



Visualising Emotions Defining Urban Space through Shared Networks

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Introduction

Networks and new media and communication tools, in combination with other media like film, imaging, text and sound, make richer ways of expression possible and at the same time offer attractive possibilities to investigate and express designing.

Architects, or their clients, in consequence become increasingly able to explore, develop and communicate their ideas in a better way.

At the same time, most people find it difficult to describe their demands and needs in advance: it seems they react much better on something that is already there, a finished work.

How then can designers get a better idea of people's needs and wishes? In other words, how could designers –among others- get a better match between expectations and results? Consequently, what could be the significance of 'new media' within this process?

Our Department of Media of the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Technology Delft (NL) studies, among other things, the role 'new media' can play during the design process.

In this paper, we describe part of our on going teaching work: in particular, the combination of (new) media techniques and the possibilities they offer to express feelings and ideas and to visualise, describe and compose spaces in different, in new ways.

In this particular case, we look at the role these new media can play not in the designing itself but during the steps prior to it.

This can result in a preliminary document to the design brief: a qualitative schedule of requirements that consists of the description of the characteristics and the qualities of space. It can be seen as a preliminary step and as a necessary complement to the traditional 'numeric' design brief.

Hereto, we started the development of different projects.

One of the projects we offer to students is based on the possibilities of media in a network environment and inspired in a proposed textual piece. This project deals therefore with the different feelings and emotions inspired by the text.

The exercise is based on the idea that emotions can help to achieve a better way to describe and visualise what we do like and dislike concerning our living environment.

Multi-New-Media in education

The concept of “new media” is a changing one. In addition to the “traditional” media and the ‘new’ media -such as computer modelling and rendering, image manipulation, etc, currently available to architecture and design students, the developments in internet based applications, communication (gsm, sms, wireless internet) and networking represent an important enlargement of the amount of tools designers, and architects can use.

In these extremely mediated network environments, the new tools offer them new ways of expression and interaction. The significance of this all can hardly be imagined.

Geert Lovink states that “Part of the culturalization process would be to study, in detail, how users interact with applications and influence their further development, network cultures come into being as a ‘productive friction’ between inter-human dynamics and the given framework of software” (1) p.6.

”In countless cases people interact and work together on specific tasks and exchange opinions and material online. Or they assist each other in technical matters and write code together. What defined the internet is its social architecture. It’s the living environment that counts, the live interaction, not just the storage and retrieval procedure” (1) p.11.

”The order of the network is made up of a continuum of relations governed by interests, passions, affects and pragmatic necessities of different actors” (1) p.18.

Concerning more specifically the field of architecture, Lovink quotes Stephen Kovacs during a debate at the Berlin Transmediale 2003:

“There is a growing interrelationship between media arts and architecture faculties. Media art often becomes uncomfortable around sculptors, while architects move closer to ‘fine’ art through technology and find a new ‘art/tech’ way”.

He also quotes Pelle Ehn: “a founding faculty member of the school for media and communication in Malmö, Sweden, (Ehn) wrote the ‘Manifesto for a Digital Bauhaus’ in 1998...According to Ehn, the original social engagement of the Bauhaus transformed into an antidemocratic professional elitism...

What is needed is “not a modernism caught in a solidified objectivity in the design of modern objects in steel, glass and concrete, but a comprehensive sensuality in the design of meaningful interactive and virtual stories and environments” (2)

As we already mentioned, the Department of Form and Media Studies encourages students to explore and combine these different available media. Software facilitates this process, and makes it often only possible. In addition to a multidisciplinary media presentation module, our department of media/visualisation techniques offers more multimedia education such as the production of audiovisual (film) presentations or multimedia, Internet based, presentations. Except for the linear storytelling, this non-linear, interactive way of presenting information is becoming increasingly popular.

Since the previous school year, we offer the possibility to participate in the multimedia free choice module mEYECity / Delft. (3)

Both this project and the upcoming The mediating architect aim to explore and expand the possibilities offered to designers by new communication tools, such as gsm, sms and internet based networks, in combination with other media like film, sound, imaging, etc.

Particularly in highly mediated network environments, these tools offer much richer ways of expression.

Within this framework, students get the chance to look at the built environment in an unusual manner. They become able to describe spaces in a total different way than they generally are asked to do. The personal worlds they compose are revealed through the different media and shared through the internet.

mEYECity / Delft

The project mEYECity / Delft explores the possibilities of media in a network environment and allows the students to rediscover their own city and to develop and share their media ‘creations’.

The built environment within which we live offers us an enormous catalogue of almost all-possible kind of spaces, materials and atmospheres.





During this module, different maps of neighbourhoods in the city of Delft are presented to the students.

As a first step, the students document a neighbourhood. They are just merely influenced by occasional events and by everything they see, eventually hear, and meet on their way. Possibly, they are just only guided by a esthetical aspects.

Hereto they make use of a digital photo camera to shoot still images and eventually small films. They can also write down or record their thoughts or even make free hand sketches.

During the next step, we offer the students different pieces of text. The stories, these fragments of text, deal with ‘emotional’ content, such as fear, violence, hope, disappointment, beauty and so forth.

Nevertheless, images can hardly be created without any feeling at all: pieces of remembrances, associations, etc. By means of a textual piece, these ties and links can be strengthened and, as a result, ‘provoke’ emotions.

