

NODAL URBANITY

Alex de Jong and Marc Schuilenburg

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Under the name Studio Popcorn, architect Alex de Jong (NL, 1972) and philosopher/jurist Marc Schuilenburg (NL, 1971) conduct research on the relations between the media and urban processes. Their book *Mediapolis. Popular Culture and the City*, in which they expound a new theory of the city on the basis of the themes 'virtual urbanism', 'sonic communities' and 'nodal urbanity', was recently issued by Uitgeverij 010 Publishers. On the tenth anniversary of Archined, Schuilenburg gave a lecture on the changing significance of public space in the nodal city.

INTRODUCTION

Public space refers to the streets and squares of a city. It serves as a symbol for the spatial and cultural aspects of urban life. At its best, public space offers the prospect of social intercourse between different groups of people. This is sometimes referred to as the public domain. This domain denotes a space in which views and opinions can be shared with others. It is thus a place for the free encounter of diverse groups, cultures, lifestyles, and ideas. The philosopher Hannah Arendt expresses this function as follows: 'The reality of the public domain relies on the simultaneous "being there" of the countless perspectives and aspects in which our common world manifests itself, and which can never be measured with a common yardstick or covered by a common denominator.'¹

The places where people freely encounter one another and exchange ideas have changed radically in character and location during the last few centuries. In the eighteenth century, coffee houses acted as public meeting

places where differences of opinion could be thrashed out and a public opinion established. During the nineteenth century, shopping arcades and publicly accessible libraries became symbols of the modern public realm. Another century later, the role of the streets and squares shifted to the main commercial centres in cities like Tokyo and Los Angeles. Groups of youths hang around all day in the covered-in boulevards of the malls, flaunting their latest purchases. The public space is thus not an autonomous zone which has retained a permanent character or place through history. Its identity is not set in advance. The nature of public space changes both in time and place.

The sociologist Manuel Castells characterizes the present era by reference to a network society. The territory of a city is, in this case, no longer determined by physical space alone. The virtuality of different streams or networks plays an important part in the spatiality factor. When certain regions, cities and ter-



territories are not embedded in these streams, they are, as Castells argues, deprived of the technological infrastructure necessary for communication, innovation, production and consumption – in short, for living in a broader connection. Considering the importance this implies for the global span of information and communication technologies, the question of what turns a place into a public space or even a public domain remains unanswered. What is public about a public space, and how spatial is that publicness in this era of electronic globalization?

A MULTIMEDIA CITYSCAPE

Who can fail to recognize the electronic billboards of Times Square in New York? Dominated by the spectacle of neon signs, texts and the advertisements of Roxy Deli, Hershey's, Cup Noodles, Coca Cola and Cadillac, over 5 thousand commercial messages are proclaimed here every day. Companies like HBO and Kodak pay over 150 thousand dollars per month for the privilege. Times Square was once considered the ultimate place drenched in imagery, but nowadays analogue and digital messages scream for our attention from every street corner of every city. Towering video screens blazon the latest advertisements of Sony and Burberry, and gigantic TV arrays and LED matrix signs keep passers-by continually up to date on the latest news and weather forecasts. Long before you reach your destination by car, luminous texts tell you if tickets are still available for the concert you hope to see that evening, whether there are places free in the nearest car park, and how many seconds it will take until the traffic signal at the entrance lane to the car park turns green again. And those are just the electronic signs. The images and slogans of commercial signboards, posters, graffiti and stickers on walls, mailboxes and

street signs jostle for visual dominance. The city has become a theatre of overlapping and mutually referent media.

This combined onslaught of images and information places the classic concept of 'the city' under considerable strain. It is becoming ever more difficult to form a concrete conception of a city. How can we maintain an image of the city if a constant stream of information and recycled images blurs our perception of the physical environment?² Los Angeles and Tokyo have become literally inconceivable. This complexity engenders a commingled environment in which everything is continually transformed and remediated. The urban environment is a hybrid place in which different modes of spatiality fuse. We must therefore interpret public space as a combination of different media rather than as a sharply defined territorial unit: a multimedia alloy of words, images, motion, and sound. Only then do we realize that public space has itself become a mass medium.

THE VIRTUAL WORLD STRIKES BACK

It is insufficient to conclude merely that the city has become a multimedia environment. Not only has public space acquired multimedia hallmarks, but it has become embedded in a virtual network. This opens up creative opportunities, but it also has repressive consequences. New technologies in the area of public order and security make the latter an everyday occurrence. Detection and pattern-recognition cameras have become widespread in public space since the early 1990s. The London Underground alone is surveyed by a network of thousands of cameras. A program called Mandrake scans faces and matches them to a database containing photos of known criminals, performing 15 million facial comparisons every sixty seconds.

