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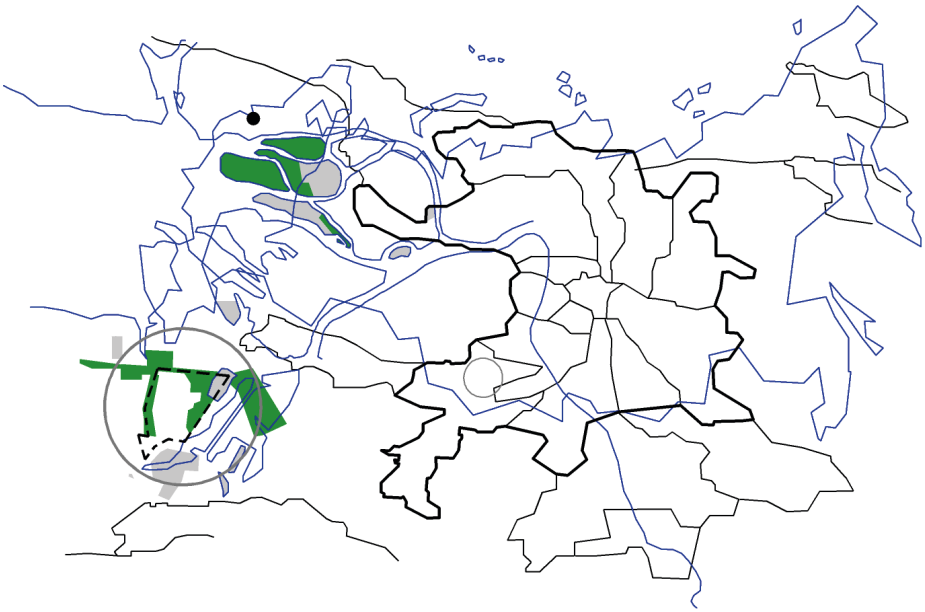
Thomas Borén

Meeting-Places of Transformation

Urban Identity, Spatial Representations and Local Politics in Post-Soviet St Petersburg



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Thomas Borén

MEETING-PLACES OF TRANSFORMATION

Urban Identity, Spatial Representations and Local Politics in Post-Soviet St Petersburg

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Frontcover Picture: Russia and Sankt-Petersburg, spaces of transformation. Digital Collage of Maps © Thomas Borén 2005

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To my parents Karin and late Linnar Borén

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List of Abbreviations

ASSR	Avtonomnaia Sovetskaia Sotsialisticheskaia Respublika (*Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic*)
GAI	Gosudarstvennaia avtomobil'naia inspektsiia (*State Automobile Inspectorate*)
Glavlit	Glavnoe upravlenie po okhrane gosudarstvennykh tain v pechati (*Main Administration for Safeguarding State Secrets in the Press*) originally: Glavnoe upravlenie po delam literatury i izdatel'stv (*Main Administration for Literary and Publishing Affairs*)
GUGK	Glavnoe upravlenie geodezii i kartografii (*Central Board of Geodesy and Cartography*)
KGB	Komitet gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti (*The Committee of State Security*)
FSB	Federal'naia sluzhba bezopasnosti (*The Federal Security Service*)
NKVD	Narodnyi komissariat vnutrennykh del (*Peoples Commissariat for Internal Affairs*).
RUVD	Raionnoe upravlenie vnutrennykh del (*District Board of Internal Affairs*)
KPSS	Kommunisticheskaia Partiia Sovetskogo Soiuza (*Communist Party of the Soviet Union, CPSU*)
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Soiuz Sovetskikh Sotsialisticheskikh Respublik, SSSR)

Note on Transliteration and Russian words

Concerning transliteration I have followed the system used by Princeton University Library throughout the text. There are, however, a few exceptions: the letters Ё, Й, Ц, Э, Ю and Я are transliterated E, I, Ts, E, Iu and Ia without “diacritic marks”. Personal names that have established English translations are not transliterated, for example Yeltsin (and not El’tsin). The last exception to the Princeton system concerns the references in which I have strictly kept to the transcription of the names, titles etc. used by the authors.

