

THE MOBILE CITY

A CONFERENCE ON LOCATIVE MEDIA, URBAN CULTURE AND IDENTITY

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www.themobilecity.nl

‘The relationships and affairs of the typical metropolitan are usually so varied and complex that without the strictest punctuality in promises and services the whole structure would break down into an inextricable chaos. Above all, this necessity is brought about by the aggregation of so many people with such differentiated interest, who must integrate their relation and activities into a highly complex organism.’

Georg Simmel, *The Metropolis and Mental Life*, 1903

INTRODUCTION

Some call it the ‘meta-city’, others the ‘network city’, the ‘media city’, the ‘software sorted city’ or the ‘mediapolis’. What all these catchwords have in common is a description of the 21st century city as a double entity. The physical, geographical city with its piazza’s, its neighborhoods and highway interchanges is overlaid with the ‘Hertzian space’ of electronic communication-, information- and observation-networks of GSM, GPS, CCTV, UMTS, WIFI, RFID, ETC. Concurrently, the domain of digital space is increasingly becoming physical, now that RFID-chips turn objects into ‘spimes’ and ‘blogjects’, creating an “internet of things”.

These networks and media are not merely tools, used by urbanites for more efficient, safe, convenient, or exclusive lifestyles. Their proliferation might change our ideas of time, space, identity, belonging, solidarity and citizenship; they will have an effect on the broader issue of ‘urban culture’ and the city itself. In fact, it seems no longer possible to talk about the city without taking these developments into account; it is no longer useful or even possible to separate the domains of ‘the real’ physical world of glass, steel, and concrete on the one hand, and ‘the virtual’ world of digital bits, data, and information on the other.

Urban space has thus become ‘hybrid space’, ‘a conceptual space created by the merging of borders between physical and digital spaces’ (De Souza e Silva 2006). However, it is important to note with De Souza e Silva that these hybrid spaces are not constructed by technology, rather, ‘It is built by the connection of mobility and

communication and materialized by social networks developed simultaneously in physical and digital spaces.' (De Souza e Silva 2006).

MAIN QUESTIONS OF THIS CONFERENCE

Locative and mobile media can be theorized as the interface between the digital domain and the city. They bring the digital world into the real world. At the same time they bring real world spatial experiences directly into digital domain and thus it is at this interfacing moment that hybrid spaces emerge. This conference aims to address a number of questions related to this emerging 'urban interface culture'. From a theoretical point of view, what are useful conceptualizations for talking about the blurring of the physical and the virtual? Are locative media merely an additional layer over the existing city? Or do we need different perspectives? From a critical point of view, what could the emergence of locative and mobile media mean for urban culture? Does the way these media address their users and the maps, practices and geographies they produce lead to transformations in the actual city, its urban culture, ideas about citizenship and the formation of identity? And third from a practical point of view, what does this blurring mean for professionals who have traditionally mainly focused on shaping our physical surroundings, such as architects, product- and landscape designers, and artists? Likewise, what does this mean for the profession of those who are working in the field of new media design and development, who have traditionally designed 'for the screen' only? And what does this mean for the academic field of geographers, new media studies and the philosophy of technology and identity?

LOCATIVE MEDIA

The media and networks that we referred to above are sometimes called locative media. In the edition of the Leonardo Electronic Almanac on locative media, Julian Bleecker defines locative media as follows:

"Locative media that is of most immediate concerns is that made by those who create experiences that take into account the geographic locale of interest, typically by elevating that geographic locale beyond its instrumentalized status as a 'latitude longitude coordinated point on earth' to the level of existential, inhabited, experienced and lived place. These locative media experiences may delve "into" the historical surface of a space to reveal past events or stories (whether fictional, confessional or standing on consensus as factual). Locative media experiences may also cross space, connecting experiences across short or long geographic,

experiential, or temporal distances. At its core, locative media is about creating a kind of geospatial experience whose aesthetics can be said to rely upon a range of characteristics ranging from the quotidian to the weighty semantics of lived experience, all latent within the ground upon which we traverse.”

