



Leonardo Electronic Almanac Vol 13, No 6-7, June - July 2005
http://lea.mit.edu

ISSN #1071-4391

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IDENSITY® / SOFT URBANISM

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KEYWORDS

hybrid space, networked architecture, 'Soft Urbanism', mobility networks, public space, public domain, new spatial paradigms, idensity®

ABSTRACT

The presentation develops scenarios for an interplay of the urban space and the media domain. New interdisciplinary fields of planning and design are introduced: Soft Urbanism, exploring the interaction of urbanism and the space of mass media and communication networks, and Hybrid Space Design, developing fused analog-digital / architectural-media spaces. Within this framework, "idensity®" is proposed as a conceptual tool for developing space in the information-communication age. A

theoretical introduction is illustrated by projects.

"The new city presupposes that the cables of the interhuman relations are switched reversibly, not in bundles as with television, but in real networks, respons(e)ibly, as in the telephone network. These are technical questions; and they are to be solved by urbanists and architects." - Vilém Flusser 1990.

To reinforce the significance of public space we have to deal with at least two "publics", the global and the local public, by creating spheres where local and global public space can fuse and interchange.

Bridging the gap and connecting the global media spheres with local content and place, an architecture of communication spaces proposes a combined analog-digital infrastructure: publicly accessible interfaces between the global media space and the local urban place. 'Public Media Urban Interfaces' is an alternative scenario for the interplay of mass media in order to reinforce the function of public (urban) space. This project develops a hybrid urban network-space, a fusion of media space and urban space. It emphasizes the role of the public in an increasingly privatized society and occupies the vacuum in between the local and the global. The products of this alliance of urban and media networks are "hybrid" spaces that are at the same time analog and digital, virtual and material, local and global.

This project represents a prototype for a new interdisciplinary field of design and planning ('Soft Urbanism'), researching the transformations of architectural/urban space of the emerging "information/communication age", exploring the dynamic interaction of urbanism and the space of mass media and communication networks. 'Soft Urbanism', dealing with the "soft" aspects of the city, not only intervenes in the realm of infrastructures, but also adopts their concept and paradigm: by supplying networks, 'Soft Urbanism' creates new fields of possibilities and frameworks for self-organizational processes.

Today, the communicational paradigm, with its "network-cities", "nodes" and "terminal architectures" is infiltrating and transforming the architectural/urban discourse and practice. Within this framework, 'identity®' is proposed as a conceptual tool for developing space in the information/communication age. This composite term consists of the combination/fusion of the word "density" of real/urban and "virtual"/media communication spaces (density of connections) and of the word "identity".

PUBLIC MEDIA URBAN INTERFACES

The local-based public 'tele-feeder facility (at your neighborhood's laundrette)', the primary unit of Public Media Urban Interfaces, enables the public to produce messages and to narrow-broadcast and receive them in a dynamic communication environment. Creating a locally-based dynamic media network from the bottom up, local events can be accelerated and reinforced to temporarily invade the global media space.

This link between global media space and local place having its interfaces in public space makes it possible to broadcast, access, influence the global media environment from the (urban) local neighborhood.

A demo project, exploiting London's urban tensions and structure unfolds strategies and visualizes aspects of these investigations, confronting a working hypothesis with the idiosyncrasies of a specific urban situation.

MEDIA BABIES

128 feeder houses (Media Babies) distributed evenly over the sprawling London towns and interconnected by means of a digital network supply eight Bridge Clubs located on the Thames with a continuous stream of (non-)events. The Media Baby at your neighborhood launderette consists of a Catching Gallery, two Intro Booths, a Debutantes' Booth, a Connector Platform and a Microwave Transmitter. The Catching Gallery is the area where the public can view the narrow/broadcasting activities of eight other Media Babies and one Bridge Club. Interactive technology enables the public to intervene in those narrow/broadcasts but also creates the possibility to establish direct contacts, thus forming endless smaller networks within the larger framework of Public Media Urban Interfaces.

BRIDGE CLUBS

The Bridge Club, providing the space for public events on an urban scale, bridges the gap between programs meant for local distribution and those that deserve a larger audience. Using the larger broadcast facilities available to the Club, the selected programs are experienced and transformed to suit a mass audience. The Bridge Club, being a knot in the net of translocalities, also serves the function of bridging programmatic events related to the site where the club is located.

