Relocating Site – The Web and Urban Life
Makeda Best

Seemingly a reaction to Action Tank's Public Space Initiative, a stenciled message appeared last fall on San Francisco's sidewalks: Space = Verb   Act   Dissent. Perhaps another reference was architect Rem Koolhaas recently declaring the ubiquity of technology means "public space is dead… the universal city exists wherever we are in the world."[1] Further, he said, "the real public space is invisible to the eye."[2] The translation of aspects of this concept seems

embodied in the anonymous stenciler's message, as the popular version of the universalist city translates into the increased control, corporatization, and homogenization of urban space. The topologies and identifiers of this largely urban landscape make it yet another packaged "experience" – purging history and the

diversity urban life offers. More than public space is made invisible – among other things, labor and political dissent, are too. The loss of and virtualization of public space shifts public identities, narratives, and histories. The challenge becomes finding tools to relocate and insist on specificity of place, of history and the individual. If public space is dead (or largely co-opted), we need to develop ways to maintain its function and develop new spaces. The internet poses a unique tool to help us to recognize the linkages between space as concepts of space become more complex. In the new urban setting, the stakes for a "space" is high.

In obvious and subtle ways, digital technology is integral to this new urban landscape. Theorists like Howard Kunstler, author of *The Geography of Nowhere,* see digital technology as the impetus behind what makes us more reliant on cars and telecommunication as eroding real interaction. Beyond lived spaces, the language of technology influences everything from social policy to the way we look

---

[1] The Van Alen Institute http://www.vanalen.org/publications/var_6.htm#
[2] The Van Alen Institute http://www.vanalen.org/publications/var_6.htm#

at and speak about the world. The language of urban life and the language of technology increasingly mirror each other. We speak of the "circulation" or "flows" of people, goods, and services. Themed entertainments are described as "portals." The language's underlying emphasis on control, tracking, targeting, and identification, threatens democracy and promotes isolationism. Like the virtual communities we visit or the virtual malls we shop, we attend in the real world to our own virtual places, from the New York New York Hotel in Las Vegas to Los Angeles' CityWalk. Michael Sorkin suggests these "hypercities" invoke "an urbanism without producing a city…a city with billions of citizens…but no residents."[3]

The internet has proven to be a tool with the potential, among other things, to disrupt our concept of urban life. We have seen how web based urban communities and projects replicate or further the

functions of urban space, but how can the internet function as more than just a posting board and respond interactively (in both virtual and real worlds) to the present conditions of urban life continues to emerge. In this way, the internet enters the urban geography as an activist site that engages the complex issues facing urban communities in a discussion. Rather than using the internet as the only "site" for action, the internet can act as a catalyst for an unknown number of actions and reactions. Rather than just celebrating e-topias, there need to be ways of recognizing that while we can be "virtually" anywhere, we live our daily life somewhere specific.

Recognizing these facts, many have observed a disintegration of communities and proposed technology as a potential remedy: the internet and web urbanism. Over the past years, local municipalities, organizations, and newspapers have established real presences through their websites – allowing citizens a platform to gather support and gain information – forcing government to

---

[3] Michael Sorkin, "See You in Disneyland," *Variations on a Theme Park,* Michael Sorkin, ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1992), p. 231

recognize their issues. Politics shifts to a "politic of the local," moving the concentration of power to citizens through virtual gathering places or virtual protests. These sites, (like the now defunct international town hall, http://www.municipia.org) also link people across cities and across the world around common issues or places.

For some, the internet holds the possibility of absorbing what urban life has lost. Eric Liftin, principal of New York-based MESH architectures + environments + web spaces, believes the web can become the new site for the spontaneous urban encounter. "The Internet has emerged as a system with potential for a new kind of urban experience, Web urbanism. Web urbanism is the migration of traditional urban experience to the Web," says Liftin.[4] According to Liftin, "There is no 'planning' in cyberspace. Public space cannot be imposed on the public. But there is a chance to build systems that recreate the dynamics of traditional public space so engaging that they define new infrastructures for the network,"[5] Media artist Michael Naimark envisions digital technology as a means for resuscitating public space: "Imagine actual public spaces wired together by ultra-high bandwidth network connections, where actual neighbors are co-present with virtual ones. Imagine a public space for 100 people tapping 100 times the bandwidth available to the

[4] The Van Alen Institute http://www.vanalen.org/publications/var_6.htm#
[5] The Van Alen Institute http://www.vanalen.org/publications/var_6.htm#

home (whatever the bandwidth). Imagine an Imax-meets-the-Web

immersive interactive public space."[6] Economist Saskia Sassen sees

potential for new technology on issues ranging from participation to

telemedicine.[7] But for architect and interactive media designer

Kadambari Baxi, the critical questions facing public space are issues

of media – not only the so-called "new" media – but all media as they

continue to be reshaped by the ever expanding telecommunication

networks.[8] How methods of resistance and ways of reinscribing urban

narratives develop is important because the urban continues to be

influential**.** Writes economist Saskia Sassen:

> "The space of the city is a far more concrete space for politics
> than that of the nation. It becomes a place where nonformal
> political actors can be part of the political scene in a way that
> is much more difficult at the national level…the space of the
> city accommodates a broad range of political activities –
> squatting, demonstrations against police brutality, fighting for
> the rights of immigrants and the homeless, the politics of

culture and identity. Much of this becomes visible on the
street. Much of urban politics is concrete, enacted by people,
rather than depending on massive media technologies.
Street-level politics makes the possible formation of new
types of political subjects that no not have to go through the
formal political system."[9]

In many instances, we can speak of the ways in which we live

either urban lives or live the effects of its conditions. The urban

population of developing countries is projected to more than double in

the next twenty-five years – reaching nearly four billion – and meaning

that more than 50% of the global population will be urban .[10] In the

United States, city life and city problems continue to whittle away at

the life and livelihoods of country towns. Reinventing notions of

country and small town life, the retreat to further and further suburbs

are reactions to urban realities. The conditions of urban life continue

to replicate into the suburbs: places like Pomona in Los Angeles

---

[6] http://www.vanalen.org/publications/var_6.htm#
[7] Sakia Sassen, *Globalization and Its Discontents – Essays on the New Mobility of People and Money,* (New York: The New Press, 1998), p. 193
[8] The Van Alen Institute - http://www.vanalen.org/publications/var_6.htm#

---

[9] Saskia Sassen, "The City: Between Topographic Representation and Spatialized Power Projects," Art Journal, Summer 2001, p. 19
[10] M. Ismail Segrageldin, "A Decent Life," *Harvard Design Magazine,* Winter/Spring 1997, p. 25

County, once home to the highest per capita incomes in the nation and frequently used in the 1950s as a test audience for Hollywood films is recast with the highest density of gang membership as a percentage of the teenage male population.[11] We are beginning to see how the new urban economy strengthens existing inequalities and establishes new dynamics of inequality.[12]

This will require political responses that help us to negotiate and critique such dynamics. There may be important practical uses for digital and web based technologies, but a critique of the racial, economic, and political tensions that continue in a landscape made more complex by the

larger numbers, fewer resources, and greater disparities between groups is also needed. Returning to ideas of e-communities and e-topias, it becomes clear what they mostly create are false communities and false perceptions of civic participation. Flux may collectively describe the contemporary urban experience, but there are facts that remain ever more prescient. Continuing the tradition of the city as being the center for political, social, and cultural commentary and dissent, web projects are beginning an online critique of these issues, maintaining that such a critique can be effectively translated into real-life applications, and expanding notions of expressive space. Finally, if the internet is seen as a place in which this critique can happen, it must do more than just be a bulletin board, but find ways of direct contact in the real world. A critique of urban

[11]Mike Davis, "Ozzie and Harriet in Hell," Harvard Design Magazine, Winter/Spring 1997, p. 4

[12] Saskia Sassen, *Globalization and Its Discontents,* (New York: The New Press, 1998), p. 148

space cannot remain online; it is offline that such critiques pose the potential for picking up what the "public space" is less and less capable of: developing real life "virtual" expression and providing archives of expression and experiences.

When users log on to website of the Institute of Applied Autonomy and use iSee, http://www.appliedautonomy.com/isee , they are able to subvert the increasing use of surveillance cameras in Manhattan, as iSee provides them with "the path of least surveillance." iSee is a web-based application charting the locations of closed-circuit television surveillance cameras in urban environments. After entering their location and destination, iSee provides a map, which may change over time as cameras are installed. iSee charts the growth of these cameras, but it also brings city dwellers outside of their perhaps regular routes. Users discover or rediscover the urban landscape by avoiding these cameras. Each map, taking users outside the grid of control, is a gesture of resistance and kind of a

writing of an off-grid, unknown, evolving counter narrative of events and encounters. Each map, each experience is personal, yet it encourages a collective interaction.

The site brings together the roaming and wandering of city life with that of the Internet, making the user both an online and offline flaneur. iSee shows that chance and spontaneity are still possible in an increasingly homogenized urban landscape, as are political statements. Instead of keeping the "community" on the web, it pushes for its establishment in real life. This simple tool forces users to directly engage with their surroundings and to question social policy, an idea which has conceptual implications far beyond Manhattan. Whether or not a user actually uses the suggested route, seeing how circuitous such routes are (and they grow ever more complex as more cameras appear) is a statement about what we think of as public, free space, versus the reality.

Action Tank's Public Space Initiative (http://www.action-tank.org/psi) produces "Public Space Kits" which instruct users on creating new forms of and reclaiming public space for democratic uses. Action Tank aptly describes the state of public space as "more like a verb than a noun, meaning it must be continually created and recreated." The kit outlines the terms "Democracy," "Public Space" and "Totalitarianism" before suggesting how to "create" space: "Go somewhere and do something that creates debate and conflict!" Recognizing that physical space may be not be "free," public space here is imbedded in action. It accounts for the fact that physical space may not be available, forcing the body of each user to be an agent in its creation. Whatever space that is created is mutable and perhaps transient, making instigations difficult to track or distinguish.

