

Theses on New Media and the City

Exchange between Pavlos Hatzopoulos and Geert Lovink
Theses on New Media and the City

PH: Are digital technologies transforming urban spaces?

GL: Much unlike many theorists have speculated about, there is no immediate effect. Maybe you express a wish, but as a matter of fact architects and urban planners have so far done remarkably little with the rise of new media over the past decades. They still seem to struggle with the arrival of the train, car and airplane. It is the urban experience that has been changed with the rise of wireless networks and portable devices, not the spatial organization itself. Architects still consider computers as inferior offline tools that assist the genius artist-engineer in drawing up 'virtual architecture'. They must feel a millennial superiority over all these ones and zeros; let alone that they have started to understand the networked nature of today's culture. What we should not be fooled about is their elegant and sophisticated play with metaphors. When you hear architects and urban planners talk, and look at their power point presentations, it's often quite impressive. But that's not our dreadful concrete jungle. Let me give you the example of public wireless networks, wifis, that are now being installed and soon will reach a critical mass. These free wireless networks will have a real impact on the level of streets, suburbs and even cities. It is citizens and in particular socially-innovative computer geeks that drive this development. It has a major impact if one can be anywhere and have conversations with your peers, friends and colleagues. This, for instance, radically changes the idea of having to be in a claustrophobic office. This 'telework' trend has been predicted for decades, but has finally arrived. And what happens? Real estate speculators still mass manufacture the same old standard office spaces, as if nothing has changed. And architectures seem all too willing to play this game with town planners and developers and will design a nice surface for these generic, boxed spaces.

PH: Why cyberculture cannot avoid the use of spatial metaphors like cyberspace and homepage?

GL: This was probably accurate in the nineties but is no longer the case. Spatial metaphors once helped new users to enter this unknown territory called the Internet. In 2005 there were already one billion users, worldwide.

The Net is a mass medium these days. Seen from the Digital Divide perspective this is 'only' 11% of the world population, but nonetheless, already twice that amount has a mobile phone... What is more interesting is the recombination of technologies as 'locative media' in which you have an awareness of space and locality, for instance, through the use of GPS data. The point however is that these concepts are no longer metaphorical. You are actually there with your car, handy or computer.

PH: Does the coming of the information society mark a politics of space or of time?

GL: Virilio would say time. I tend to disagree with him. What we struggle with, in the end, is not chronopolitics but the distribution and control of space. Why would there otherwise be a conflict in the Middle East if land grabs and colonization would be things of the past? The whole question of borders has been unresolved and in fact get worse if you look at the way in which 'Western' countries are building (electronic) walls against migrants and refugees. We could also say it in a different way. Now that we do not have time left and the interval to react tends to zero, what's left is the question of space. Yet, new technologies are not transcending time and space, let's forget such metaphysical nonsense. There can be 'telepresence' but this is not making 'old' problems simply go away.

PH: Why do so many of us make this self-evident equation between the city and contemporary urban life and new media?

GL: Lately I am fascinated how Indian friends of mine at www.sarai.net in Delhi talk about new media and 'the city' as if it is one and the same. Urban culture is a relatively new field of study for India's intellectuals while still 75% of its population is living in the rural areas. Previous generations of intellectuals were mainly preoccupied with rural issues. The "abstract machinery" of high rises, freeways and subways have not yet been the subject of serious engagement. The exciting work at the Sarai New Media Centre has to be seen as an attempt to create a rich cultural-political vocabulary to interpret the everyday of urban life. What constitutes democracy and public life in the age of Internet and free software? I can agree with all this but from the technology angle, let's say from the satellite perspective of Google Maps there is little evidence that urban areas are that much different from the rest of the globe, except for their infrastructural density. From a 21st century capitalist perspective rural areas in Asia and Africa are 'the final market' and arguably much bigger than those in the

cities. The fact that that the vast majority of humankind was written off in the 20th century should not impress Indian, Chinese and Brazilian entrepreneurs. Wireless networks make it so much easier to penetrate vast territories. Combine this with cheap mobile phones and laptops and you have an enormous educational and entertainment market. What these technologies at the moment do is to connect those that are left behind in the villages with family members that moved to the city. Western Union takes care of the money flows. However, at some point we'll see a reserve interest. I have to take care not to get too evangelical here but there is something appealing in what John Perry Barlow in back in 1995 called 'the global tissue that connects all synapses'. Despite all the mess and inequality in the world I can see that we'll get there, sooner than we anticipated. Good on you, Johnny!

PH: Can urban spaces be theorized as networks, in similar fashion to the new media, networks connecting people, their activities, and things?

GL: Yes but that has always been done. There is nothing new about 'cities as flows'. Ever since the construction of railways and stations in the centre of the walled cities it became all too visible what flows do to the built environment. The tail of destruction then continued with the construction of highways. However, the interesting question is: what is effect of fibre optical cables on cities, and not just financial districts and commercial office spaces, but on the population as a whole? Technology is no longer in the hand of a few corporations. This even counts for the latest and fastest. The time when high tech reaches you and me has been reduced to a few years. What does it mean that the new flows are by and large invisible? What is the implication that electronics are getting so small that we hardly see them? It could fairly well mean that this is the ideal condition to do nothing. We go through numerous revolutions and nothing changes! In fact we can (re)build more and more historical buildings and pretend we live in another century, much like that historical simulacrum where I was born, Amsterdam.

PH: What do you think should be the strategy against control: the establishment of open, public, or common spaces?

GL: What I dream of is the opening of media labs in which technologies of disturbance are developed and tested for 'civil society' use. I don't think it helps to simply ignore the massive attacks on privacy that are under way. As an example I must always think of the Israel-based communications company NetLine that introduced C-Guard, "a device that blocks cell-phone use in an

enclosed area and creates a predefined ring-free zone. The tiny wall-mounted gadget can be used to keep movie theaters quiet, prevent electromagnetic interference on airplanes and in hospitals, and enforce call-free zones on military bases, where eavesdroppers might tap security-sensitive conversations.” (Wired, August 1998). Just go to <http://www.c-guard.com>. We should not be too fixed only on the visible spectrum that is covered by cameras. There are already countless ways to sabotage these small RFID-tags. It’s just a matter how to democratize this secret-knowledge-for-all.