

## CITY OF BITS

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My name is wjm@mit.edu (though I have many aliases), and I am an flâneur. I hang out on the network.

The keyboard is my café. Each morning I turn to some nearby machine - my modest personal computer at home, a more powerful workstation in one of the offices or laboratories that I frequent, or a laptop in a hotel room-to log into electronic mail. I click on an icon to open an "inbox" filled with messages from round the world-replies to technical questions, queries for me to answer, drafts of papers, submissions of student work, appointments, travel and meeting arrangements, bits of business, greetings, reminders, chitchat, gossip, complaints, tips, jokes, flirtation. I type replies immediately, then drop them into an "outbox," from which they are forwarded automatically to the appropriate destinations. (Note the scare quotes. "Box" is a very loose metaphor, and I will come back to that later.) If I have time before I finish gulping my coffee, I also check the wire services and a couple of specialized news services to which I subscribe, then glance at the latest weather report. This ritual is repeated whenever I have a spare moment during the day.

Traditionally, you needed to go someplace to do this sort of thing-to the agora, the forum, the piazza, the café, the bar, the pub, Main Street, the mall, the beach, the gym, the bathhouse, the college dining hall, the common room, the office, or the club -and where you went pegged your peer group, your social position, and your role. It also framed expectations about how you should represent yourself by your clothing, body language, speech, and behavior and about the interactions that were to take place. Each familiar species of public place had its actors, costumes, and scripts. But the worldwide computer network-the electronic agora-subverts, displaces, and radically redefines our notions of gathering place, community, and urban



life. The Net has a fundamentally different physical structure, and it operates under quite different rules from those that organize the action in the public places of traditional cities. It will play as crucial a role in twenty-first-century urbanity as the centrally located, spatially bounded, architecturally celebrated agora did (according to Aristotle's *Politics*) in the life of the Greek polis and in prototypical urban diagrams like that so lucidly traced out by the Milesians on their Ionian rock.