Since a couple of years the transliteration of place names is standard cartographic procedure on international maps and therefore Sankt-Peterburg, and not Saint-Petersburg, St. Petersburg or St Petersburg, Petergof and not Peterhof, and so on in this text. Toponyms, apart from names of the countries or seas (Soviet Union, and not Sovetskii Soiuz; Russia, and not Rossiia; Gulf of Finland, and not Finskii zalif), are thus transliterated throughout the text, even if an English name exists. Exceptions, however, do exist. For ease of reading, certain details in names are translated when deamed relevant, such as highway instead of *shosse*, street instead of *ulitsa*.

“Soviet”, with a capital “S” is used when the word is an adjective relating to the proper noun of the country (e.g. Soviet authorities), but when the same word is used with a lower case “s”, it denotes the political units (councils) that governed the different territorial levels throughout the Soviet Union. Raion is another case in point. The word is in many texts treated as an English word, and is so also here. In general, however, Russian words are otherwise transliterated into the form (singular, plural, the accusative, the dative, etc.) they have in the Russian context.

Preface and Acknowledgements

The main part of this work was presented in December 2003 as a seminar manuscript. It was then called *Urban Life and Landscape in Russia in the Aftermath of Modernity: Ligovo Essays of St Petersburg*, which has been the working title of the present text. In April 2005 I defended the manuscript as a doctoral thesis at the Department of Human Geography, Stockholm University, and it was made available in print in one of the department series (Meddelanden No. 133, 2005) under its present title. The text at hand now is the same as in the theses – only marginal changes and language corrections has been made.

Acknowledgements: First of all, many thanks to my supervisors – Bo Lenntorp, who guided me through the final stages, and Karl-Olov Arnstberg, who got me started and followed my work for a long time. Many thanks also to Thomas Lundén as assisting supervisor. All of you have been very important to me and to this work.

This book started in the context of the research project "Life-forms in the Suburbs of Large Cities in the Baltic Sea Region" carried out by the Swans research group and financed by The Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies (Östersjöstiftelsen). The project was based at Södertörn University College and led by Karl-Olov Arnstberg. Thanks also to my Swan-companions: Ulla Berglund, Siv Ehn, Bettina Lissner, Eleonora Narvselius, Erik Olsson and Juan Velasquez.

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When the Swans-project ended I returned to Stockholm University and the Department of Human Geography, where I received additional funding for finishing my work from the Faculty of Social Sciences. The two major financiers are hereby greatly acknowledged, as are Lillemor och Hans W:son Ahlmanns fond för geografisk forskning, Stiftelsen Carl Mannerfelts Fond, and Axel Lagrelius fond för geografisk forskning for complementary financing. The grants from the Swedish Institute which helped to finance the fieldwork are also greatly acknowledged.

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Apart from the scientific support from supervisors and colleagues at both Stockholm University and Södertörn University College, apart from the material support from the financiers, apart from the help and moral support from family and friends in Sweden and Russia, last but not least I wish to acknowledge the spiritual support from God. Thanks.

Thomas Borén

1 Modelling time-space – urban meeting-places

Dunk, dunk, dunk, dunk. The sound of the pounding knife is rhythmic, steady and secure. Cabbage is chopped to salad. Elena Alekseevna sits on a small stool in the middle of the kitchen floor with a sack on one side and a number of cabbage heads on the other. On the floor in front of her is a cracked wooden bowl and she works with a mezzaluna, the blade of which fits the curvature of the bowl. Outside the window newly fallen snow has adorned Ligovo, one of Sankt-Peterburg's worn outer high-rise districts, in a beautiful winter apparel. Elena has taken in the cabbages from the small glassed-in balcony on the west side of the apartment block which is more usually used as the prolonged pantry of the flat. The cold outside seems to have come as a surprise despite it already being mid-November, and the balcony is now too cold and some of the cabbages have frozen. Elena Alekseevna peels off the outer leaves that have been spoiled by the cold and then inspects the colour and consistency of the remaining part. If it is green and soft the cabbage is cut in two and the stem removed. The two halves are chopped up, whereas the stem and the damaged outer leaves are put aside to be composted at the dacha. The cabbage heads that are white and hard are put back into the sack for later use. She talks uninterruptedly while working.

