

CyberUniversity

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The study of a cyberuniversity derives from an analogy between real urban space and its virtual “substitution”. It represents an attempt to balance some views, which seems to be contrary, exclusive, but they are just parts of the same wholeness. Especially the notion of a cyber society is lately considered such an exaggeration, that it is possible to forget the meaning of a real life experience and interactions, which are already threatened. One should contribute to the awarness that is used in such a comparison, it is “just” an analogy, not a real similarity. At the same time it is possible to point out some limitations of a cyberspace and indicate a more realistic view of the meaning of cyber communities. Awarness of the development processes could help to find a balance between reality and virtuality, using cyberfacilities not to destroy us (our identity) but to improve the quality of our (real) life.

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University, Cyberspace, Cyber Society and Community

A university organism represents community of seekers of the truth, a socially acknowledged system of knowledge organization, which is materialized in space of communications. It is a community, system and space of contradictions - according to affinities and nature of communications. Complexity of its spatial conditions and needs derives from a series of contradictions between universality and scientific specialisation.

The interrelation of university and town could be seen as the relation between the part and the whole. University is one of town-making activities, it is an urban entity. It comprises and (at the same time) forms a common, public and private urban level, a rich layer of urban communications, but institutionally it belongs to the top of the hierarchical structure of the town. Though in its spatial complexity it is similar to the town,

which could play its role, the university could not perform the role of the town. Town represents university experience. Definition of town as university town is clear, when the university predominates as social, natural and cultural environment in the urban space.

In making important, active, innovative universities, appointed conditions (terms) are necessary. University community is not able to form itself without its own space. But if that space is not recognizable, university identification is impossible. Placement should enable university growth for their mutual positive influence.

Openness deriving from a place and time leads to hierarchical rich wholeness of offer and choice. Unity of diversity enables a recognizable variety. But challenge of space encourages human creativeness. Spatial details also contribute to the quality and express fast changing and unpredictable conditions of space and time.

Urban empirical macro (and micro) space is the space of analogy and hierarchy. It includes material (traffic...) and immaterial (perceptual, especially visual and social) spatial communications. Image of the city is formed on the basis of its spatial effects, human memorising of direct experienced real series of urban places and according to our imagination and expectations.

Information technologies affect on the appearance of non-spatial, digital and anti-hierarchical system of information in urban space. It could be named space of flows, space of immaterial communications in virtual space, informational city or cyberspace. Invisible, constant and abstract space of flows does not connect only anything belonging to real places. In a new form of transcendental utopism it could become even a kind of substitution of reality. Imagination of such space could derive only from abstract, mathematical memory. Only a combinatory system of rules could be recognised. Because of its fragmented structure, piecemeal images could not be connected into the mental image of wholeness. Therefore the identity of local units is threatened. Even more: our notion of real world is being partly ruined. This problem represents the origin of postmodern meaning of united disappearing of a physical and electronic city. "The machine is to modernism what the computer is to postmodernism." [A]

The new type of city (and university as a part of it) represents an increasingly important system of virtual spaces interconnected by the information superhighway.

The Internet as a whole possesses self-organizing characteristics similar to those of a living organism(s). Kelly compares it to the behaviour of a swarm of bees searching for a new location for the hive. [B]

An analysis of types of famous university centres [C] dealing with their spatial development relations between university and town shows us that in the growth of every single type of these interrelations certain conditions of space, time (a period of single intervention or piecemeal growth) and society are needed.

If university in the hierarchical city of wholeness which grows with its society grows as fast as (or slower than) the town, the result will be urban university (a part of campus only in specific circumstances and demands). But if university grows faster than the town, the interrelations of wholeness will be destroyed and entirely isolated campus will arise.

In the fast growing town - with neutral, anonymous network of communications and building areas - urban communities don't have an opportunity of thinking about hierarchical forming of centres, which are perceptible, because of their fast growth. If university grows as fast as or slower than the town, urban campus will arise, which is at least partly interwoven with urban public space. But in overtaking of urban growth the only possible result is isolated campus.

In the outskirts university growth is always faster than the urban growth, therefore isolated campus is the only option.

Time in cybercity is transformed into a single moment or into continuous flow. The result is extremely isolated form - wired up campus - just the opposite of original meanings of terms university and campus as spaces and communities.

The new social morphology of our societies, the "network society" is "characterized by the pre-eminence of social morphology over social action". [P]

A virtual community "is generally understood as a self-defined electronic network of interactive communications organized around a shared interest or purpose, although sometimes communication becomes a goal in itself." Hosted conferences or bulletin board systems represent relatively formalized virtual communities. But some of them are formed spontaneously. It is not clear yet how sociable virtual communities are, as Manuel Castells pointed out. It could be added that such a question indicates that there is not as much sociability as in real communities. Castells advances the hypothesis that two very different populations "live" in such virtual communities: "a tiny minority of the electronic villagers and a transient crowd for whom their casual incursions into

various networks is tantamount to exploring several existences under the mode of the ephemeral.” [F]

Information systems influence upon the way of thinking about the university and the town, researching and planning them.