REPLACE THE RIGHT TO VOTE WITH THE RIGHT TO BROADCAST

The publicly distributed 'Air Time for All' Smart Card allows you to produce and narrow/broadcast and also gives you the opportunity to adopt a message (not your own) by giving it extra air time. At the Media Baby in the neighborhood, you will find the necessary programming facilities to make your program and the means to monitor it as it goes on the air. You can also accelerate messages (not your own) by giving them extra broadcasting time with the help of the special Smart Card. And as a message gains strength, its chances of reaching a much larger audience increase, reaching more Media Babies, a Bridge Club, the city or even the whole country, Europe and the rest of the world.

SOFT URBANISM

In architecture's role of defining and materializing the spaces for social interaction, designing the relationship between the physical and digital public domain is becoming more and more of a challenge: investigating the relation and interconnection of the "soft" city with its finite material counterpart, the living environment, speculating about interfaces between the "virtual" and the material (urban) world and designing hybrid (analog-digital) communicational spaces.

Soft Urbanism deals with information/communication processes in public space, the soft aspects overlying the urban sprawl and modifying it: the invisible networks acting as attractors, transforming the traditional urban structure, interweaving,

ripping open and cutting through the urban tissue, demanding interfaces.

Soft Urbanism not only intervenes in the realm of infrastructures, but also adopts their concept and follows their paradigm. It brings an inherently flexible approach by expanding the field of possibilities of social interaction and opening new paths of urban development. Soft Urbanism is therefore not about determining places, but about creating frameworks for processes of self-organization. Not accepting being powerless in the face of the forces of the market, Soft Urbanism rethinks the strategies of interventions to reintroduce programmatic speculations about the public domain in urbanism.

The interventions will not be about control and determination, but about expanding infrastructures, frameworks for processes of self-organization. "Soft" strategies will be "bottom-up" strategies: rather than defining first the global result of the interaction and then determining the necessary relation between the elements in order to produce that interaction (which would be a "top-down" approach), simple rules for a set of independent elements will be developed and what emerges from the interaction of these elements is aleatory. According to biological models, these fields of interaction of plural forces could serve as a reservoir for the selection processes needed for the urban transformations.

MOBILE (CONTAINER) INFRASTRUCTURE

The Public Media Urban Interfaces and the Bridge Clubs together with a fleet of container-boats, caravans, rickshaws, taxis, trucks and limousines (equipped with transmitters/receivers and interactive life jackets) form a transportation/communication infrastructure servicing the users of the network and also commuters, nomads, migrants and tourists. The traditional translocal (mobility/communication) networks are thus knitted to the new glocal media networks (Internet/TV).

These capsules containing (from rudimentary to more sophisticated) media units are mobile nodes in the translocal networked environments, "vessels" within the complex multilayerings of the space of flows. They serve as spaces of exchange (export/import trade), as laboratories of glocal cultural bastardization. With this (container) mobile infrastructure new hybrid urbanity emerges, that is no longer tied to any one specific location but rather is the result of their interconnection.

URBAN IDENSITY®

Within these new hybrid ("real" and media) landscapes, these interconnected networks, traditional categories for analyzing space are becoming obsolete. A new field of planning and design, combining urbanism and architecture with information/communication networks and media spaces is emerging. It is a field that requires new tools and new research categories in order to develop the new hybrid network urbanities.

In the contradictory dynamics of today's urban environment with its antithetical tendencies of concentration and decentralization, of functional mix and segregation, traditional terms of spatial distinction lose their validity. In this fragmented urban landscape, categories like "centre" versus

"periphery", "landscape" versus "city" and "functional zoning" (such as living, working and recreation), are becoming obsolete.

The polarity between private and public space is disintegrating. Public and private environments are becoming intermingled and blurring in the fusion of media and "real" space. We see this in the hybrid spaces of the publicly broadcasted (inverted) privacies of reality TV and the "Big Brothers," in the media presence of war intruding on our living rooms and in the private (communication) space of mobile telephony within public urban space.

To understand this fusion, this superimposition and the interaction of media and "real" urban spaces, the new term 'idensity®' is introduced, replacing the obsolete conventional terms of spatial distinction. Idensity® does not differentiate between information/communication networks and urban/architectural environments. It thereby offers an integrated model for dealing with hybrid (media and "real") space in the information/communication age and incorporates a wide range of future (communication) spaces.