I watch astonished. A couple of days have passed since I moved in with Elena Alekseevna and her family, and the sense of un-substantiality has started to pass. I sit on a stool at the kitchen table with my back turned to the wall. The task of chopping the cabbages into fine shreds looks like hard work. I ask if I may help but the offer is rejected. These everyday kitchen practicalities in Ligovo seemed a world removed from those played out in my own Stockholm kitchenette. Someone who grew up under similar circumstances in the same country or region would probably already have a relatively accurate picture of what was taking place behind the closed doors of people otherwise strange to him or her. They would largely share the same lifeworld and, with some reflection, would be reasonably aware of

what was going on in other people's everyday lives. Although the specific life forms may vary, people would be aware of the general structures of the lifeworld. The place, in this case Ligovo, or Uritsk which is the Soviet name, is one part of the general lifeworld structure of the people living here. They all encounter the same physical environment, and all would have some kind of relation to the high-rise buildings and the large-scale urban landscape that radiates out from the historical centre of Sankt-Peterburg. They would know how the city works, would follow its rhythms and all be included in the world of thoughts that encompasses it. There is a practical understanding of the city, and on a daily basis the urbanites handle the claims and opportunities of their lifeworld, both in relation to that very lifeworld, and also in relation to the systems that act in a given city space. However, the situation is almost the opposite for an outside researcher. A premise for this kind of research is that life in other places is different, and it was with great interest that I sat down at the kitchen table when I heard the pounding and saw that Elena was busy doing something that I did not immediately understand.

It was clear that Elena Alekseevna had sorted and chopped cabbage many times before. Careful use of the resources at hand in order to have food on the table was self-evident to her, as self-evident as the return of all that was not edible to the soil, nothing should be wasted. What was not self-evident to Elena Alekseevna, however, was that there would always actually be something to eat. Indeed, hunger was no abstract condition, as a teenager she had herself experienced the famine in Leningrad during the blockade in the early 1940s. During the winter of 1941–42, it was January, her younger brother had starved and frozen to death and his body had lain for one month in a room of the flat waiting for removal and burial. Hunger also existed in the stories she related about her two sisters whom she had never met; sisters who had died in infancy during the hard years following the revolution.

For someone who has at one time experienced starvation, food is rarely if ever taken for granted, even to the extent that one might neglect one's family. Elena Alekseevna relates a story about something edible that she had to, but did not want to share, and her pain, the remembrance of hunger – the panicked and drained desperation – etched into her face like *The Cry*

of Munch, silent and deafening at the same time. During the war, moreover, people's lives were not only threatened by hunger, cold and the detonating shells of the attacking forces, but also by a total collapse of Soviet society. The disintegration of the system had been so immanent that the memories of what had taken place still exist – and are cared for – as a formative element in the lifeworlds today, over 60 years later.

In a discussion of lifeworlds it would be easy to stop at one or a couple of aspects of the concept, and in the following the focus is first and foremost on the spatial system of relevances of the lifeworld. At the same time, however, it is important to remember that the concept aims to understand a type of a whole. It is the whole that consist of the collected experience that all persons have, and it is also directed forwards in time as expectations, plans and goals for action. The sum total of the lived experiences in this very now makes up the lifeworld of an individual. This sum total thus includes the memories, knowledges and practices that one carries along in life, as well as ideas about the future, both concrete personal goals, as well as the overarching views that exist in society at large pertaining to the prospects and vistas to come.

