Moving beyond Hybridity

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The goal of this paper is to analyze the notion of a hybrid space, to explore the necessity of adopting this term as a characteristic of space, and to question whether it is time to move beyond its use. The term, hybrid, originating in biology, describes the offspring of two different species. For the past two decades, Hybridity has found a wide application within social sciences, including architecture. In general, Hybridity occurs when two separate entities come together to form a third. In the context of architecture, a hybrid space is one in which the advent of technology allows us to experience multiple spaces simultaneously.

We understand Hybridity to be a conceptual construct that is useful in explaining new phenomenon. This begs the question, what is the new phenomenon. In the case of space, it is the aforementioned advent of technology. This is not, however, the first time space has been expanded by technology. Throughout history, our ability to understand stand space has been extended by the advent of new technology. Perhaps, a hybrid space is not defined by technology after all.

The ultimate goal of this paper is to define the moment at which Hybridity ceases to be useful, assuming that such a moment even exists. Though it has been helpful in understand space in new ways, allowing new insights into space, for many spaces this term can reach the end of its usefulness. The moment at which this occurs is dependant on a few factors. The first is one of adoption. Once a hybrid space is commonplace, is it strictly necessary to consider it a hybrid any longer? The second factor is the polymorphism of hybrid spaces. The phrase hybrid space does not describe a single form of space. Instead, a hybrid space can be one of a plethora of spaces. Finally, the issues of category and identity may help define this moment. If Hybridity relies on categories and instances between categories, then this suggests that a change in perspective may destroy the category of the hybrid. Perspective is directly tied to the specific identity of the viewer and that viewer’s experiences.

Keywords: hybridity; technology; space; architecture; identity.
Defining hybrid

To understand hybrid space, we must first understand what a hybrid is. Unfortunately, hybrid is a term with a long history, and with a tendency to transform based on the discipline employing it. One can encounter the term within different disciplines, such as Biology, Anthropology, Sociology, Engineering, more recently, the Arts and, of course, Architecture.

The first discipline to use the term hybrid is biology (actually, agriculture). According to this discipline, a hybrid is the offspring of two different species. A hybrid can occur either through natural processes like the cross-pollination of plants, or it can occur through human intervention (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hybridity: June 2006; Clarke, 2005). Humans have intentionally crossed both plants and animals to create new more useful species. Essentially, a hybrid is a mix of two different species, and it can only be produced through mixing.

Historically, the term hybrid is co-opted to form a discourse of racial purity. During the late 18th century, hybrid is used to refer to humans of mixed racial backgrounds. Scientists of this era used anatomical measurements to prove that Caucasians were superior to all other races (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hybridity: June 2006; Clarke, 2005). Hybrids were viewed as a threat to the purity of the superior race (Ross, 2005). We see this unfortunate line of thinking in the extreme philosophy of the Nazis and Adolf Hitler. Here we see that the term hybrid still refers to a mixing, but in this case it is a derogatory term used with hegemonic ends. Hybrid no longer refers to the mixing of different species to create new ones. Instead, it refers to a mixing of categories, in this case, categories of humans, generally referred to as races.

In the second half 20th century, the term hybrid takes a turn. As a first step, through post-colonial discourse, hybrid loses its derogatory meaning. Instead, theorists refer to hybridity in an attempt to study the effects mixing has on culture and identity. If hybrid refers to an entity derived through mixing, as a term, hybridity refers to the mixing itself. Hybridity as a theory deals with categories and boundaries, and how these are undermined by mixing between races. Differentiation now supersedes categorization. The second step is to move passed genetic mixing and to apply hybridity to cultures as well. With this turn, the different is no longer viewed as something to be feared. Instead hybridity seeks to understand it. Hybridity is also not limited to the genetics of an individual, but to his cultural experience. Some theoreticians of hybridity go so far as to adopt an agenda of promoting racial tolerance. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hybridity: June 2006; Clarke, 2005; Ross, 2005) Here, the term hybrid retains its meaning of a mixed human, but it is no longer seen as something negative and it is not strictly based on genetic boundaries. It has come to include cultural mixing as well. In fact, many view the idea of a hybrid as a positive force in culture. We also see the emergence of the term hybridity, which can be taken to mean ‘mixing’, but tends to be used to describe the study of the effects of hybrids on culture. Hybridity is now seen as a way to expand, and even surpass, rigid boundaries.