It is a composite term, combining the word "density" - of real (urban) and "virtual" (media) communication spaces (density of connections) - and the word "identity." 'Idensity®' integrates the concept of "density" (density of connections, density of physical and digital infrastructure, density of communication-spaces, etc.) with the concept of "identity" (image policies, urban brands, etc.). It can, for example, help in understanding the processes of spatial segregation and distinction between urban fragments that have qualities of 'global' performance and that can be seen as part of a "global urban condition" and those other, sometimes neighboring (parts of) cities that lose in relevance and disappear from (global) mental maps. It can therefore be implemented as an operative tool to steer the processes of urban development.

But it is not a mere summation of the concepts of "density" and "identity." It is instead a fusion, as it inverts "identity," linking it to communication, "identity" being defined by connectivity.

Therefore, it does not just address the "clear-cut identity, the particularity, the individuality of the traditional places or sites" but also the layered 'idensities' of the "non-lieux" ("non-places") [1] of today's generic cities, which are to be found especially in the realms of mobility and consumption (airports, hotels, shopping malls, motorway rest areas, etc.). It does not refer only to object-qualities but describes a field of superimposed (communication) spaces: the branded space of the chain-shop, the symbolic space of the traditional building the shop is located in, the media space of teleshopping, the communication space of the GSM..

This new term is implemented to describe and analyze the communication spaces of the coming "network society", a society not so much based on the traditional, relatively static structures of belonging in the family, the corporation or the state, but on flexible, dynamic, ever-changing networks of exchange and communication. It carries the discussion on the urban from the morphological level of a formal description of the network patterns of the "network city" to a more integrated structural understanding of the networks of spaces for social communication.

According to the traditional (bourgeois) concept of privacy, identity is based on private individuality. It is, however, important to be aware of the historicity of such a concept. As John Lucaks writes "Domesticity, privacy, comfort, the concept of the home and of the family [...] are, literally, principal achievements of the Bourgeois Age." [2] The notion of the "privy chamber" emerged in 17th century English literature at the same time as new private physical spaces came into being, when the introduction of the corridor layout in English interiors of the 17th century enabled the development of "private quarters." But the expression "privy chamber" is also used metaphorically for the soul. The "privy chamber" is the container of (private) identity.

In the last year of the 20th century, "Big Brother," the notorious reality-soap (with its networked container) was launched in Holland and was cloned and copied all over the planet. "Big Brother" shocked people profoundly and became a prime topic of debate in the media, from popular talk shows to scholarly journals ("Is this the End of Our Civilization?").

What was shocking in "Big Brother" was the broadcasting (the invasion) of privacy. The participants of the soap defined their identity not in the "privy chamber" but in the public networked environment of the broadcasting-container. The ENDEMOL soap was an interactive environment (the television audience had democratic rights, influencing the sequels). The captives in the container/networks witnessed their existence in the "Real Virtuality" [3] of their media presence. They experienced their identity within the 'densities' of the (communication) channels.

In the same year, 1999, a big campaign was launched in Holland. On most billboards in major and minor cities, men and women, youngsters and the elderly - in short, the average Dutch person - were declaring "ik ben Ben." This was not the mass expression of an identity crisis, but an advertising campaign for the launch of the new GSM company called "Ben," targeting the public at large. The slogan was based on a simple play on words, "ben" meaning in Dutch "I am" and "Ben" being a common man's name as well as the name of the mobile phone company.

But what makes this slogan such an interesting expression of our times is its definition of identity (I am: Ik ben) as connectivity ("Ben" being the network provider) with the 'identity@' of the urbanite being defined as the density of the (superimposed media/"real") communication spaces.

In February 2000 it was announced: "Ik Ben een jaar".

This advertising slogan expresses in a very direct way nothing other than a new view of subjectivity and identity. Villém Flusser, the philosopher of communication, would write: "The new image of man looks roughly like this: we have to imagine a network of interhuman relations, a 'field of intersubjective relations.' The strands of this web must be conceived as channels through which information (ideas, feelings, intentions and knowledge, etc.) flows. These strands get temporarily knotted and form what we call 'human subjects.' The totality of the threads constitutes the concrete sphere of life and the knots are abstract extrapolations. [...] The density of the webs of interhuman relations differs from place to place within the

network. The greater the density, the more 'concrete' the relations. These dense points form wave troughs in the field [...] The wave troughs exert an 'attractive' force on the surrounding field (pulling it into their gravitational field) so that more and more interhuman relations are drawn in from the periphery. [...] These wave troughs shall be called 'cities'." [4]

The term 'idensity' is a conceptual tool for researching and developing (social) space in the information/communication age.

* IMAGES ACCOMPANYING THIS ARTICLE CAN BE SEEN AT THE LEA WEBSITE: <http://lea.mit.edu>

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