The things that are found in the surroundings of one's existence also constitute a part of the social world, and partake in the forming of lifeworlds. One ages not only together with other people with whom one shares the lived experience, but also with the material world that encompasses the self. And just as communication between people may vary from the smallest of gestures and briefest of utterances from strangers, to deep exchanges with family, friends, neighbours and colleagues with whom one shares space for larger parts of the day and for long periods of time, the contact with the things one shares space with, and which are within the reach of one's consciousness, may vary. Certain things are more present than others and may be found within the physical distance needed to have a direct, tactile contact with them. A large part of the social system within which the things are arranged, is constructed to regulate this very direct and tactile contact. To mention but one example, there was a very obvious lack of tactile contact with food during the famine in Leningrad.

The social system that regulates access and contact to things functions in a different way than the practice-oriented and moral and emotionally

based regime that orders experiences in the lifeworld. At the most general of levels, the system is all about power and money that are formed around norms. Morals and emotions constitute the base of the system, but in contrast to the feelings and values of the lifeworld, these have evolved in direct relation to the power over, and the organisation of, a space that widely transgresses in size, and in technical and social complexity the space that people via their lifeworlds are in direct contact with and which they form and are formed by. The space of the lifeworld and the space of the system are not different or discrete spaces in the physical environment. Rather, the space where both lifeworld and system take place is created as a composite arising from the intermingling and over-layering of the system and the lifeworld into each other. Space, viewed in this way, is essentially a meeting-place of lifeworld and systemic forces.

These meeting-places are, in the final analysis, about survival, as the example of food provisioning in the city has shown. In most cases, however, space is taken for granted and is not reflected upon on a daily basis by the general public. We practice our everyday spatialities on a routine basis, and, for as long as everything functions as usual, the place where we live and it's functioning does not occupy the front regions of the mind. Consequently, if it is of more or less decisive importance for the general welfare of people that these places work, a geographically interesting task is to problemize them, and I think of them exactly as meeting-places defined in time and space by a series of cultural, social and physical necessities and opportunities. In this chapter I outline a scale-sensitive model for how this may be understood. In the following chapters I apply the model in empirical descriptions and analyses of some specific aspects on these meeting-places.

The aim of this study is to understand how meeting-places are constructed and, in the light of this construction, to understand the transformation from the Soviet times to today. The purpose of the study is hence twofold: firstly to develop a model for understanding spatial change and the construction of space as a meeting-place, and secondly, to employ this model to show an otherwise little-known picture of urban Russia and the outer high-rise districts in Sankt-Peterburg and their transformation from Soviet times to the present day.

In connection with these theoretical and empirical objectives, I pursue a methodologically aimed thesis of logic, namely that the model is a tool that makes the worldview of time-geography and the epistemology of the landscape of courses applicable to concrete research. The model, I argue, is situated in-between geographic theory and the chosen object of research, and from it research questions which are hence both theoretically and empirically grounded may be constructed. These research questions may include heuristic and explorative searches, as well as concretely formulated questions. By no means is this the only way to bring theory and empirical material close to each other, but it is one way to make the idea of the landscape of courses researchable without losing track of this idea's ontological foundations and principles.

Empirically this is carried out by focusing on meeting-places, in the context of this study on Ligovo, an outer city district in Sankt-Peterburg, to illustrate the train of thoughts presented. To a large extent the study builds on spatial narratives, and the period of analysis approximately spans the years between 1970 and 2000. Fieldwork in the form of participant observation was carried over a 16 month period during 1998 to 2000, 14 months of which were spent in Ligovo. I have worked abductively and hence tried to interweave and synthesise theory and empirical material in the model discussed below. In terms of both the objective and the research approach I have embraced a desire to be "empirical" for the reason that the existing knowledge concerning formerly Soviet and current Russian everyday places is limited. I thus hope to fill in a few of the blanks on the Western map of the Russia that developed during the Soviet era. I proceed from a view on places and landscapes that derives from the time-geographical perspective and complement this with a spatialised discussion on Jürgen Habermas' lifeworld and system.