Ricardo Miranda Zuñiga's online and offline mobile cart (which has appeared in New York and Los Angeles) reinvents the popular game *Streetfighter:* in *Vagamundo: A Migrant's Tale*

(http://www.ambriente.com), instead of soldiers, players are newly arrived Mexican immigrants struggling with limited English skills and scavenging tips in a restaurant job. Zuñiga's game highlights the largely invisible experience of immigrants who perform much of the labor that sustains not just cities in the United States, but across the world. The economic base of cities is often erroneously linked to industry, when the vast majority of people do not have factory jobs, but work in small trades or small informal businesses.[13] Writes Zuñiga, "In the United States, there are currently over eight million illegal immigrants, including more than three million from Mexico. The vast majority of these immigrants compose a near slave labor population contributing to the U.S. economy. Vagamundo attempts to inform its audience by

---

[13] Serageldin, "A Decent Life," Harvard Design Magazine, p. 25

creatively investigating, the Latin American immigrant population in New York City via the video game format , a format that leads to immersion through interaction."[14]

Various levels of the game engage the complexities of race and class. Level One, El Borracho, represents a "Culture of Poverty" as an outcome of cultural traits such as bad work habits, heavy drinking, and violence. To advance, players must avoid the flying liquor bottles to earn a job. Level 2 is The Green Grocer Bagger, representing a "Culture of Assimilation." Here, the player begins to learn English, while combating the "stereotype monster," represented by a giant roach. The player progresses until finally learning English and landing a job at an upscale restaurant. However, the question of assimilation remains – the player must decide whether or not to help

---

[14] http://www.ambriente.com/about
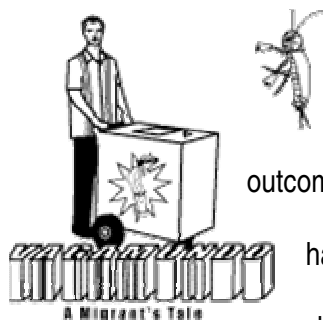
new immigrants. *Vagamundo* uses a popular format to directly engage people while at the same time asking real social and economic questions. The game asks players to recognize the experiences of the game's real life counterpoints, while asking non-Latinos to consider their own roles within the game. The mobile kiosk itself looks like an ice-cream cart, which in many cities are guided by Latino men. Zuñiga's other web projects include *audiophile v.02,* an ongoing collection of urban sounds from Mexico City to Manhattan. The sounds of the street tell their own history: of movement, of surprise, of disorientation. At the same time as Zuñiga's project float within cyberspace, available for anyone around the world, what they speak of and archive a unique experience.

These projects use to the web to carve both on and offline spaces for expression and for critique. This space is at once physical, political, cultural and economic. Howard Rheingold may see cyberspace as "a tool that could bring conviviality and understanding

into our lives,"[15] but Rheingold's vision of utopia still allows people to exist in a virtual space, without the complexities of real life. In Rheingold's world, you should immigrate to www.activeworlds.com, build your own virtual home and interact with virtual neighbors. These sites may bring people together, but we must remember the ways in which such a spaces themselves are intrinsically scripted. Some of the functions of urban life may be able to be carried out on the internet; many cannot. Instead of replicating these functions, the internet can work to translate these functions into real life. We must not, as Kevin Robins argues, divorce new technologies from the world (with its complexities and problems) they develop in and out of.[16]

---

[15] Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Finding Connection in a Computerized World,* (London, Secker & Warburg, 1994), p. 12
[16] See Kevin Robins, *Into the Image: Culture and Politics in the Field of Vision,* (London: Routledge, 1996).

Illustrations:
1. http://www.actiontank.org/psi
2. http://www.appliedautonomy.com/isee
3. http://www.appliedautonomy.com/isee
4. http://www.ambriente.com

In many instances, the universalist city trumpets a limited variety of political and cultural, but visual practices. There are still opportunities for critique through technology itself – strategies for interaction/resistance and the resuscitation of absent histories that relocate concepts of urbanism and urban experience. These projects work to redefine visual and physical interactions, highlighting how technology has become the very means by which many artists and collectives have chosen to address the changes affecting the virtualization of urban life, insisting that the affects of such changes are indeed lived and need articulation in both the virtual and real world. The message extends beyond the internet, as there are many instances in which we need to learn to "make" space. Here, the internet is used as a catalyst for moments of both individual and collective history. These sites and projects call attention to history and

---

5. http://www.ambriente.com
6. http://www.actiontank.org/psi

experience, linking people across cities, while continuing to act as

responses to specific factors. While the universalist city may link us

more than ever, it is more difficult to find outlets for and to illuminate

the conditions and contradictions of those linkages. Instead of using

the internet as a retreat, it is possible to make the internet another

terrain for use and instigation, while proposing that the learning and

dissent intrinsic to urban life are still possible.