SPATIALITY AND VIRTUALITY

"Perception Virtual Urban Environments"

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Abstract. This paper explores how the notions of SPATIALITY ‘public space’ can inform the debate over VIRTUALITY “electronic media”. It examines the metaphorical adoption of urban models to look at electronic sociality and suggests approaches: suburbanized telecities, communitarian visions and accounts that appeal to a renewed public sphere. However, instead of trying to shift these metaphors by contrasting them to a purported real world, the paper examines how they shape an electronic architecture. In this sense, the ‘real’ city is the indefinable complexity and folding of spaces-lying outside the visualizations offered of cyberspace.

1. The Real and the Virtual

When bricks become pixels, the tectonics of architecture becomes informational. When it comes to thinking about the city and information and communication networks, we need to address the question what is ‘urban’ about these networks at all? It is less the location of access points than interactional spaces created. These are often organized using an urban architecture. By examining accounts that look to the dislocation of the city, its overextension and disappearance. Following this are accounts that see a suburban mode of experience a telematic 'Cyberville'.

Opposing this, some point to electronic networks revitalizing communities. Then to address arguments for the transformation of the public sphere. Through these contrasting stances, we should explore a view linking these discontinuous visions into a labyrinthine view of the city, of different media and associated spatialities folding into one another. These metaphors of ‘electronic space’ organize the experience of electronic technologies into techno-spatial practices that embody particular conceptions of cyberspace. Do
the current imagined spatial ontologies, applied to software worlds, inhibit possibilities by mapping them into conventional understandings? Spatial metaphors make the low-level abstractions of machine code tangible, but may naturalize some configurations of cyberspace; thus images of (techno)frontiers may offer connotations of a mythical, individualistic libertarian past with a faith in progress, while (information) highways and their ilk bring the baggage of state intervention. And yet we cannot bypass spatial representations, because they are an idiom through which networks are experienced. The city is both object and metaphor in a reflexive system where the imagining of electronic space is vital to creating it.

2. Virtual Communities

If in the 1980s, virtual technologies had been linked to the breakdown in community and the destruction of urban form, in the Nineties they were seen as the saviour of community life. It did not matter whether the arguments were for or against the virtual technologies, it seemed no case could be made without referring both to the social consequences of the technologies and their impact on the public spaces of the city. This realization leads to the thought that the rise in virtual technologies had somehow become bound tightly with the decline in amenity of urban communal space. Both critics and advocates of telematics start from similar beginnings and both risk seeing technology determining the outcome. Recent urban history is told as a story of declining communal space and increasing atomization; the difference comes in a belief that this time technology offers a solution instead of causing further crises, that fiber optics can reconnect communities broken up by tarmac.

However, instead of this fragmented subject, adrift in oceans of information, there is a vision, or, as detractors would have it, a fantasy of recreating community. Communications not seen as a transmission of information, as globalised accounts tend to have it, but rather as a socially binding ritual.

The hope that the incredible powers of global computer networks can create new virtual communities, more useful and healthier than the old geographic ones, is thus misplaced. The net seduces us and further removes us from our localities- unless we take charge of it with specific community-based, local agendas. However, an alternate argument sees non localized ‘virtual communities’ independently of locally embedded urban networks. Instead of spaces of informational flows, telematics allow places to which people can feel attachment and belonging. Real is the description for meaningful interaction- be it down a phone or face-to-face. Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough
people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relations in cyberspace.

