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From Representation to Performance:
Responsive Public Space

Abstract

What is the public sphere in cyberspace?

What should the public sphere in cyberspace be?

What should we do with the public sphere in cyberspace?

What can we do with the public sphere in cyberspace?

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What can we do with the public sphere in cyberspace?

We approach these questions by embedding them in two ways, historical and material. We ask: "What alternative ways of being together in public evolved over the centuries since the Greek agora?" and "What in fact is this stuff that cyberspace and public sphere are made of?"

Overall, our paper has three threads. In the first thread we concisely review some of the common terms of the debate about cyberspace and the public sphere. In the second thread, we provide a few evocative descriptions of social spaces and events whose roots precede the industrial age.
In the third thread, we propose a structural critique of how information and network technologies are designed, and propose an alternative approach to public space in the information age. We offer some ways to rethink how such technologies can be embedded in historically- as well as ontologically

Corso Saint Francoise 1905

rich ways that could support life-giving aspects of the public. We point to experimental hybrid media events being built by our association, sponge, that make concrete some of the concerns and approaches we highlight in the paper.

Major points:

1. Looking at the history of public spaces, we realize that spectrum of public action is much richer than what we typically see in modern informatic abstractions of the market and the agora. As many performance theory studies show us, much alternative public action is swept into the category of play, which we explore through projects such as sponge.

2. We shift attention from representation to performance. We make the move from maintaining representations of society to performing socially, and gain more supple ways of building and inhabiting settings for public activity.

3. We shift attention from alphabets and objects to substrate and field. This is analogous to shifting the concern of a municipal public commission from the shape of the windows or the kind of fixtures on a specific house, to the Earth on which- and the materials out of which people build their homes.

4. We shift attention from purely digital representation and simulation to material, embodied experience, augmented by responsive digital media.

5. We explore responsive spaces with art and speculative design as well as techno-scientific research.

1 Problematic Promises: Cybernetics and Information Theory

In the last few decades, we have witnessed the penetration of cybernetic and information-theoretic habits of thought far beyond their original domains. "Languaging" has now been replaced by the exchange of data, of information about events. Information is the universal solvent that reduces all forms of human experience to equivalencies. Overloaded with information, we circle, as lost satellites, around a decentralized freedom. The society lost the sense of community, it became a place of pure exchange. Every individual "Self" took the role of the "Other" on its shoulders, the role of creating difference, but as 'the essence of the otherness of the other lies in (…) indifference' (Karatani) the 'differentiated' information flows freely, but unnoticed. Karatani captured this reduction to transactions that become meaningless when we give up the collective construction of meaning.

Therefore, the multidisciplinary debate about the re/construction of public space is one of the most crucial discussions for the evolution of the future societies.

2 What's Public In Public Spheres?

In the enlightenment conception, what does the public sphere allow us to do? Damiris and Wild, in their paper "The Internet: A New Agora?" have perceptively and usefully described different modes of public behavior: rational action, social action and ethical action. We could gain another perspective on the public space by turning sideways and examining it as a domain of synchronicity, speech-action and commitment. In any event, we nuance the notion of public by distinguishing community from society, where society is not simply a union or a web of black-box communities but a vibratory medium in which communities can absorb influences and find dis/harmonics with distant communities. It is the rich confusion of our physical world, together with the instability of the virtual one, that allows hybrid public spaces to emerge. After a long period of individualization, people are urgently forming bonds across the globe, and these bonds need

from TGarden Installation concept

a lot of room to grow. The debate about what constitutes public space and the activities that evolve in them is not new. Every society infected by the notion of the Greek polis has its own ambivalent relationship with this concept of public space. On one hand, public space is necessary to mediate a community, on the other, it has a great subversive power. Historically, public spaces were not only a home to sellers, buyers and news-broadcasters, but also to alternatives, radicals, thieves and jesters. Building a public space is a project in which the whole community contributes to build a place where both personal and public memories can be stored and reused, a place that ties society together in rituals and common goals.

3 Historical Alternatives

What examples from history can we draw on for alternative ways of being public, of public performance? The well known examples are:

- Agora, classical basis for western democratic polis;
- Pre-capitalist Market, base of an exchange economy between different communities;
- Renaissance Italian Piazza, meeting place where most of the everyday life took place;
- Garden, place for reconciliation, meditation and interaction with people and nature;
- Street used not as a transport conduit, but as a locus of experiencing a city in time;
- Fair or Festival, itinerant public event that adapts to different local conditions;
- Mediaeval Circus, parade of tolerated differences;
- Situationists' psychogeographic experiments and playful approaches
  to urbanism;

In these spaces or events, especially in the Garden, the Street, the Circus, the Festival and situationist drift through the city play is an important public activity. "… a secret theatre, in which both artist & audience have completely disappeared - only to reappear on another plane, where life & art become the same thing, the pure giving of gifts (…) Potentially, everyone is now some kind of artist - & potentially every audience has regained its innocence, its ability to become the art that it experiences." (Bey)
aspects of these public spaces, that could inform our approach to hybrid or augmented spaces. These aspects include material resistances, territory, temporality and synchronicity and ritual, commitment and empathy, the aesthetic span between logic and sensuality.