The late 20th century has seen a second parallel use of the term hybrid, through the disciplines of Engineering and Science. Here, hybrid refers to a solution, which is built on two or more previous solutions to a problem. The goal is to mix previous solutions, keeping the benefits while avoiding the negatives. These solutions may only be considered hybrids for a limited time. Once they are fully understood and implemented they cease to be hybrids. Instead they may pass their traits on to future hybrids. Here we see the term hybrid moving back to a meaning similar to the one used by biology. The hybrid is still a mixture of two existing solutions (species), but in this case, the hybrid does not remain a hybrid for its entire life. The time an entity can remain a hybrid is finite. Although such solutions are called hybrids, in many ways, these solutions are akin to carefully breeding better versions of particular plants or animals.
Hybrid space

We see that the term hybrid has re-inherited a meaning similar to its original roots in biology. Digging deeper, we are reminded that the root of hybrid and hybridity is the Latin, ‘hybrida’. ‘Hybrida’ refers to the offspring of a wild boar and a tame sow. If a hybrid space is the mixing of two spaces, which is the boar and which is the sow?

What is a hybrid space? In their introduction to *Leonardo’s* special section on “Hybridity, Arts, Science, and Cultural Effects”, Yvonne Spielman and Jay David Bolter define a contact zone in which “different cultures connect, merge, intersect and eventually transform.” (Spielman and Bolter, 2006) For them, this contact zone is a third space, in which cultural interactions occur. They also refer to a third space created by digital technology, where the virtual meets the actual. For them, this space is a means by which technology creates a contact zone. (Spielman and Bolter, 2006) Here we find our first definition of a hybrid space. A hybrid space is a zone in which a mixing of cultures can occur.

As we have seen above, the term hybrid follows two tracks. The first, which we will call sociological hybridity, refers the mixing of races and cultures with the goal of enriched contexts. This track follows the definition we derive from Spielman and Bolter. The second, which we will call scientific hybridity, refers to the mixing of existing entities to produces new entities with enhanced properties. Here the goal is to solve a specific problem. We are not concerned with culture, but with technology. A hybrid space may fall within either or both of these categories.

Sociological hybrid space

A sociological hybrid space is a space that seeks to supersede the boundaries between different cultures. Some examples of such hybrid spaces are multi-faith chapels, universities, airports, McDonald’s, and other internationally located commercial chains, the United Nations building in New York, sites built to house the Olympic Games, and athletic arenas in general.

These spaces conform to sociological hybridity, not because they are born of other spaces in a material sense, but because they are the offspring of disparate spaces in a cultural sense. Here, material space is transformed by the identity of multiple cultural spaces. A sociologically hybrid space is a space that is a contact zone between cultures.

Scientific hybrid space

A scientific hybrid space is born through the catalytic interference of technology. In fact, scientific hybrid space is generated by a hybrid medium, the digital. This is a medium, which replicates and adopts modes of operations from a wide range of older mediums, creating hybrid tools. When coupled with space, information and communication technologies generate one of two types of hybrids. The first is a space, which is extended by a layer of information, such as augmented or mediated realities. The second is a space, which is a juncture of multiple spaces, real or virtual, experienced through communication technology.

Sociological and scientific hybrid spaces

It is also possible to have a hybrid space, which embodies both aspects of hybridity, one that is created through the union of material spaces and cultural spaces. This is a multilayered space. Multiple spaces, both real and virtual, are bridged through technology. These spaces, however, belong to multiple cultures, creating an enriched cultural context, in new and unpredicted ways. For instance, when three gamers meet in the online game, World of Warcraft, we can state that we have achieved scientific hybridity, the physical and virtual unite to form a third space. If one gamer is sitting in his bedroom in the United States, another in an internet café in Greece, and the third in a university lab in China, we also have sociological hybridity occurring.

Exploring hybrid space

Hybrid spaces are a concept that arose during the last decade. Generally when one speaks of hybrid
space, one speaks of a space that has technology embedded within it. Hybridity in space is synonymous with technological interference in space. Although hybrid spaces can be multicultural, most references to hybrid spaces refer to a space created by technology that brings two spaces together. This trend runs counter to definitions we have created above. Using the common definition, one type of hybrid occurs through virtual reality (VR) technology. The VR user exists in two spaces simultaneously, her immediate surroundings and those she experiences through her computer interface. The metaspace she experiences is a hybrid space. One can argue that a fully immersive VR experience allows the user to forget her immediate space. In this case, we do not have a hybrid space but the experience of a purely virtual space.

