POP-UP CITY
URBANISM, ONCE THE STUFF OF GLASS, CONCRETE AND STEEL, IS NOW AS LIKELY TO EXIST ON YOUR PALM-TOP, SAYS DUTCH ARCHITECTURAL PRACTICE STUDIO POPCORN

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In online games such as *World of Warcraft*, millions of players have developed a virtual global economy.
What can we learn from video director Hyena Williams’ observation, “Whatever continent you’re on, the cool kids have the urban look”? Do cool kids only live in cities? Or has urbanity become a “look” in a fashion shoot the size of the globe? After losing the west “house” to dance music, planners and architects have to admit that another essential component of their professional vocabulary has been colonised by more frivolous domains. “Urban” has moved elsewhere. Look at it as a combination of different “mediascapes” and you will begin to understand where it has gone.

MULTIMEDIALITY
Where once the light show that is New York’s Times Square was a rare example of media presence, nowadays most metropolitan centres are wrapped in electronic screens. The average person’s senses are continuously triggered, stimulated and enhanced by digital messages beaming out the latest fashion frenzy of Levi’s, the thirst-quenching promise of Coca-Cola and the cool chic of D&G. Boom-up TV screens and message boards inform us non-stop about news and weather. Long before we reach our destinations, we know which roads have traffic jams and which car parks have vacant bays. There are also analogue images: slogans, stickers, graffiti and posters on every possible surface. All are battling for our attention. The city is now a collection of media that have merged into each other. These mass-mediatic qualities prove that the classical concept of “the city” has become problematic. How can we form an image of a city when a constant flood of information and hypermediated images distabilises our perception of our physical environment? It is unclear when the city can live in its real like. It has become a bastard landscape in which everything is continuously transformed and re-mediated. As the city has turned into a hybrid place in which several spatial conditions merge into each other, can we do anything other than treat it a mass medium in which we now happen to live?

VIRTUALITY
To say that the urban has become a mediated baistard is not enough. Our habitat also reaches into virtual space, “the city” is increasingly comprised of the virtual “scapes” of different media. In Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPG), a new world has emerged that exploits the possibilities of broadband Internet. In games like Everquest, World of Warcraft and Project Entropolis, millions of players worldwide meet and interact in three-dimensional neighbourhoods. A global economy has developed in which virtual houses, hotels and land are traded between users. In 2004, a gamer bought a virtual space resort, complete with mining and hunting taxation rights, for $100,000. Such “properties” are sold on special websites like mypanetcom and Internetgame. On eBay, you’ll encounter a virtual economy that rivals those of some first-world countries. The developers of Project Entropolis have taken another step in making the virtual gaming world with the “real world,” announcing that it will soon be possible to use ATM machines to trade in the money used in their online gaming environment for “real” money. Ten Project Entropolis Dollars (PED) will represent $1. In an environment in which actual and virtual collides, the future is always present.

CONNECTIVITY
The virtual worlds of online gaming show that nobody cares that your real name, gender or age is not the same as that of your avatar. Having sex with a 50-year-old male chorist who looks like a 28-year-old female model is no big deal. Authenticity is of no importance. Although nearly every MMORPG offers players the possibility of marrying online in a wedding chapel, complete with rings and a priest, testing relationships are a rarity. Outside the traditional city, new social environments have developed. In mediated realms, “free” communities, not based on strong ties, are the norm. An MMORPG is not only a form of gaming, but also one of socialising. As a consequence, several game developers draw upon the mini-hours and intelligence of their audience by offering them roles in the design of the environments they inhabit. The 19th-century idea of the isolated genius has turned into a “screw-in”, in which the intelligence of a group of individuals is mobilised and made productive. This social reality is developing away from historical and geographical ties and is completely determined by global popular culture. Connectivity causes a “mediatization” of public spheres that all have local connections. As a result, with the electronic globalisation of pop culture, we witness an unfolding of ever-changing togetherness.

INTERACTIVITY
Balling in the city means having a continuous interaction with our environment. Interactivity has become our very essence. New York rap star Fat Joe was wrong when he told us to “slow back.” Now we lean forward, over our keyboards, mobile phones and game consoles, embraicing technology in a post-puritistic state of mind. No mobile phone; no business. No laptop; no friends. The urban exists in nodes, access points, where closed systems meet. Interactivity, the market of urbanity, is an entrance into different settings, spheres or neighbourhoods, “real” or virtual. Interactive systems also mutually influence each other. Therefore interactivity should be approached in terms of its social context, and architecture’s logical function will be as a connection, allowing us to move from one closed-off environment to the other. Restraining some people form, and allowing others access to, a certain point will be the most important function of architecture in this version of the future.

ESCAPING THE CITY
It is essential to understand the city in terms of its mediial qualities. The discourse of the city has long been denied a true media theory. Virulent and energetic human communications only exist when they are connected to you, to me, to your house, to the street, to the next city, to fashion, to magazines, to TV. We need to detach the word “urban” from “the city.” A city is only urban when it misses a vast range of media, has a strong virtual infrastructure and combines splintered public spheres in an interactive space. So, to find the city, we have to start seeing it as a node where multiwirality, virtuality, connectivity and interactivity strengthen each other. This place is not given; it can be actualised — here and now. We call this assembly point “Nodal Urbanity.” Nodal Urbanity destroys our idea of the city as an inhabited place of a particular size and in a location that you can find on Google Earth. Nodal Urbanity is not another attempt to deconstruct the notion of the city. It puts forward a new kind of city that is no longer stuck in a physical domain. It is a relational space that has been stripped of inherent qualities and stable structures. This dynamic space is unstable and contingent. Combine the four mediascapes and urbanity pops up anywhere and any time.

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