From this definition it is hard to make a true division between locative media and the broader category of mobile media. As different researchers (Bull, Ito) have pointed out, mobile media such as the mobile phone or the personal stereo are often used in a way described by Bleecker: creating or appropriating a geospatial experience.

More abstractly, Marc Tuterts and Kazys Varnelis see two categories of locative media. One is annotative – these are media technologies that allow its users to virtually tag (and consequently filter) the real world. The second is phenomenological – tracing the action of a subject in the world. Another way to categorize these new media is between media that take an actual spatial context of a communicative practice as its point of departure and media that provide a virtual but spatially organized interface related to an actual geography for communicative and informational practices. Combining these different points of view, we can differentiate between (at least) six ways in which locative and mobile media can transform our notions of urban culture.

- The use of spatially organized interfaces to information databases, for instance Google Earth-mash ups or TomTom devices.
- The annotation of geographic places (and the attribution, construction and contestation of maps, meaning, and territories)
- The mapping or tracing of objects and persons and the use of locative media as tools for micro-coordination such as realtime and realspace social networking.
- The use of locative media as filtering devices: either selecting relevant places from the perspective of the subject. Or the other way around: systems that grant or refusing access to certain places.
- The use of locative media as a ‘space making devices’, altering the experience of a certain space through its use. For instance mobile phones or personal stereo’s.
- The issue of address: framing space and/or subjects in a certain way, providing us with ontologic metaphors, starting to understand our subjectivities in other ways.

URBAN CULTURE AND IDENTITY

Our interest in this conference is made up of the implications of the above for the concepts of urban culture and identity. With urban culture we mean the philosophical idea of the city as an 'organization of differences'. Starting with the Chicago and German School, urbanists have pointed out that the main characteristic of the modern city is that it brings together diverse groups of people with diverse backgrounds, identities, and goals. Urban culture can be understood as the interface – both geographically and culturally - that makes the city liveable, that confronts these differences and/or reconciles these differences into a whole. Two concepts are related to the idea of urban culture: 'dwelling' and 'public space'. 'Dwelling' is the process of 'making oneself at home', the process in which local structures are appropriated or exerted to strengthen one's (group) identity. The public sphere is the place and process of confrontation and exchange, of clashes, innovation, political organization and cultural development.

These concepts are also related to theories of identity formation. Identity can be conceptualized as a series of mediations: between I and me (self-self relation); between I and other people (self-others) and between I and the world (self-environment). Paul Ricoeur proposes that the narrative is the privileged form of mediation: we think of ourselves, other people, and the world around us in terms of stories (Ricoeur 1992). We adopt existing stories and/or create very personal new stories to "dwell in", while the public sphere can be seen as a sphere where one opens up to the possibilities for creating new stories that give meaning and a sense of direction to our lives. This dialectic can be equalled to what Ricoeur calls sedimentation and innovation.

Place, seen as meaningful location, is an important aspect of identity. Where we are (or are not) influences our personal sense of selfhood and our shared cultural identities. So is space, which we take as "a practised place" (De Certeau 1984: 117). The room we are able to carve out for ourselves in existing places in the city shapes the future direction of our lives, the possible story-lines we may follow.

The city has always been an important setting for modern identities. Identities are increasingly constructed, experienced and expressed within an urban setting. The statistical wisdom that nowadays over half of the world's population is living in cities is only one argument for that claim. Likewise, identities are increasingly technologically mediated. Much has been written about identities in virtual spaces: Harraway (1991) about the "Cyborg" as a new being not confined to traditional social categories; Sherry Turkle on the realness of virtual identities in "Life on the Screen" (1995); Gergen (2000) about the ever-present influence of technologies leading to "Saturated Selves"; Rheingold

on the formation and very real experience of “virtual communities” (..year).