1.1 Point of departure – landscapes of courses

Meeting-places. Life and landscape. Concepts intertwined in each other. My own view of landscape originates in the general worldview of time-geography, and more specifically in the idea of *förloppslandskap*, the land-

scapes of courses (Hägerstrand 1993).[1] This perspective views the world as being in constant motion and flux and focuses on the dynamic interface between time, space, humans and things (nature, material artefacts). It further views the world as loaded with human intentions expressed in the form of projects, and with energy from the sun, as well as with the dynamic aspects of a general ecology. It is constructed to understand the totality and multi-dimensionality of the geographical object of study – the earth as the home of mankind.

The landscape of courses hereby concurs with the core of the geographic tradition in which the principle of nearness – rather than the principle of likeness – is applied, and it thus proceeds from ideas of co-existences of differences, and how these are packed and jostle with each other in time-space. In this view time-space is essentially a meeting-place, and the study of this may be called a *gefügekunde*, or the logic of how things are put together. This logic would try to explain and understand how all that is present in a given scenery keeps together, and how the processes of time-space proceed in collaboration, competition, or independently of each other, or how they may be pushed aside (Hägerstrand 1985a). In such a scenery it is not only the material existents – corpuscles – that take place, but also ideas, intentions, plans, perceptions, wishes, knowledges, narratives, relations and other socially and immaterially conditioned occurrences are seen as part of the totality, and from which the physical landscape is subsequently materialised or demolished. All that is present is of interest in creating the sought for contextual synthesis, and the

> only totality that fulfils the condition of the presence of all components, but still is confined, is a piece of a populated landscape. With landscape is meant not only that which is visible in the surroundings, but *all that is present within the defined border, inclu-*

1 Landscapes of flows would be an alternative translation. However, Hägerstrand often found and used words with a special flavour, although more ordinary words well could have about the same meaning. Therefore I have translated *förlopp* to courses and not to flows. Moreover, the word flow would in most instances be translated to Swedish as *flöde* and not *förlopp*. For reviews and discussions of time-geography, see Hägerstrand 1985b, 1991, Asplund 1983, Carlestam & Sollbe 1991, Åquist 1992, Gren 1994, Lenntorp 1998, Borén 1999.

> *sive of that which moves in and out of the border during the chosen time-period.* (Hägerstrand 1993:26, *original emphasis, my translation*)

It is about "blocks of reality without gaps", and it is only in the next stage that it becomes interesting to specify and organise the material on the basis of the research questions one is interested in. With regard to this, Bo Lenntorp (1998) writes that geography may be seen as a "logic of excerption" (*excerperingslära*) in which the epistemologically important idea is not to sew together the ideas of different schools of thought, but to excerpt or "pick out" the relevant parts of such a block for detailed examination, without misrepresenting the geographic perspective of the totality of reality. To understand how the world is put together in the first place, it is thus the finetuned excerpts that are important. The point of departure is not to add detail to detail from "below", but rather to divide the totality from "above", to understand how

> [t]he configurations of nature and society compete about place in a defined budget of space, time and energy. Hereby cause and effect is not only a question of before-and-after as in a laboratory, but also of the practicabilities of the budget, due to the surroundings' resistance or willingness to be traversable. Without a notion of the landscape of courses as a budget frame, it is not possible to decide what is pushed aside as an effect of something new penetrating, or what is expanding because something formerly unresisting withdraws. *The study of the landscape of courses becomes a question of how to observe and interpret the physical "wielding of power" of different phenomena in relation to each other.* (Hägerstrand 1993:27, *original emphasis, my translation*)

One of the keys to understanding spatial change is thus to be found in the nature and qualities of the surroundings, and they should therefore feature prominently in any theory or model that tries to understand this change.