3. Virtual Public Spaces

Studies of electronic communication systems suggest that participants code ‘virtual’ reality through categories of ‘normal’ reality. They do so by communicating to each other as if they were in physical common space, as if this space were inhabited by bodies, were capable by Cartesian perspective, and by regarding the interactions as events, as fully significant in the participants’ life histories. Some analyses read (virtual) urban spaces directly into types of social world- a Platonism that sees a perfect correspondence between information, forms and consciousness. More interesting perhaps are neo-rationalist interpretations by architects like Rossi, where classical forms are not about communal identity so much as a freeing of the public realm from commodification. The invocation of classical forms is somewhere between inventory and memory- not eternal grammar but evoking the historical specificities of past public realms. Thus the work of architects like Leon Krier does not aim to recreate an essential public form but rather a relationship between new and old forms that will weave their path through the junk of the commercialized city, re-establishing a public realm and knitting together the presently disparate bits-a new order to be layered on the urban detritus. It is a form of building spaces for public association that deploys strongly classical ideas of space not to suggest classical forms determine public life, but to animate their cultural memory. This evocation of urban pasts might be contrasted with more avowedly post-modern works like Gehry’s Loyola Law School (Figure 1&2) which assembles disparate detritus, creating a public space through fragments of temples, deliberately incomplete, without capitols or bases, and baroque stairs without balustrade. It is a physical manifestation of the informational realm of the telematic city, as fragmented, simultaneous flows of information.

*Figure 1 & 2*: Loyola Law School showing the post-modern trend in creating public spaces
A sense of complication echoed in the avowedly deconstructive Parc de la Villette (Figure 3) in Paris, which takes up Klee and Kandinsky, to produce disjunctural landscapes, with a looping path of cinematic images to be watched, overlain by a red grid parodying Corbusier. How might these imaginative public spaces of architects inform telematics? Graham and Aurigi (1997b) offer a tentative typology separating simple electronic brochures, then data access systems, from those that encourage interaction by emulating real cities, or inventing new ones. Thus Digital City (Figure 4) has various ‘agora’ for information and discussion- urban metaphors which explicitly invoke 'Athenian participatory democracy'. One of the aims was to foster a virtual public space where decisions can be queried and issues discussed, in order to redress a decline in conventional political participation. The urban metaphor seems reassuring, using a vocabulary like agora and forum in the same way that Krier evoked Western history. More directly, the Helsinki Arena2000 project offers a direct replication of the city. It offers virtual visits to existing places, with Nokia using its existing phone system so that clicking on the door in virtual Helsinki enables you to contact the user at that place or ring the phone, whichever is available. These are visualisable, organisable spaces. Instead of the fluidity of the metropolis, many of these environments seem rather to echo walled cities and knowable, closed realms of shared assumption. However, the transparency of the spaces created should give pause for thought. In contrast to omnipolis, it is not multiplicity of times in given spaces, but the monologue of form representing function. We might well criticize this dream of transparency as more of the modernist ‘radiant city’.

This is not the utopian transparency of the modernist city recycled by cyber-enthusiasts, nor the collapsing world of its dystopian twin. We need to think of overlaying multipurpose spaces. I would suggest metaphors of labyrinthine space, offering not so much the bird’s eye view. Even the imaginings of communal and public space deployed by virtual protagonists risk repeating a notion of presence that may be neither tenable nor desirable.
Whether the electropolis is seen as helping or hindering them, good places are typically identified with a narrative of wholeness. Thus Parc de Villette is compiled from one rubric over another, cutting across each other denying coherence—a layering of different types of space. Or the etchings of Piranesi in the 18th century that, echoing anatomical drawings, excavated Rome through ruins, creating gaps and irruptions of the past into the present. This sense of the public as disjunctural politics and space, suggests countering the narrative that the loss of the public sphere is the loss of enclosure through flows.

Public space in virtual cities may be geography of events and becomings. Instead of the desire for a coherent, visible and legible city, critiqued by de Certeau (1984) as writing the city through the optics of control, electronic public space is pluriform, conflictual and opaque. It is not fixed and standing, but is made through conjuncture. This public space is not the binding together into wholes, the creation of symbolisable realities, but much more the puncturing of representational space. Old technologies and spatialities do not disappear but persist in an interweaving and cross-cutting of forms and practices.