Balancing contrary themes

There are two opposite ways of thinking about the university.

Traditionalists[F] argue that university is already dead. Due to the fact the original idea of freedom and universality died at the beginning of scientific specialisation. The only way of its revival is returning to its original form.

At the same time a lot of enthusiasts of innovations (e. g. W. J. Mitchell [G] believe that university is going to survive even its replacement by a cyberinstitution, like changing clothes.

There is a hidden danger in such opposite ways of thinking. It could be forgotten that cyberuniversity is just a new form of the tradition, which is parallel to the main one. The alternative tradition to places of learning with a possibility of being part of the spatially defined community, began with itinerant teachers and holy men of preindustrial societies, continued with correspondence schools of the industrial revolution, “Open University” of two-way radio, broadcast television and videotapes and developed into the contemporary electronic world. During the centuries that alternative tradition never become more important than permanent systems of face-to-face learning. We could even argue that correspondence based distant learning is more innovative because of breaking face-to-face interaction than its latter metamorphosis. This alternative tradition possesses its own characteristic from the very beginning: independence of permanent meeting places of offerers and seekers of knowledge and experience.

We all know that it is impossible to turn the development process back, but it is possible to abstract some ideas, which are still relevant today. The most important idea of the university community

is face-to-face interaction.

Probably M. Christine Boyer [H] exaggerates with her suggestion that our notion of the real world is being ruined, when she writes about disappearing of a physical city in the information society. Is it still a real space we live in and we need our homes. But it is true that the computer revolution will have considerable and probably irreversible effects on conventional patterns of work and communication. [I]

The arguments for the possibility of displacing functions of many traditional building types are based on a simplification the case by ignoring the symbolic content of real spaces and places and their social significance as well.

The people, using cyberspace, although hidden behind electronic masks or shown in their artificially arranged actions are still real...

Future role of a University and a CyberUniversity

The statements about the meaning of circumstances of space, time and society for development of different types of relations between university and city (such as urban university, campus, “wired-up campus”...) lead to a decision about direct linkages with cultural tradition of university and urban space (or cyberspace).

According to the traditional meaning the spatial destiny of university will be shared with the destiny of the town of its interrelations. It could even die earlier, during its metamorphosis into another, non-university image (form). But its informational nature rescues it from its spatial limits and offers it another kind of permanence.

In wired-up university the spatial homogeneity is transformed into virtual (cyberspace). But in spite of any kind of affinities with urban infrastructure, its isolation as a whole stays above all other university types.

Real space is experienced by numerous human possibilities of acting in it. Working in virtual space seems to be very creative, but it is limited since its

perception is reduced.

The transformation of time in cybercity (to a single moment or to a continuous flow) leads to the opposition of original meanings of term university as space and community: its socio-spatial isolation.

University community could be formed neither in machines nor in computers or in front of them - without its own space. But if that space is not recognisable, university identification is impossible. Cyberspace could offer educational system of the network society, virtual but not the university community. It enables simulation of reality, which helps planning real space, but can not substitute the richness of its life.

In spite of universal use of computers in advanced countries and forming of virtual communities university is not as affected by the computer logic as some other urban institutions. Because its quality derives from face-to-face interactions, encouraged by its spatial identity, university will be hardly replaced by its cybersubstitution.

It seems that cyberuniversity offers equal educational opportunities to all people, but its privileged image still remains, because a majority of underdeveloped world (regions) is excluded from the virtuality.

The expansion of the Internet means expansion of information, but more time is needed to find something useful. Also the freedom of choice is limited because of more and more chaotic situation.

There is a hidden danger in computer systems: withdrawal into the space of electronic matrix. Only acting on a distance and freezing in front of computer terminals remains without possibilities of immediate actions. But single actual questions ought to be solved in every moment.

Cyberuniversity will play a similar significant town-making role in the digital city of tomorrow as the university of real places. But we shouldn't be forgotten that we started with analogy! It is very important to preserve the distance between the imaginary world and the real space of architecture.

Dualism of universalists' campus and relativists' urban form is transformed into a new one. Global

function of the university is incorporated in cyberuniversity, while a local remains in a real space. Information system gives the university an opportunity to reduce unnecessary spatial internal communications and intensify its relations according to the affinities with the urban fabric and infrastructure. The importance of cyberuniversity will rise with its ability of forming attractive antispatial local identity. But lack of identity at the virtual level has to be balanced in the real space.

It is possible that one day a new information system will replace the existing one. But with analogy we could say, that it will probably continue alternative (educational) role without replacing the main flow.

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Notes

- [A] M. C. Boyer (1996), 90.
- [B] K. Kelly (1994).
- [C] T. Zupan_i_ Strojan (1997).
- [D] M. Castells (1996), 469.
- [E] *Ibid*, 362. See also: H. Rheingold (1993). And S. Turkle (1995).
- [F] I. Kant, F. W. Schelling, F. Nietzsche (1991).
- [G] W. J. Mitchell (1996).
- [H] M. C. Boyer (1996).
- [I] C. Abel (1997), 222.

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