In Rotterdam, the area from City Hall to the main railway station is similarly covered by a network of cameras. In their most advanced form, systems like these alert a private security firm whenever the system recognizes a certain face or whenever an individual's facial expression shows signs of imminent aggression.

The upshot of these developments is that public space has become ever more tightly interwoven with the virtual flows of various media. But this interweaving is not limited to the virtualization of physical space such as that resulting from the proliferation of surveillance systems. The virtual space itself bears increasing resemblance to a 'physical' environment. Looking at online games like *EverQuest*, *Ultima Online* and *Project Entropia*, it is clear that they give rise to a new kind of realm. Millions of players congregate in the three-dimensional virtual worlds of these games. Invisible to non-gamers, a global economy develops in which houses, islands, hotels, and resorts are traded. People buy and sell virtual properties on special auction websites like *MyGameStock* and *Internet Game Exchange*. A player of *Project Entropia* bought a virtual space station in 2004 for the sum of \$100,000. This space station was described as a 'monumental project'. If you search eBay using the term *online games*, you will encounter a virtual economy comparable in size to the gross national product of a typical Eastern Bloc country. The American economist Edward Castronova, who studied the virtual environment of the online role-playing game *EverQuest*, concluded in 2001 that the per capita GNP of this game took 77th place in world rankings – somewhere between those of Russia and Bulgaria. How does this virtualization process impinge on our physical environment? In May

2006, the makers of *Project Entropia* announced that the virtual currency from this online game would be paid out in 'real' money from a special ATM. The exchange rate was to be ten Project Entropia Dollars (PED) to one US Dollar. So perhaps it is no longer correct to assume a distinction between a 'merely ostensibly existent' reality and an 'objective' one.

RELATIONS BETWEEN PEOPLE

To learn about the nature of the implications for spatial design of the continual ebb and flow between the real world and the virtual – the logic that every virtuality eventually becomes reality and, conversely, that every reality merges into a virtual world – we must consider a third hallmark of public space, that of connectivity. Once it is realized that millions of players congregate in those synthetic environments, it becomes clear that media processes allow people from all over the world to form connections and enter into social relationships with one another. In that respect, connectivity has a primarily social significance. A new kind of social milieu is developing outside the traditional venues of public space such as city squares, parks, coffee houses, libraries, chain stores, and malls.

Estimates indicate that some thirteen to fourteen million people enter the parallel worlds of online games daily, counting only those games running on the servers of the USA, Europe, and South Korea. In these global villages, players form alliances, endeavour to accumulate wealth in the form of weapons or houses, and may even marry. Several games offer suitably imposing locations for wedding celebrations, as well as supplying costumes and wedding rings. What are the concrete attributes of

these communities? Attributes like religion, race, sex, and national origin are no longer the binding factors. In this respect these communities do not answer to the classic concept of *Gemeinschaft* as formulated by the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies in his 1887 book *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*.³ In a *Gemeinschaft*, individuals are engaged with the community as much as with themselves. They are guided by communal values and convictions. The *Gemeinschaft* is characterized by strong interpersonal relationships and family cohesion, and by relatively simple social institutions. The family is in Tönnies' outlook the perfect example of a *Gemeinschaft*.

The electronic globalization of this planet by cell phones, the Internet, satellites and tv makes it necessary to seek the notion of community in a different quarter. The nineteenth-century concept of *Gemeinschaft* has gained a new meaning. The sociologist Craig Calhoun writes of the secularization of the concept of community: 'Community life can be understood as the life people live in dense, multiplex, relatively autonomous networks of social relationship. Community life, thus, is not a place or simply a small-scale population aggregate, but a mode of relating variable in extent.'⁴ In this respect, it seems that strongly-bonded virtual communities must be rather rare. Instead there are 'thin' communities in which people remain largely strangers to one another and are unaware of the other's actual gender, name or age.

OPEN AND CLOSED MEETING PLACES

The really novel thing about connectivity is that the resulting sense of community is worldwide in its scope. The result is a net-