1.2 Introducing a model for spatial change

As I have pointed out above, one of the keys to understanding time-spatial change resides in the character of the surroundings. To the extent that everything in a landscape of courses is constantly in motion, these surroundings function as media that are themselves also in motion and continuous transformation. One of these agile media, or surroundings, that I want to focus on is the "social", in a broad meaning of the term. While this causes me to depart slightly from the corporeally addressed corpus callosum of time-geography, I do retain a focus on its intention to consider the time-spatial configurations of co-existences. Rather I look at this from another direction, from the immaterial world to the material.[2]

The social functions as a medium for ideas, practices and knowledge, and is thereby also a medium – to a greater or lesser extent – for order. I divide the social as medium into four parts; *language*, *power*, *money* (Habermas 1984, 1987a) and what I conceptualise as *serious enthusiasm*. However, before I account for the details in this constructed order (and the concepts we as researchers use to understand this are sometimes part of the construction of that very same order), it should be made clear that time-geography needs to be complemented with both a methodology and a method that are adjusted to the study of this medium. Sometimes that which has been divided from above, must be seen from with-in.

To do this, I proceed from a time-spatial model of power-forces in and between what I call *total* action-space, *real* action-space and the *actual* action-space. These action-spaces, which are concerned with different levels of scale, are formed in relation to space, time, lifeworld and system, and the general ideas that are prevalent in society at a certain time, as well as

2 Time-geography is open to these kinds of theoretical experiments, as shown in the studies that combine it with other theories, see Kersti Nordell (2002) discussing time-geography and Schütz, Jennie Bäckman (2001) discussing Tönnies, my own attempts with regards to the lifeworlds and system (1999), Åquist discussing Giddens (1992). Anthony Giddens has used it in his works and structuration theory was influenced by it. Also, Nigel Thrift (1996) refers to it and places some of Hägerstrand's ideas in line with the thinking of Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Merleau-Ponty, Bourdieu, de Certeau and Shotter. The "list" of works could probably be made longer; what the referred examples indicate is that time-geography is open to use in a broader context, may be aligned with mainstream social theory, and is adaptable to research problems of various kinds.

by the *course-relations* which mainly originate in the fact that people are active creatures engaged in projects (Figure 1.1). Apart from these elements, the model features an important additional aspect, i.e. the pertinence of (today's perception of) the history of science for the understanding of the world. (See also Borén 1999.)

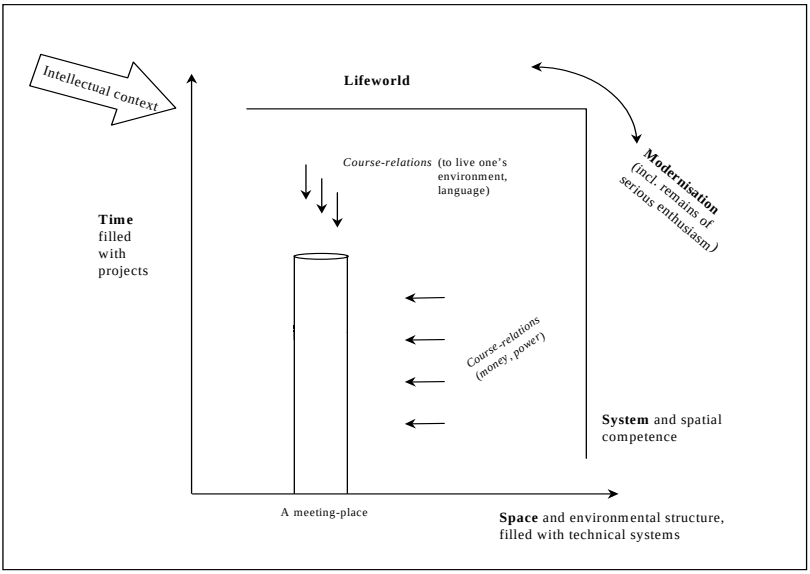

Figure 1.1 Model of scale-sensitive space construction

The model is general and almost anything may be positioned at its centre, i.e. be placed in relation to the components of the model to understand the object of study in a geographic time-spatial context. In this case, and according to the purpose of the study, a part of the city of Sankt-Peterburg is positioned at the centre. *The purpose of the model then becomes to show, in a scale-sensitive way (i.e. from the nearness in everyday life to time-space-enclosing factors) the components of and the dynamics in the construction of space* – or expressed in a more time-geographic way *to show how a block of the landscape of courses appears in a methodologically applicable form*. This is the overarching thesis of this work.