What happens to identity experience and construction when medium-specific properties of locative media challenge ideas about singularity of spatial settings? For instance, what happens to traveller or migrant identities when her routes can be shared in realtime by family and friends? How far away are they actually from ‘home’? In this example, locative media may question the idea of the city as “the organization differences”, because such media may create a constant sense of “dwelling” in the well-known.

What happens to urban places when new mediated identities are performed in the city? One example is the possibility for actual face to face meetings as a result of ‘social proximity’ in locative media. Paradoxically, we see in this case that locative media can also function to create spaces for “meeting” with strangers.

BROADER THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A number of theories have started to conceptualize this ‘mobile urbanism’, ranging from the warning critical theories of ‘splintering urbanism’ to the empowering possibilities of ‘Smart Mobs’, the description of the ‘speeding up of urban culture’ and the interventions of digital situationism.

On the dystopian side, critics warn us that these new locative technologies are dividers, not uniters. In their interesting book *Splintering Urbanism*, Graham and Marvin take a look at infrastructure grids. In the modern city, they state, universal access to infrastructure networks was the ideal. These infrastructure networks integrated all citizens into the same technological system. However, new technologies in cooperation with neo-liberal economic policy have turned this idea around. Infrastructure networks such as highways are privatized and their uses are turned into services sold to calculating consumers rather than citizens. Technology can measure individual use of infrastructure networks on a pay-per-use base, and automatically give or refuse access to certain parts of the city. In its most extreme scenario the city stops to exist as a integrating geographical unit, but rather turns into a series of restricted islands. Differences are thus organized according to the algorithms of the software in

Other dystopian scenario’s include the rise of CCTV and other observation networks, that can restrict access to semi-public space or discipline or eliminate certain behaviour. Others again point out that the new personal communication networks recentre the individual in his own self-selected network that is accessible wherever he or she might be. Interaction or confrontation with strangers in public space will yield to interaction within communities of the like-minded in networks of parochial spaces

(both virtual and geographic). Both trends might erase ideas of common identities or redefine ideas of citizenship.

These scenario's are countered by more optimistic writings and technology pitches of both artists and silicon valley start-ups: new technologies unite, rather than divide. Each group can claim public space in their own way by adding their interpretation of the place to its virtual double. Locative Media thus enable confrontation of different groups in public space and provide heterotopic interpretations of the city. The smart-mob phenomenon enables communities to organize on the spot, or – when reputation systems become common - to connect strangers in public space. Thanks to the mobile phone, location technology and social networks, in the metacity nobody has to bowl alone. Digital Situationists use mobile technology for their interventions in public space. They criticize the middle class consumer culture and the annihilation of true public space in contemporary cities, but try to counter this with new technologies that turn these commercialized spaces back into spaces for confrontation, for storytelling or for bottom-up use.

To come back to Simmel, mobile and locative media might provide a new interface that integrates the many people with their differentiated interests into the highly complex organism of the 21st century city; This time it does not – as Simmel suggested - homogenize differences through a unifying clock time or bureaucratic formalism. There are however different scenario's of how this changing 'organization of differences' will play out: one of inclusion, and one of exclusion. In the optimistic scenario, locative media reconnect differences in a new networked urban culture and creates a new spatially networked public sphere, balancing new possibilities for 'dwelling' with opportunities for 'meeting'. In more negative views, it organizes differences by exclusion: it enables groups to distract themselves in their equally liquid and networked parochial spheres and focuses on dwelling rather than the public sphere.

At this conference, we would like to explore these issues from different angles. We would like to bring together perspectives from academia, the arts and technology to explore different discourses on locative media and urban culture. This way, we aim to give city professionals (urban planners, policy makers), academics, artists, students and others a brief insight in current discourse on the metacity and its 'mobile urbanism'.

Martijn de Waal & Michiel de Lange, conference organizers.