 shows A glimpse of the historic façade of Cardiff Market within its environs.

Remarkably, Cardiff Market has preserved its historical essence amid modern developments. A prominent Samuel clock, suspended over the High Street entrance since 1910, has undergone substantial restoration efforts, reflecting its enduring significance. Designated as a culturally protected and Grade II-listed building since 1975, the market encapsulates historical remnants. During fieldwork, I observed how the roof retained the expansive glass windows harking back to the prison era. While the stalls have embraced contemporary refurbishments, vestiges of antiquity persist in vintage seating, staircases, walls, and the central clock, creating a palpable connection to the past.

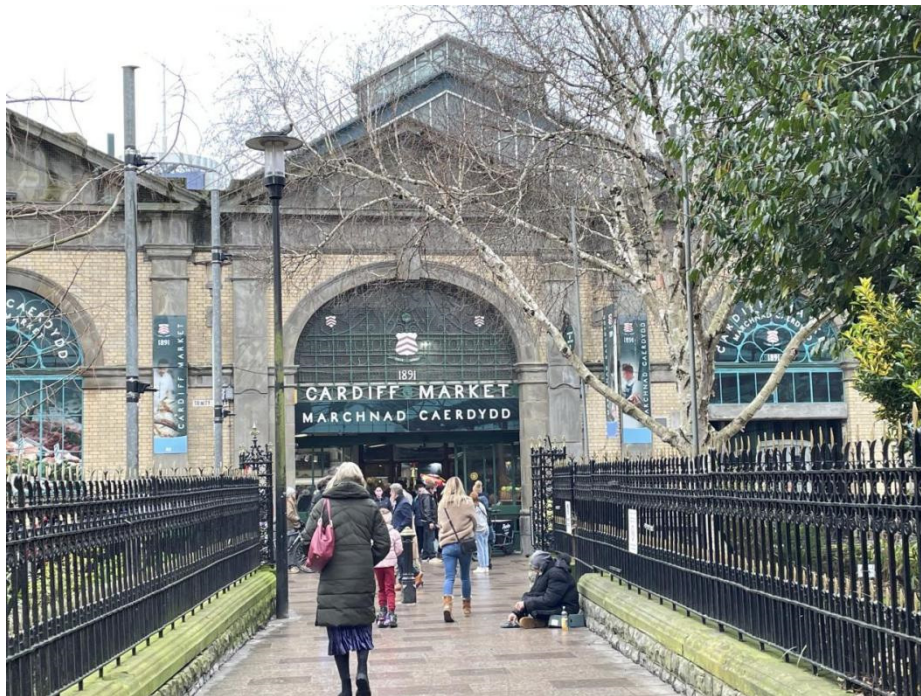


Figure 1: A glimpse of the historic façade of Cardiff Market within its environs.

Image: Cardiff Market (distant) and Trinity Street near St John's Church (proximate). Limeng Chen. January 2022.

As an evolving hub, Cardiff Market thrives on diversity and dynamism. Originating as a farmers' market in the 18th century, it now hosts an array of local independent businesses, offering an eclectic range of products. Traditional Welsh fare intermingles with artisan coffee, street food, vintage clothing, and second-hand records. Many enterprises have transcended generations, underscoring their longstanding presence. Ashton, a fishmonger, traces his family's involvement

since 1866, while David Phillips, an aquatic accessories vendor, boasts over three decades of experience, imparting expertise on tropical fish and plants.

The eclectic atmosphere of Cardiff Market is enhanced by its fluid interaction with visitors. Beyond shopping, the market embodies a social nexus. Observing a florist and souvenir shop owner dancing together within transparent, interconnected stalls exemplifies the convivial atmosphere. This vibrant microcosm unites residents and global tourists, facilitating the exchange of narratives across diverse backgrounds.

Cardiff Market serves as a pertinent example of urban planning's lack of "over-determination," a concept elucidated by Sennett. [2] The evolving spatial configuration of the market underscores the organic development process. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the gradual filling of the ground floor and balcony floor by diverse stakeholders, unburdened by excessive preconceptions. Initially, individual shops occupied distinct spaces, subsequently expanding into communal areas with centrally located stalls. This evolution mirrored the diversification of merchandise, encompassing snacks, coffee, fruit, flowers, souvenirs, and vintage records.

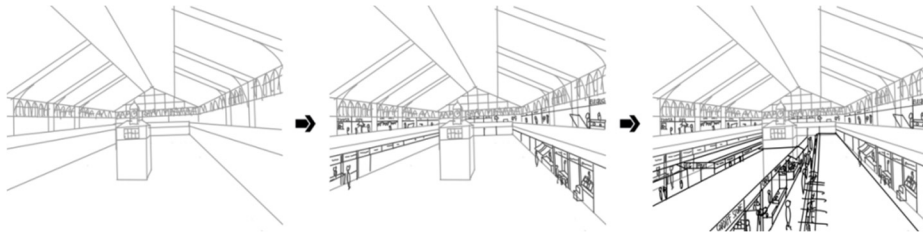


Figure 2: The space on the ground floor of Cardiff Market is gradually completed by urban users. Li-meng Chen. January 2022.