This counter example forces us to conclude that a hybrid space requires the user to have an experience based in multiple spaces. Of course it is possible to design virtual spaces so that use experiences multiple virtual spaces simultaneously. These too should be considered hybrid spaces. A better example of a hybrid space may be augmented reality. Here, the user experiences his immediate environment with an added layer of information. Both the immediate space and the information space can be experienced independent of each other, but the most meaningful experience, or at least the most informative one, occurs when both spaces are experienced simultaneously as a hybrid space. Another strategy for achieving this form of hybrid space uses communication technologies to allow users to experience each other’s location simultaneously. A video conference call is an example of such a hybrid space.

The hybrid spaces we have described follow a definition, which falls under our category of scientific hybridity. Our definition of hybridity includes what we call sociological hybridity. In our initial description of sociological hybridity we intentionally described it independent of technology. This does not mean that sociological hybridity can not occur through the mediation of technology. Many view the internet as a multicultural space that allows for a great amount of cross pollination. Since the global acceptance of the internet as a means of communication the speed at which cultural trends are influenced by other cultures has great increased. For instance, in “Hybridity, so What?” Jan Nederveen Pieterse describes Mandarin Pop as “a Cantonese and Pacific American combination of styles. One of its original inspirations is Hong Kong crooners doing Mandarin cover versions of Japanese popular ballads. The Japanese ballads were already a mixture of Japanese and American styles that featured, for instance, saxophone backgrounds” (Pieterse, 2001). This is a fourth generation hybrid which is only possible because of the ease and speed at which cultures can now experience each other through contemporary communications and information technologies. As multiculturalism influences pedagogy, we also see the examples of lessons unit that allow students from multiple countries to interact in the creation of projects through a variety of communication technologies.

As mentioned earlier all of these spaces have emerged in the last decade or so. Hybrid space is coined as a term to describe the transformation a space undergoes because of a marriage between space and technology. This marriage of space and technology is not new. Nor is it the product of the last decade. Let us start with a living room from the late 1950s. In this room we have two pieces of technology, the television and the telephone, that create the conditions of hybridity. The telephone is a communication technology that creates a real-time connection between two distant spaces. The television delivers virtual spaces to the living room. Why is living room not discussed as a hybrid space? This phenomenon is also found in the cinema. A film is a cultural object, encoded with subjective elements. The cinema is a space comprised of the audience’s seats and the projected film. This projection creates a hybrid space that bridges the physical space of the audience with the virtual space of the film. Dependent on the subject matter of the film and the specific audience, it also has the potential of being a sociological hybrid. This line of thinking extends even
further back in human history to the technology of theater. Here we still have the union of two spaces, the actual space inhabited by the audience, and to a degree, the actors, and the virtual space (the space of fantasy) created by the play-write and the actors. This space shares common elements with the previously analyzed spaces of the living room and the cinema. In all cases, the audience experiences two spaces simultaneously, their actual, physical space, and the space of fantasy created by a very old virtual technology. Although these spaces embody all the traits of hybrid space, it is interesting that they have never been seriously considered as hybrid spaces. It can be argued that these spaces fall short of hybridity because the lack an interactive or participatory element. Technologies of the last decade are characterized by the ability of the audience/user to participate in the outcome of an experience. In response to this criticism, we give the example of improvisational and participatory performances. In these cases, the audience is a part of a production. Such strategies were employed by the Dadaist at the turn of the century and date back to ancient Greek theater, in which the audience often participated in comedies.

So far, our working definition of a hybrid space is a space that is the bastard child of two or more categories of space. These categories may be cultural or technological in nature. Our most recent examples bring this definition into question. We either need to work through history and re-categorize all spaces that fit this definition as hybrid spaces, or we need to dig deeper and find that which distinguishes a hybrid space from other similar spaces.

