

SHORTSTORY

OPEN SPACES

&

LITTLE SISTERS

by Marc Schuilenburg

Technology has been an integral part of our lives for some years now. A new generation of designers and urban development planners use technology for the design of both personal space and large-scale urban areas. Focussing on the personal environment (the car, our house, the office, etc.), we see an impressive migration of computer technology to all kinds of objects designed to make our lives more comfortable and to respond to the needs of the individual. This is called ambient intelligence. Technical devices are invisibly integrated in the walls of our house, in our clothes, our bank cards, or even in our bodies; all of which we do not seem to perceive as intrusive or as a violation of our privacy. Examples are microchips in televisions and microwaves that operate wirelessly and respond to the wink of an eye or a simple hand gesture. Also the 'intelligent' refrigerator, which keeps stock of our groceries and informs the supermarket of our shopping list, is an example of user-friendly intelligence designed to adapt to our preferences and moods. The user does not have to adapt to the technology; the technology adapts to the user.

The magical promise of ambient intelligence is that it is designed to provide service and support. It will heighten our sense of comfort and security. We like that. After all, our time spent queuing in supermarkets can hardly be put into perspective. On average, we spend at least one year of our lives in queues. However, there is more to this issue that meets the eye. For instance, what happens with your intelligent fridge if the profile of your roommate is tagged because he stole a candy bar in a supermarket? And how can we relate to the space between our kitchen and the supermarket? Is it a private or public environment ... or something completely different?

In order to elucidate upon this, technology must be viewed in a much broader context. It is not neutral, quite the opposite. Technology covers the way in which our social reality is experienced. It not only leads to a different partitioning of the space in the city, but also contributes to a specific understanding of ourselves.

Capturing the sense of space in the city can prove to be a bit of a challenge, but a bird's-eye view quickly reveals that three 'hard lines' give city life consistency, coherence, and direction. These lines encompass people and have a history of their own. They divide the city and its inhabitants in specific areas. Such strict divisions often have a political-economical basis and are ideologically founded. Once drawn, they produce specific effects and serve a particular purpose. What divisions are we referring to?

Firstly, binary oppositions such as 'city-countryside' and 'nature-culture' come to mind. Long ago these divisions ensured that city dwellers felt protected and sheltered from dangers lying outside the sphere of their influence. Advancing urbanization has weakened both divisions. Other oppositions, however, have taken their place. The distinction 'public-private', for example, which goes back to the French Revolution. At that time two spheres were created in order to convey what was meant by 'life'. The private sphere is where the authorities should not intervene; behind closed doors each individual is entitled to his own desires and beliefs. In the public sphere, however, the individual becomes a citizen who is expected to let public interest prevail over his own desires and beliefs. The public sphere is where you should be protected by the authorities from people who might harm you.

Secondly, we see that the city is divided in ever-expanding circles. This is the second 'hard line'. It starts with the bed, followed by the room, then the house, the street, the neighbourhood, the borough, the city, etc. These 'circular divisions' are ever-expanding and, consequently, so is the environment in which we live and move. Each circle encompasses one or more other circles. The nature of the circle changes as soon as elements of a small circle are absorbed by a larger circle, are coupled with other elements, or simply disappear. The larger the circle, the more complicated the social structure and relations within this inner world.

Thirdly, there are 'linear divisions'. These regard the different periods or phases in our life succeeding each other chronologically: family life, school, army, career, etc. The transitions between these phases is what we refer to as 'growing up'. On the one hand this third line is characterized by the function-specific position of each phase. Every place -school, military camp, work - has its idiosyncrasies, or, in other words, its own physical, social, and symbolic characteristics. On the other hand, each phase is concluded when the next one begins. At school, writes Deleuze in 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', they tell you that you are not at home anymore. At work they tell you: 'You are not at school anymore'. The result of all of this is a succession of phases and spaces in which the individual moves from point to point as if something new could be added to his life constantly.

These three hard lines have been reflected upon and written about considerably. Historical research has shown that each line has its own dynamics, which do not always dovetail with the other two. They often ignore each

other; sometimes even turn against each other, but more often they reinforce each other, overlap, or converge in new divisions.

Such historical tracings are valuable in themselves, but they do little justice to the history of a more invisible space through which we move. This 'space' goes beyond the classical dichotomies and modernistic divisions of the urban space: it runs straight across the three divisions described here. We call this invisible space an 'open' or 'medial space'.

