

Detroit: connecting the needle with the city

Published in: *Cross-Reference*, vol. 00, issue 00, The Hague, 2006.

Alex de Jong and Marc Schuilenburg

From the end of the 1950's Detroit has seen more than half of her nearly two million inhabitants leave. Detroit now has fewer inhabitants than she had a century ago. Riots, mass-emigration, disappearing industries and implementations of new highways have turned Detroit into a fragmented city with inhabitants that retreat behind walls of all sorts. It can be argued that Detroit has the doubtful honour to be the forerunner of a global trend that is called 'splintering urbanism'.(1) This trend shows how, under the pressure of retreating governments, privatisation, the rise of the car ownership and the growing importance of media, cities are fragmenting in numerous ways. In the comfort of our car, that is equipped with the latest gadgets like plasma screens, DVD-players and automated maps, people commute between their controlled working and living environment. Often the roads that are used are privatised and tolled, providing fast connections between enclaves and fortresses. The spaces in between are considered unsafe concrete jungles, supposedly only fit for beggars, junkies and gang-members.

Next to the deconstruction of her modernist homogenous city Detroit also witnessed a second and parallel process. Typically, this process is driven by forces that cannot be found on the tables of planners, developers and critics. Detroit's tomorrow has a shadow future that is planned with audiotapes, samplers, drum machines and black vinyl. From the beginning of the 1980's the electronic dance music called 'techno' has proven how the fragmentation of Detroit's urban environment is part of a re-structuring of the outlines of the city. Far away from the scope of sociologists, urban planners and architects Detroit reinvented herself into a media city, which uses the untapped energy potential of sound. Designed by DJ's and producers a more vibrant version of Detroit has been created.

Techno-rebels or star architects?

The term 'techno-music' originates from *The Third Wave*, a book by the American futurologist Alvin Toffler. Toffler describes how the energy usage of any society, it's ways of production and distribution are interrelated into one system. He calls this bigger system a *techno-sphere*, which has a characteristic form at each stage of social development. The *techno-sphere* has gone through three waves of changes during the history of mankind. The first wave was the agrarian revolution. The next massive change came with the industrial wave. After three hundred years we are now witnessing the wave of the digital revolution. For Toffler the information and communication technologies will cause a tsunami of fundamental changes in our society. *Techno-rebels* will be the most important people of this era: 'nuclear engineers, bio-chemists, physicians, public health officials, and geneticists as well as millions of ordinary citizens.'(2)

In 1984, inspired by Toffler, Juan Atkins and Rick Davis started making electronic dance music under the name Cybotron, a partial contraction of cyborg and electronic. With their classic tracks they gave Detroit the nickname it still has today. 'Tech-noh Cit-eee', yells the distorted voice of Rick Davis in the eponymously titled number, which is about the new condition of Detroit after the departure of the car industry and the race riots of the late sixties. That the city had broken down into separate enclaves in the huge areas of asphalt and abandoned factory sites is not, for Atkins and Davis, reason for moping about the decline of the city and the loss of its mainstay industry. 'You can look at the state of Detroit as a plus,' Atkins has said, 'We're at the forefront here. When the new technology came in, Detroit

collapsed as an industrial city, but Detroit is Techno City: it's getting better, it's coming back around.'

Atkins and Davies see in early videogames a demonstration of Toffler's ideas. As they observe how videogames are able to create urban spaces, the spatial framework of videogames in their eyes offers new possibilities to meet each other in different ways. The digital structure of games provides Atkins and Davies with the idea for an open system of connections, which they call the Grid: *'We used a lot of video terms to refer to real-life situations. We conceived of the streets or the environment as being like the Game Grid. And Cybotron was considered a 'super-sprite'. Certain images in a video programme are referred to as 'sprites', and a super sprite had certain powers on the game-grid that a regular sprite didn't have.'* The multiple spatial dimensions of videogames lead to tracks as *Alleys of Your Mind*, *Cosmic Cars* and *Clear*. But it is in *Techno City* that a coherent, inspired space is opened in which sound is the most imaginative and connective element for the formation of an urban spatiality.