As a next step, and influenced by these different ‘emotions’, the students now document a different portion of the city.

In order to get a more spontaneous, fresh reaction on the ‘emotions’ we ask them to give each other (during different sessions) instructions by means of mobile phones: the student who reads the textual fragment remains at the faculty and transmits his or her ‘emotions’ to the one visiting the neighbourhood.

Consequently, the students document now, all kinds of urban elements in different ways and according to the feelings inspired by the textual piece. In some way, they translate the offered textual pieces into the descriptions of characteristics and qualities of the urban space.

Later, all these documented routes are uploaded. The students build their own web sites and can eventually add more own material to the original images and notes, such as text, digital photo and video film, graphics, etc. In addition, they can complete the stories by adding links, street sounds and ‘testimonies’. They can also write a diary or web log as well.

All their stories make contact with each other through the meta-database of the ‘becoming.be’ web platform.

“B.E.C.O.M.I.N.G. is an experimental platform for the creation of media and research (social-cultural, artistic, educational and scientific). It is an alternative context for project development, a project in itself, intended to give rise to other projects.

Device: development through creation - artistic, technological, social-cultural, educational.

Key words: context, network, scripting.

In the first place, it is a protocol: a working method that all participants share.” (4)

Consequently, the students are able to react on each others material. They can adapt a personal version of every story. The platform allows the participants to edit each others work or change the ordering of the images. Since the possibility exists to go back to any previous step, there is no fear to loose the published material.

At the end of the module, all this results in the presentation of internet based multimedia products. These pages remain available and in principle, after being authorised to join the platform, other people can react on the material as well.

Based on this relevant characteristic, we also intend to broaden and further explore possibilities and consequences around this form of participation.

The mediating architect

At our department of media/visualization techniques, and by means of the same multimedia module we also intend to offer architecture students the possibility to participate in the project The mediating architect.

The students will be asked to work on the description of the characteristics and the qualities of interior or exterior space as a preperafory step and a necessary complement to the definitive design brief to the architect.

Based on a given assignment, the students will consequently compose their own context.

Each student or small group of students will be asked to adopt a determined identity. According to their identity, they will have to describe their needs and ‘wishful dreams’ concerning architectural spaces. In this way, they compose an own world related to their corresponding identities.

After uploading and sharing it on the web, other people or ‘experts’

can interact and participate. As a result, they come to know more about somebody's ideal home, (working) place, etc.

The information all this material represents constitutes the basis of the brief to the architect, a kind of qualitative design brief.

Students will make use of all kind of media. But above all, not 3D-modelling software. They are not asked to design but to describe the characteristics and qualities of spaces by means of their multimedia creations.

Once more, all this will result in the presentation of (web based) multimedia products -which will include web logs- and as we hope, 'live' events as well.

Conclusions

In general, multimedia is mostly applied to the design and the presentation of plans.

On the other hand, it is important to investigate and further develop its role in the steps preceding the design. Hereto the presented projects explore and broaden the possibilities offered to designers by new communication tools in combination with other media.

The project mEYEcITY / Delft is directed to rediscover and document our built environment.

As a result, it offers an immense collection, a catalogue of almost all possible spaces and materials combined with atmosphere (feelings, emotions). This material enriches the amount of tools available for designers.

The mediating architect's aims to further research and communicate/visualise people's needs, wishes or demands concerning their living environment.

It deals with the description of space, in a more an emotional way. Corresponding to the identity of the different 'users/clients' it results in a qualitative schedule of requirements for the future design.

Both projects are web based. This network environment encourages and facilitates interaction: people react on each other and are able to add information.

In relation to mEYecity / Delft, the students were asked to shoot the images and, at this point, not to manipulate them later in the computer. By following a determined route, the sequence of images was established in advance.

In many cases, the conclusions about the combination of emotions and images are rather evident: 'negative' words correspond with 'ugly' places: a garden view is considered romantic, nature is attractive, trellis repulse people.

But obviously as well, especially during the qualities and presentation sessions, there was often no unanimity about attractive or unappealing, cosy or disgusting, concerning for instance the type of neighbourhood and housing.

The way they framed the images, for instance close-up or total, in combination with the composition, shows the appealing aspects or elements they met on their way.

In addition, (many) total shots can also suggest the avoidance of focus or choices within the offered information. These aspects may depend either on the observer or on the characteristics of the studied object.

But above all, the modules show mainly the significance of a technique, a way to better describe and evaluate the quality of our (future) urban and living space.

Except for the designing itself, new media offer enormous possibilities to investigate the phases before the design and make much richer ways of expression possible. These media, in combination with web-based networks, can help people think about, define, express and visualise the qualities of the space where they live. At the same time, they also enlarge and improve significantly the amount of tools designers have to their disposal. They come to know more about evaluating and visualising space and are thus able to describe spaces in a different way than they usually are asked to do. New media make this process effective and even possible.





References

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- (2) Lovink Geert, *My First Recession, Critical Internet Culture in Transition*, Rotterdam, NAI Uitgevers/V2_Organisatie, 2003.
- (3) inspired on an art project by Stefaan Decostere, Belgium.
- (4) www.becoming.be; initiator: Stefaan Decostere and Cargo (Belgium)