The definition of the word 'open' is 'not shut' (doors, gates, etc.), but also 'not covered, naked, clear'. The term expresses a notion of origin. In the words of urbanist Pieter Uyttenhove: 'Each beginning, each origin - birth, Big Bang, awakening, liberation, breakthrough - is a form of opening'. Even though the meaning of the word adapts to the spirit of the times and to the local circumstances, in the world of architecture and urban development it is mainly used to describe publicly accessible space. This is referred to as public space. This is where people can freely meet and exchange ideas.

The character of public space has changed significantly over the past centuries. In the 18th century it encompassed coffee houses and parks which served as public meeting places where differences of opinions were settled and the public opinion was formed. Shopping arcades and publicly accessible libraries symbolized the modern public nature of society in the 19th century. Places referred to as 'mass private properties' are of more recent date. These include shopping centres, amusement parks, sports stadiums, and office parks. Although these areas are usually private property, they undeniably have a public function. They serve as a space where people can build a united world. The same can be seen in the virtual environments of online games such as 'World of Warcraft' and 'Second Life', where eleven to twelve million people gather every day.

In spite of the metamorphoses of public space over the centuries, this space has always been a clear example of the first hard line. The dichotomy 'public-private' has served its purpose quite well for many centuries, but it now seems to be past its prime. If one looks at the changes in the urban landscape with an open mind one will see that, to a degree, public space and private space overlap in various areas. These overlaps are never stable or static. They are not sharply delineated and constantly change their shape, range, and composition due to several causes. Developments such as privatization, globalization, and a decreasing trust in the extent to which urban space can be effected by government policies, for example. The most important reason, however, is rooted in the influence of new technologies (rfid-tags, chips, smart dust, etc.), which cause overlaps not only in the physical and virtual space, but especially in the public and private space. This digital infiltration - described by Peter Sloterdijk as a new phase of the globalization process - not only made the city a part of a trans-

national dynamic, but has also had an influence on its physical environment. This allows us to be private in a public space and public in a private space. How does this happen?

Back to the fridge.

In an information-based environment strict divisions such as 'private-public' dissolve. This means that the relation between public and private itself has changed. Separate areas are connected and subsequently fulfil another function in another connection. In other words, delineated space to which access is restricted is absorbed by an 'open' or 'medial space'. This space realizes itself in what it has made disappear. The same technologies used to deliver groceries to our house also bridge the distance between our kitchen and the supermarket. Our house and the shop thus no longer operate as separate entities; instead there is a continuous connection via modern information technologies. Bearing this in mind, can we still maintain that hard lines separate 'inside' and 'outside'? Or should we argue that 'inside' and 'outside' are inextricably intertwined?

The 21st century, the century in which technological media have first comprehensively penetrated our lives, presupposes a new conception of space. Instead of being finite in its boundedness, an open space is flexible and derives its form from the context within which it is contained. It does not have a well-defined content or fixed form. It can be expanded in every direction and is confined only by a horizon that moves as people, goods and information move. Illustrative of such territorial expansion is imprisonment. Electronic supervision, which allows the inmate to serve his prison sentence outside the walls of a prison cell, shifts the prison environment to the inmate's immediate home environment. But also the transition from school to work and home has become diffuse. The factory is no longer the working place you leave behind after working hours. With the rise of immaterial labour it has become customary to take work home, to finish a report in the weekend, and to check e-mails during vacation. At the same time, the working place has changed into a feel-good environment, with cosy coffee corners and comfortable lounge areas; all of this to make your time at work as enjoyable as possible and, maybe, make it feel a little bit like home.

All of this does not mean that you can do whatever you please in an open space. Deleuze writes: 'We don't have to stray into science fiction to find a control mechanism that can fix the position of any element at any given moment – an animal in a game reserve, a man in a business (electronic tagging)'. The introduction of the shops ban order illustrates this. This order is used increasingly by shop owners in large-scale urban areas. One who shops in a shopping area that has such a policy and displays anti-social behaviour may have a shops ban order issued against him for all the shops that support the policy. Steal one candy bar from one particular supermarket and you are faced with a shops ban for all the shops in the city

centre. Not only that particular supermarket is off limits; all other shops are as well. Since 2005 over a thousand of such shops ban orders have been issued in cities as The Hague and Rotterdam.