4. Urban Future between Virtuality and Reality

With decentralization, globalization, and harmonization, Digital Spatiality has emerged with five forces of change transforming culture, infrastructure, and economy and lifestyles: global imperatives; size polarities; redefined time; egalitarian energy; and meaningless territory. Nevertheless forms of knowledge for the present and future demand critical theories of power, as well as normative and utopian visions that contextualize technology within a social, political, and economic framework, and that assess implications of new technologies in terms of their potential to enhance or restrict freedom and democracy, and to promote or undermine environmental sustainability and social justice.

Furthermore urbanists are in conflict between the permanent requirements of organizing and constructing real space, with its land problems, the geometric and geographic constraints of the center and the periphery, and the new requirements of managing the real time of immediacy and ubiquity. Nevertheless the virtual is real but not actual, ideal but never abstract. Indeed, the two sides of this purported dialectic, the real-actual and the virtual-imaginary are akin to oscillating forces in a shifting field, existing not side by side but through and across each other. If they are entities at all, they share functions and space over coterminous territories, or overlapping regions of non-exclusivity.
Figure 4&5: The hyper surfaces

An architecture capable of addressing and choreographing - the dance between the doubled worlds of the real-actual and the virtual-potential is beginning to present itself. Instead of trying to guarantee the eternal life of an existing architecture in a different medium, our strategy today should be the contamination of that architecture with other media and disciplines in order to produce a new and more robust urban experience. Whether "hyper surface," (Figure 4&5) with investigations into a topology of relational, mediated human, or "trans-architectures," in terms of turning-inside-out of cyberspace, these experimental forms promise to occupy the coterminous territories of the real and the virtual. In them, we may begin to experience a world no longer divided by virtuality but one made rich with spaces of animated potentials and realities. There are organizing metaphors that make virtual environments places to be.

These virtual 'spaces' are concerned with being elsewhere and being other in an evolutionary, in the same powerful conflation of real space and simulation, of real life and virtuality. Returning to the futurism from which the neo-futurism of cyber-architecture has developed, the virtual future is laden with the dark nihilism that the visionary dreams of new, futurist cities produced. Contemporary cyberspace, with its emphasis on the future, reenacts the nihilistic logic of early futurism in so far as the fulfillments of its dreams are necessarily deferred to a time that one can never witness. Since one cannot "be" in the future, one cannot comfortably "be" in the fiction that is cyberspace. Attempting to do so is like attempting to inhabit any dream or vision. And if the present is already lacking, the future is represented as already spent, mortgaged through national deficits and environmental destruction. Finally, a 'crisis of collective memory", a shared disjunction of our relations to the past, is linked to rapid urban change as modernism and industrialization disrupts the myriad of ways in which cities house a collective sense of history. The crisis of collective memory provokes a desire to reframe the past in urban scenography. Such scenographic representations repress the mystery and disorder of urban life which is collapsed into 'scenes', as seen in
the shopping malls and housing enclaves, where history becomes a product which is packaged and consumed. The deconstructive task leads to a play of formal imagery, whilst aiming to unpack and reconstruct the life world and its spatial programs. Such a programmatic deconstruction would entail a systematic engagement with the ways in which the life world has been sliced, its functions categorized, coded, juxtaposed and omitted. And in a decentred, disoriented and fragmented world the shock value may come from a reintegration and reorientation. The key role of future city designers is to deploy creative imagination in the public interest, yet it must be divorced from Plato's ideal 'forms' and authoritarian politics.

5. Conclusion

Places do not disappear, but their logic and their meaning become absorbed in the network. However the proliferation of "non-places"; the bland shopping malls, indistinguishable airports, office blocks, gated communities, theme parks, old-worldly villages, and managed and coifed "wilderness" areas that, functioning as signs rather than places, immerse the user in a self conscious form of ritual bearing little relation to any actual time or location. Alongside the built environment, the global reach of this stage incorporates urban/art installations designed to experiment with new possibilities of virtual space, whilst exploring metaphors of urban life and human experience, weaving into existing fabric of the real city and becoming a city of pixels, that functions as a dynamic experimental incubator, enclosing various concepts.

References


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