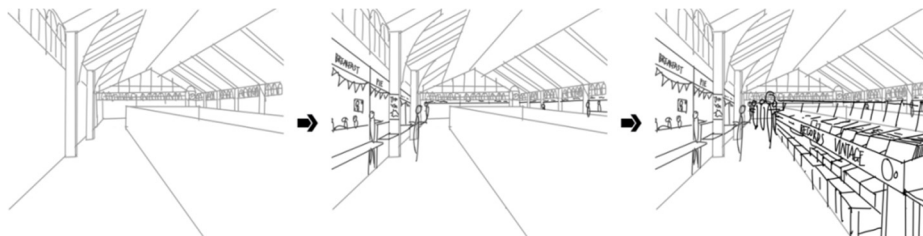


Figure 3: The space on the balcony floor of Cardiff Market is gradually completed by urban users. Li-meng Chen. January 2022.

While initially designated as a farmers' market, Cardiff Market's function was neither excessively proscribed nor overtly constrained by urban planners. Instead, it was granted the latitude to evolve organically in response to the changing requirements of traders and consumers, both local and beyond, amid shifting temporal dynamics. Commencing as a livestock and agricultural products trading hub, the market's evolution over centuries has yielded a diverse assortment of commodities. This adaptive process has engendered heightened diversity and prospects, rendering the market appealing to a broad spectrum of patrons.

The underlying catalyst for Cardiff Market's dynamic trajectory is its inherent flexibility, unburdened by rigid regulations or externally imposed control. This unconstrained environment

has enabled it to be attuned to evolving needs and temporal exigencies, metamorphosing in line with user aspirations. This resilience fortifies its longevity and sustainability, a paradigm aligning with Sennett's notion of incompleteness fostering adaptability and empowerment [6].

The genesis of Cardiff Market finds its roots in a repurposed prison edifice. According to Sennett's discourse[7], urban developmental undertakings capitalize on preexisting "incomplete forms," rather than erecting entirely new structures. This concept resonates globally, evident in scenarios such as China repurposing defunct factories. New York's Fairway Market beneath the 125th Street viaduct exemplifies this principle, fostering community cohesion [8]. The praxis of development within incomplete forms contradicts the myth of tabula rasa, as it perpetuates growth through adaptive occupation.

Cardiff Market's Victorian edifice and the contiguous environs embody such unfinished forms, dating back to the 18th century. Conspicuously, planners abstained from erasing the prison's vestiges, electing instead to relinquish control to the urban populace and temporal flux. This strategic choice catalyzed the emergence of the Cardiff Market as an exemplar of adaptable potential. Its evolution amalgamates antiquity and novelty, each stage of amalgamation stimulating innovation and unforeseeable outcomes. This confluence engenders a creative heterogeneity within the market and its surroundings, evoking the palpable interplay of historical and modern elements. This aligns with the premise posited by Wood and Dovey of a multi-form mix engendering a rich urban fabric [9].

The amalgamation of diversity within Cardiff Market resonates with Jacobs' conception, amalgamating a gamut of uses and building ages, manifesting in diverse content. In an environment like Cardiff Market, characterized by open accessibility and diverse clientele, this diversity engenders coexistence rather than discord. The perceived "chaos" therein does not precipitate societal tensions or challenge the argument against over-determination. Instead, it showcases a harmonious confluence of diverse elements, exemplifying a model of urban coexistence and growth.

4 Conclusion

This essay contends that Sennett's critique of "over-determination" can breathe vitality into urban environments[9]. In the contemporary era, propelled by global capitalism, a substantial portion of cities is undergoing economic commodification. Despite the facade of orderliness and harmony projected by such urban spaces, underlying development challenges loom large. While modernized architectural endeavors, including skyscrapers and new residential complexes, offer employment and lodging solutions for swiftly expanding populations, while also bolstering economic growth and the process of urbanization, these models of urban development suffer from excessive restriction and specialization. They proffer narrowly tailored solutions to discrete urban issues, consequently constraining the multifaceted potential of urban spaces and rendering them vulnerable to entrenchment.

The ultimate aspiration of urban planning resides in cultivating cities capable of adapting to transformations spanning decades if not centuries. Any urban undertaking must be grounded in the pursuit of a sustainable society, and in this context, embracing a certain degree of disorderly planning can facilitate such an outcome. The unbounded decisions evident in the development

of Cardiff Market, for instance, have yielded expanses characterized by untapped potential, an indistinct and disorderly terrain ripe with prospects. This open-ended space can accommodate unforeseen serendipities, yielding a rich array of outcomes in the process. The intrinsic values emerging from Cardiff Market's organic evolution possess a greater capacity for future adaptability and resilience compared to the predefined values tethered to new skyscrapers. This approach may also mitigate the inevitable social conflicts arising from the fusion of diverse urban constituents.

For the onward advancement of the Cardiff Market, it is imperative to perpetuate the existing developmental strengths. Preserving the distinctive character engendered by historical accretion, while concurrently fostering novel innovative attributes through a development process that resists excessive prescription, is paramount. An effective urban planning strategy should harmonize these two dynamics, culminating in an adaptable trajectory aligned with sustainable future growth.

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