Although the term 'shops ban' suggests that only shops are concerned, theatres, studios and galleries, hotels, banks, restaurants, and even chemists use such ban orders as well. Invisible networks allow these companies to exchange personal details of people who have been issued a ban order (facial features, address, name, etc.). A distinctive type of 'infrastructure' is installed on multiple levels, not only on the scale of global flows of people, goods and information, but also on the scale of streets, shops and homes, all in order to create a sense of security. In other words: information on who is and isn't welcome.

Because of technologies such as 'face-check', CCTV and shared databases, these spaces are increasingly taking on a life of their own. In that sense they are not passive shells but rather active processes. Time and time again one is forced to ask oneself the question: am I still permitted access? An open space, therefore, is not a homogeneous or undivided space as if it contained no segments or rifts. After all, it may contain several spaces, like several languages may exist within a language. Admittedly, an open space is not restricted by the three hard lines described here, but access can be partially restricted for certain people. A cooperative environment thus becomes an opposing environment, as in the case of the shops ban order.

The shops ban order can be distinguished from the detailed forms of discipline, as Michel Foucault described them in his classic book *Discipline and Punish*. This type of security technique is not aimed at normalization through a process of enclosure which re-establishes the status quo. Access may be denied somewhere else in the Netherlands as well. In contrast to a 'punishment mentality', in which a person is punished because he has committed a wrongful act in the past, this future-oriented approach is based on a 'precaution mentality', that is associated with the potential for loss, harm, injury or destruction. Its purpose is to make the future more certain. Therefore, this technique is no longer meant to keep one inside a closed space, but is installed in order to create a open space, which allows 'free' movement, while being perfectly controlled. This is also a key theme in the film *Minority Report* in which technical devices identify certain people as possible perpetrators before they have actually committed a crime.

All sorts of invisible 'open' or 'medial spaces' come into being in our urban landscape. They unmake spatial boundaries of a given entity, such as the city, and create new assemblages in which people 'act and speak' and are reassembled together. However, what has received little attention is the fact that also a different self-consciousness is created in these spaces. So,

if the distance is bridged between 'house and shop', 'prison and home' and 'work and school' in the face of the rise of a precaution society, what will become of the homo clausus? What will capture the state of mind of a contemporary individual? Would the person, who slowly but surely hands over the most intimate details of his human existence in order to sustain the flow, not best be characterized as a homo transparantus?

The characterization of a homo transparantus marks those persons who have 'revealed themselves'. Once identified, they can be continuously monitored and followed through different technologies and the integration of computer systems and databases. At the same time, these technologies are continuously mapping the 'factors of risk' of an individual person. Our body has become pure information. We no longer find ourselves dealing with a universal or general category of mankind. We have become informants on ourselves. We are 'dividuals': physically embodied human subjects that are endlessly divisible and reducible to data representations via technologies of control, like computer-based systems. The implications are that uncertain elements or 'risk-persons' are set apart and become 'neutralized'.

This form of precaution leads to a great deal of speculation about whether we have entered George Orwell's world of 'Big Brother is watching you'. Such a dystopian view, however, has not been realized the way George Orwell imagined. The Big Brother metaphor suggests that everything is watched and observed from one single point. In our cities, however, all kinds of identity control practices are proliferating in everyday life. A whole variety of practices – tax offices, supermarkets, banks, neighbourhoods, hospitals, and insurance companies – has been set up to make it possible for people to anonymously report their neighbours on issues varying from social benefit fraud to domestic violence, from suspicious behaviour to an actual crime being committed.

This is what Orwell seems to have overlooked when he described the role of technology in his novel 1984. Instead of Big Brother, it is now better to speak of Little Sisters. ■

Recommended readings:

De Jong, A. & M. Schuilenburg (2007), *Mediapolis. Popular Culture and the City*, Rotterdam: 010-Publishers.

Deleuze, G. (1995), *Postscript on the Societies of Control*, in: *Negotiations 1972–1990*, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 172–182.

Romein, E. & M. Schuilenburg (2008), *Are you on the fast track? The rise of surveillant assemblages in a post-industrial age*, in: *Architectural Theory Review*, vol. 13, no. 3, p. 337–348.

Uyttenhove, P. (2006), 'De open stad', in: M. Dings (red.) *De stad*, Rotterdam: Uitgeverij 010, p. 263–273.