**Distinguishing hybrid space**
The history of the hybrid may give us clues to help us find this distinguishing characteristic. As mentioned earlier, the first shift in hybridity views a hybrid as a diluting of purity. When applied to space, this would suggest that pure categories of space are superior to their hybrid offspring. If we adopt this characteristic, we have to assume that a hybrid space is a phenomenon in culture that we are not interested in. Although this assertion does not apply to scientific hybridity, which seeks to create a superior space through mixing, this assertion may well apply to sociological hybridity. As cultural norms are widely disseminated through hybrid spaces, unique cultural identities become less distinct. This form of hybridity is clearly seen as a threat by certain cultural and political leaders. For such leaders, as they fight to maintain control over the cultural directions of their populace, a hybrid space is seen as an evil. For example, the Chinese government imposes strict censorship over the data stream, by limiting which websites can be viewed within China and by reviewing e-mails that cross its boundaries. Clearly, the Chinese believe that hybrid spaces are a threat to their space identity. In order to preserve it, they are willing to openly discriminate against other forms of space. This is still not enough to distinguish the hybrid spaces of the last decade from the hybrid spaces from previous moments in history. Governments have performed this type of censorship to maintain clear categories of culture and space throughout history. For instance, the Berlin Wall was erected to delineate a clear separation between two cultural spaces.

This brings us to the concept of hybridity as it exists in the second half of the 20th century. Here the hybrid is no longer seen as a negative. Instead, it is a phenomenon that people seek to understand. For some, it takes on the positive attempt of reconciling the fragmented whole, by bridging the differences between categories. Hybridity is no longer about discrimination, but about differentiation. There is now an enthusiastic respect for a mosaic of the different. Applied to space, this suggests that a hybrid space is not related to technology. Instead, it suggests that a hybrid space falls under the category of the sociological hybrid. It is a space that intentionally seeks to bring together categories of cultural spaces. Such spaces seek to undermine the hegemony of specific groups, leading to a form of globalization which is about the crossing of boundaries. We return to the example of the Olympic village. This space is in fact a composite of two spaces, one for the athletes...
and one for the audience. The global villages created for Olympic athletes must be comfortable for a wide variety of cultures. They are also constructed so that competitors can form friendships and cultural links between each other. The space of the audience follows a similar philosophy. It is a space which tries architecturally to be culturally neutral, but which allows each culture to cheer for their country mates. In this manner, the previously neutral space now contains the culture of two or more countries. This definition of a hybrid does not give a distinguishing feature of hybrid spaces, but it also undermines the definition of a hybrid space as being one that is tied to technology.

Our last definition for a hybrid is the definition that arises in parallel to the previous one. This is the definition that comes from the sciences and gives us the idea of scientific hybridity. As discussed earlier, this definition suggests that hybridity is a way for creating new solutions to a problem based on previous solutions. Unlike the hybrid found in biology, this hybrid does not remain a hybrid indefinitely. Once understood and implemented, it is capable of producing a new generation of hybrids. This suggests that this entity loses its identity as a hybrid. As soon as it is capable of passing on its traits to the next generation of hybrid solutions, it ceases to be a hybrid itself. Often, whether a technology continues to be a hybrid or not depends on the choices made by scientists and engineers. This is not hybridity based on natural selection, but hybridity based on intervention. For space, this suggests that a hybrid space is a new form of space that addresses specific issues or problems, and that it is the offspring of pre-existing categories of spaces. This definition does imply that technology intervenes on space, but we are not limited to specific technologies, such as digital technologies. Green architecture is an example of this type of hybrid space. It weds traditional structured space with selected virtues of natural space/environment. This type of space embodies a variety of old and new technologies, but it is not strictly dependent on digital technologies. The current generation of green architecture is the resurrection of a line within architecture that had been previously abandoned. The architecture it is based on has its roots in early examples of human architecture. Just as green architecture is based on previous solutions, it can be assumed that the current generation of green architecture will spawn future generations of even greener architecture. In this manner, its time as a hybrid is finite. Yet again, we find that this definition of hybridity does not give us a unique trait to distinguish what are generally considered hybrid spaces from previous types of space.

Moving beyond hybridity
We reach the point, in which we have the concept of a hybrid space, but we are unable to distinguish it from a variety of other spaces, each of which can also be considered a hybrid space. Hybrid space is not something that can be uniquely identified. Instead the concept of the hybrid space is a polymorphic entity that can describe a wide variety of spaces.