Both mentioned historical examples and public experiments that we conduct today should be fully lived interactive experiences, spaces based on the temporal rhythms of emergence and disappearance, where the experience is a synergy of an eerie ambience, smells, sounds, change and exchange, memory, prophecy and ecstatic dance. The language of the these spaces is alive and shared among its participants, not owned by anyone, but spontaneously generated by everyone, in all variety of individual argot.

Breugel. Booth Theatre and Fair

4 From Description To Performing

Wittgenstein's discussion of rule-following is a good starting point to talk about a public space that is constructed on the fly by its participants. By shifting attention from representation to performance, we shift the focus of design from technologies of static representation (e.g. snap-shot database schemas with data from forms), to technologies of creation and performance. Of course, the social forms that we mentioned earlier all have rules and conventions, some

of which are followed pretty strictly even if they are tacit. However we think of these rules not as chains or shells encasing our activity, but rather as collective agreements arising after the fact, emerging as conventions in the course of play. We think of rules as constructed by newcomers to the game, for the newcomers' benefit, as a way to summarize history. And we think of rules as scaffolding to enable the players to improvise against a provisional framework, and reach beyond the scope of their past activity if they desire.

Christopher Alexander, in his book, The Timeless Way of Building, viewed each space as alive with events that were scaffolded by the geometry of that space. Schematizing Alexander's description, the geometry of a place gives a shape to the imagination of the inhabitant, the imagination inspires the behavior, and the behaviors build the event. What sorts of repetition and variety emerging in play can we expect in cyberspace?

5 Malleable Spaces

How can we construct alternate forms of public social action in our contemporary mixed architectures built out of computation, digital media and steel? What are some "techniques" that we might invent appropriate to such hybrid architecture?

In our globalized society, communities that used to be comfortably bounded and closed are exposed to exogenous and even alien language. If language is the appropriate medium of public activity, then translation becomes all-important. Translation, the "Holy-Grail" of artificial intelligence is a living process. Could translation become an organism living inside the cyber-public space alongside more automatic processes?

When thinking about the immunological aspect of autopoeitic systems, students of living and techno-scientific entities saw that the Internet could

3d rendering of the TGarden environment

not be transparent any more than an organism could live without skins. Under the impact of plague messages, ISP's grew spam filters and firewalls like skin to protect their members. But perhaps now we can build a more subtle form of immune system, that lives in the interstitial fluid inside and outside our hybrid bodies. An immune system that doesn't simply destroy or eject alien objects, but modifies the habits of the body in order to accommodate the presence of other living processes.

Static Space to Elastic Space to Responsive Space

The society has long ago started moving away from an aesthetic for a "built" environment that assumes the neat separation of modernist design — so masterfully epitomized by Eames — between user and object. There are no clear rules or boundaries, no definitely resolved conflicts (Stuart Hampshire) and no eternally fixed resolution of interests (Chantal Mouffe & Ernesto Laclau) in a truly democratic realm. Given this, we argue that public space should be created as heterogeneous domains and remain polyphonic, that its totality cannot be grasped in any one schema.

The inhabitants of a medieval market could make sense of their environment despite the lack of fixed total schema. Braudel remarked that in 14C Paris, servants gauged when to rush out into the market not by watching clocks (which didn't exist) but by attending to the varying quality of the mixed roar of vendors and hawkers voices as they entered the streets of the city. How can we achieve such collective intuition and pliability in today's public spaces? What is the stuff, the fabric of society that we wish to make elastic? This includes the communication networks, the flow of information, systems of identification, systems of access to credit. What elasticity means must be worked out in the course of playing the games of communicating, identifying, buying and borrowing, but we want to point out only that designing elasticity into public domain applies to the computational as well as the physical.

This places the emphasis on transformation, rather than object. In the modern era, much information and social technology is devoted to testing for when an object is of type X. Now we are creating technologies that transform an object from type X to type Y. Some of these technologies will be computational, but other will be social conventions. It is essential that we carry the design of public space not as a purely cybernetic, computational design, but as a design of material, built, inhabited environment, which is partially augmented by computational processes. *Such environments will become not only elastic but responsive spaces.*

6 Examples

If we, the inhabitants of these elastic, responsive, computationally augmented public spaces wish to take responsibility for the shape and the behavior of these environments, we will have to engage in experiments in real-time and in life. We will have to take these spaces apart and reconstruct them many times and across multiple cultural contexts. Sponge and FOAM associations are dedicated to constructing public experiments along these lines as a way to rapidly develop a feel for inhabiting such hybrid spaces, through experiments such as:

- Construction of live spaces from the detritus of a "dead" public space;
- Turning parking lots into parks using digital means;
- Working with heat as pliable media;
- Transforming clothing into dance-writing;
- Building a media sauna in which people sweat out the toxic icons, dead metaphors and routinized lingo that have been embossed into our bodies;
- Constructing an alchemical field in which the participants instigate processes of transformation and transmutation;
- Developing a network of public gardens and inhabiting them not only with the local bio-diversity, but with global arts and media, by organizing an itinerant festival taking place in the gardens instead of in convention centers;
- Taking the media out of the computer and into the physical world, inflating the two-dimensionality of the digital media into real life, allowing a continuous, natural interaction between the physical and the virtual.

Over the next few years, we will build these experiments first in Europe and North America, and take what we learn into the domain of public, urban design. We invite all interested in such experiments to join us.

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Temple in the trunk of a Banyan tree in India