At the peak of its decline, Detroit is reinvented through popular media. *Techno City* is the answer of Atkins and Davies to the film *Metropolis* (1926) by Fritz Lang. *Metropolis* was filmed in the UFA Neu Babelsberg studios near Berlin, and had its premiere on 10 January 1927. The film is about the inequality between employers and workers, but is best known for its dazzling backdrop of soaring skyscrapers with crowded highways bridging the gaps between them and aeroplanes filling the air space. *Metropolis* is for Davies the ultimate proof that a city that is subject to physical laws can also be evoked by the ephemeral character of a soundscape: *'Techno City was the electronic village. It was divided into several sections. I'd watched Fritz Lang's 'Metropolis' - which had the privileged sector in the clouds and the underground worker's city. I thought there should be three sectors: the idea was that a person could be born and raised in Techno City - the worker's city - but what he wanted to do was work his way to the cybodrome where artists and intellectuals reside. There would be no Moloch, but all sorts of diversions, games, electronic instruments. Techno City was the equivalent of the ghetto in Detroit: on Woodward Avenue the pimps, pushers etc. get overlooked by the Renaissance Tower.'*

Detroit: a sonic revolution

After the city's loss of a coherent visual unity, techno has recreated a collective envelope that is no longer to be looked for in a material environment: streets, buildings and squares. Detroit's new collectivity occurs in a sonic domain which takes a different approach to the disintegrating visible urban environment. According to Derrick May the city will be all about a distinctive flavour: *'It's the emptiness in the city that puts the wholeness in the music. It's like a blind person can smell and touch and can sense things that a person with eyes would never notice. And I tend to think a lot of us here in Detroit have been blind: blinded by what was happening around us. And we sort of took those other senses and enhanced them, and that's how the music developed.'* Later on, younger producers like Jeff Mills, Mike Banks and Robert Hood joined in the collective Underground Resistance to pursue the same line of thinking. UR calls itself a movement that wants to change *'through sonic revolution'*. By staying underground the collective wants to *'combat the mediocre audio and visual programming that is being fed to the inhabitants of Earth, this programming is stagnating the minds of the people.'*

As an extreme version of May's observation UR is completely withdrawn from the streets. While staying underground they try to change people's minds with interstellar beats. For a long time the members of UR refused to be photographed without their bandana's obscuring their identities. Linking specific sounds and rhythms with typical features of the city now creates the *distinct flavour* of Detroit. Every track gives Detroit a new sensation. Not

only do the rhythms make you dance spasmodically like a robot, also the music makes the city into an immediate experience. Without having to see skyscrapers, roads, highways or office blocks, techno will make you feel Detroit. That is why driving along an empty highway through a deserted neighbourhood to the music of *Cosmic Cars* was for Cybotron no less than sensational experience of a reinvented city: '*Stepping on the gas. Stepping on the gas in my cosmic car.*'

Sonic urbanism

In many ways the raves that took place in the dark basements, night-clubs and studio's of Detroit represents a way of thinking that is not only musically cutting edge. With the growing importance of media in general and popular media in particular the splintering of our once coherent urban environments is counteracted in ways that defy our ideas of what a city should be. In these 'old' notions physical space is still regarded as an objective stage or absolute entity, which can be analysed independently of time and matter. It has a perceptive logic in which an object and the observer are always facing one another with a neutral space between them. However, when you hear the beats of techno, you are always in the middle surrounded by sounds. As a consequence the beats and rhythms of Detroit techno make clear that it is time to approach both sound and our notion of what a city should be in a completely different way. The city is no longer limited to its physical presence. Only a medial diversity will make it urban.

Notes:

- (1) Graham, S. and Simon, S., *Splintering Urbanism: Networked Infrastructures, Technological Mobilities and the Urban Condition*, Routledge, New York, 2001.
- (2) A. Toffler, *The Third Wave* (1980), New York, Bantam Books, 1990, p. 150.