It should be noted that in this thesis I mainly treat the *societal* budgeting of time-space and, further, that the ecological time-spatial budgeting that takes place between man, plants and animals is, if treated at all, simply regarded as a definite limit to what the societal budgeting is capable of. The main difference between the different types of budgeting is that ecological budgeting is not coloured by ideological standpoints. As soon as it is, it becomes by definition part of the societal budgeting.

Concerning the components of the model, space is one of them. In the model, space is regarded as "absolute" until lifeworld and system are included. When lifeworld and system are included space becomes relational, but still retains many of its absolute traits.[3] These traits of space as absolute constitute the environmental structure, which in its turn consists of nature and technical support systems, i.e. technology and infrastructure of various kinds. These figure as fundaments to the different action-spaces I will describe. If we turn to relational space, I will call this "action-space" since it is filled with projects and practices of the lived environment, spatial competencies and course-relations, all of which evolve over time. But "action-space" as an analytical concept can hardly be said to suffice for the purpose of this research. To be scale-sensitive to a world that ranges from the everyday projects of people, to space-overarching historical developments, time-space must be divided further, and I find the division of action-space into the three above mentioned levels useful for this purpose.

Time and projects are further components of the model. Time is regarded as absolute, or definite, and filled up with projects.[4] Projects are here treated in the time-geographical meaning where they are regarded as future oriented "goals for action". No specific differentiation is made between unreflected routine behaviours, spontaneous or impulsive actions, planned actions, or whether the project contains one or several people. Neither are projects differentiated according to their relation to common

3 This move from an absolute conception of space to a relational conception also means that time-geography becomes sensible to epistemological critique, a trait it would not have otherwise (at least not explicitly, as its intention is to move beyond the political and provide a politically neutral frame of mind, or worldview).

4 This does not rule out that the *perception* of time may vary among people, or due to circumstances (see Lundén 2002:26). In this model such aspects are considered as a part of lifeworlds.

norms and values, or to other interests. Two ideas require specific mention here. Firstly, that projects are often enfolded in other projects, and secondly that an action aimed at a certain goal often gives rise to unexpected side-effects. Projects could be concisely summarised as "cultural" process and is a general concept for human action. I leave it at this for the time being but in the following chapters I discuss at length both "culture" and "action" in terms of the acting subject as competent and wide-awake and examine this in terms of signifying systems and (everyday) practices.

In the model, the concept of course-relation fulfils an important role. In the landscape of courses, the determination of the *where* and *when* of that which exists is dependent on its surroundings, i.e. a course, existent or project is dependent on all the other things and projects that exist in its time-spatial surroundings, and therefore it must of necessity have some kind of force balancing mutual relation to them. This relation I call course-relation, and it is the relation between courses, and between courses and existents and projects that are intended. In interplay with each other, the course-relations determine the position of a particular course, existent or project. If these relations did not exist, a particular course, existent or project would diffuse forwards in time to cover all in time-space. Apart from the pressure that the surroundings exert on a course, existent or project, it may have internal, centripetal forces that keep it together, concentrating it from within. In the model the course-relations are illustrated with arrows, and as is shown these stem from the two lines illustrating lifeworld and system. The course-relations, it must be clear, exert a transforming force on that which they are directed towards.

An additional factor in the model is the thick arrow in the upper left corner. The arrow symbolises the intellectual context, i.e. the historical context of thought in which we as researchers understand the problems and material at hand. This course-relation relates to a context that does not necessarily affect, at least not directly, the spaces under study, although it surely affects the manner in which these are understood. It is included in the model to show that our understandings (as expressed in this model, and further discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, and as "shown" empirically in Chapters 4–7) are not detached from the intellectual and social context in which they develop. A note on this is that the intellectual context is dynamic and