A type of hybrid we have not referred to so far is the cyborg. A cyborg is a mixture between a biological and mechanical/electrical system. In “a Cyborg Manifesto”, Donna Haraway uses the metaphor of the cyborg to discuss the state of feminism. In it she suggests that traditional feminism relies on general categories to understand the position of women in society. She suggests that this strategy fails because each woman within a population is a cyborg. She is comprised of so many different identities, pieced together to form a whole, that a woman can no longer be categorized. Instead, each woman must be dealt with on an individual basis. The new category of cyborg is useless, because the term cyborg is polymorphic. Each cyborg is unique. (Haraway, 1991) This problem also exists for a hybrid. The category of hybrid suggests only that to understand a hybrid we must understand its parents. This presents two problems. The first is that each hybrid has a unique genesis. In order to understand it, we much look at each hybrid’s parents on a case by case basis. The category of a hybrid does not serve to understand an
instance of a hybrid. The category only offers a strategy by which to start to understand the instance. The second problem lies in the fact that understanding the part that lead to a hybrid is not enough. As Haraway argues, each woman must be understood on her own terms. The identities that may comprise a cyborg are so many, that general strategies can not be applied. (Haraway, 1991) This applies to hybrids as well. It is not enough to understand its genesis, one must also understand its history and its place within culture. This renders the category of hybrid nearly useless. To understand a thing, one must study the thing itself.

Normally this would be enough to abandon the use of the term, but its prevalence within literature suggests that there may be some uses to the idea of a hybrid space. As Marshall McLuhan reminds us, “the hybrid or the meeting of two media is a moment of truth and revelation from which a new form is born. For the parallel between two media holds us on the frontiers between forms that snap us out of the Narcissus-narcosis. The moment of meeting of media is a moment of freedom and release from the ordinary trance and numbness imposed by them on our senses.” (McLuhan, 1964) McLuhan suggests that the generation of a hybrid, in his case through media, in our case through space, is a moment that surpasses stagnation and offers something new with which to move forward. Somehow, we must reconcile the apparent uselessness of the hybrid category, and the power of the moment of genesis.

The category of the hybrid remains useful in two ways. The first lies in the discovery of new hybrid phenomenon. As just mentioned, the category of the hybrid, suggests that its genesis is important. When confronted with a new hybrid phenomenon, understanding its parents starts to give an idea of its nature. The second advantage of hybridity is as a strategy for creating new solutions. Given a problem, a hybrid solution based on well understood previous solutions is often the best way at maximizing advantages and minimizing disadvantages of previous solutions. Both these advantages apply to the term hybrid space. When confronted to emergent spaces, we can often begin to understand them by understanding their parents. When the need for a new type of space arises, we can design it using a hybrid strategy.

The problem lies in the fetishization of the hybrid concept. When we fetishize the hybrid, we create a condition of permanency and stagnation by tying the hybrid category to specific instances. As we have seen, the nature of the hybrid is temporary and shifting. For a variety of reasons, a hybrid instance can not remain a hybrid indefinitely. Time here is a finite element. If the concept of the hybrid is to remain useful, we must be willing to move beyond the hybrid within specific instances. We are left with a situation in which the concept of the hybrid is useful, but only if it is continuously applied to new instances.

In order to ensure the continued usefulness of the concept of hybridity, we must know when to abandon the label of hybrid within an instance. As already mentioned one criterion for moving past the hybrid is when it becomes the parent of the next generation of hybrids. A second criterion is that of the common place. Earlier we used the example of the living room as a hybrid space. The problem with the living room’s hybridity is that the living room is such a common space that we do not think of it as something different from the norm. A third criterion is one of experience. Certain hybrids are experienced by two generations. Older generations see the hybrid and immediately see its parents. They can only understand the hybrid through these parents and they rarely manage to become fully familiarized with the new situation. The younger generation only experiences the hybrid. Their world view is one in which the hybrid is the familiar. When a generation experiences a hybrid as the familiar, everyone else must learn to accept it as something other than a hybrid.

We offer these three moments as an initial set of tools by which hybridity can continue to function as a concept. Hybridity is an endless spiral, in which new hybrid instances emerge and old instances define new categories outside hybridity. This end-
less cycle occurs within time. Within time there are constantly instances of transition. Moving beyond is about taking advantage of these transitional opportunities. We must not allow hybrids to remain sterile. We must allow them to take their place within history and culture.

**References**