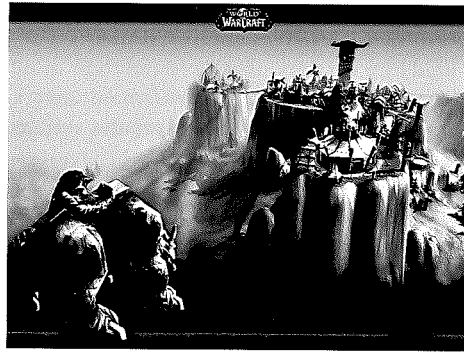


Fig. 3.1 Poster World of Warcraft

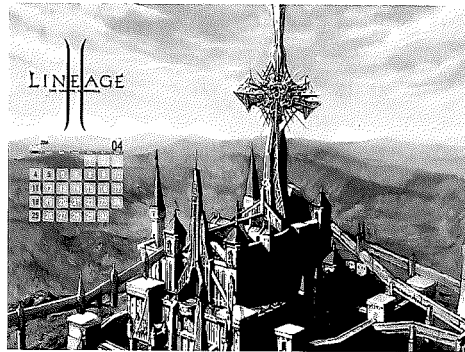


Fig. 3.2 Poster Lineage: the Chaotic Chronicle

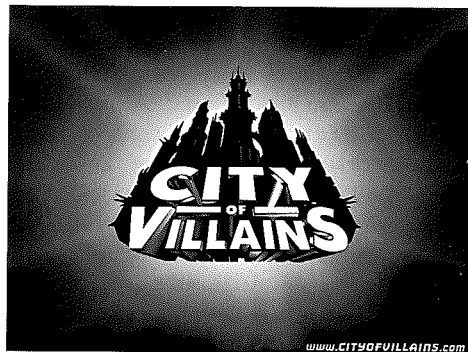


Fig. 3.3 Poster City of Villains

work in which one-way traffic is unthinkable. Electronic globalization recruits a gathering that continually changes in its scale, place, and character. This brings us to our last hallmark of public space, which is also its most diffuse feature. While the effects of multimodality, virtuality and connectivity attract little discussion, disputes arise about the definition and the meaning of the term 'interactivity'. One thing everyone agrees on is that it is a container concept. Many theorists hence wonder whether the term really adds anything new to our understanding of the impact of the media. Espen Aarseth, the pioneer of the cybertext literary theory, regards interactivity as nothing but a buzzword, a cheap rhetorical trick that the industry uses to increase its turnover.⁵ Lev Manovich adds that interactivity is tautologous; the author of *The Language of New Media* considers any content that presents itself in a digital context to be interactive by definition.⁶

The same problem arises if we try to define interactivity in our physical environment. The Son-O-House built in Eindhoven by the Dutch architect Lars Spuybroek is a pavilion that reacts to human movements. The interior of the pavilion is draped with loudspeakers and infrared sensors. The movements of those present are detected by the sensors, and each signal is associated with a specific sound effect. Is this an instance of interactivity? The level of interaction between the building and its users is not vastly greater than that of an air conditioning system. Perhaps this is one reason why people so often find the term 'interactive' relatively meaningless. For a better grasp of the concept of interactivity, we must abandon the simple definition, which treats it as a continual interaction between a person and his environment. This descriptive definition of interactivity explains little more

than that we are always interactive because we respond to the stimuli we constantly receive from the people and things around us.

More pertinent is a description that clarifies not only our capacity to intervene in a spatially multilayered structure in an explorative, constructive way, but also one that refutes the claimed neutrality of interactive techniques. These two sides – the explorative and the constructive – coalesce once we regard interactivity as the possibility of linking open and closed systems together in the space of the city. Interactivity is then comparable to the coupling of different systems. Under this definition, we can localize interactivity precisely at the point where one system mutates into another. An interactive environment can hence be described as a relatively open milieu that binds a number of relatively closed systems together. Not only does it become clear under the latter notion of interactivity how systems impinge upon one another, but it is also evident how new systems may detach themselves from their context and function in relative autonomy. The term 'interactivity' thus always stands in relation to a social environment. Moreover, interactivity turns out no longer to be a neutral or value-free device, but one which marks a point of entry, a way into a different spatiality, ambience, or neighbourhood. Which forms of community come together? What groups of people are excluded from particular spaces? That is furthermore the political facet of interactivity: it potentiates the connection by which someone may move from one discrete space to another.

POP-UP SPACES

Public space changes continually in terms of character and place: that has been clear enough over the last few centuries. The twenty-first century, the century in which the

technological media have first comprehensively penetrated our lives, now presupposes a new conception of public space. We refer to this conception as 'nodal urbanity'. Nodal urbanity designates a coherent space that can no longer be defined in purely physical terms. Instead of being finite in its boundedness, this space is flexible and derives its form from the context within which it is contained. Against the background of the hallmarks of multimedia, connectivity, virtuality and interactivity, we must therefore take a fresh look at the way public space comes into being. Although each of the four hallmarks has its own history and has developed through different media, this notion entails more than a casual disquisition on architectural principles. From the standpoint of nodal urbanity, which mix of nodes do we wish to have in our cities?

NOTES:

- 1 H. Arendt, *Vita Activa*, Amsterdam, Boom, 1994, p. 65.
- 2 M.C. Boyer, *CyberCities: Visual Perception in the Age of Electronic Communication*, New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 1996, p. 150.
- 3 F. Tönnies, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, 1887
- 4 G. Delanty, *Community*, London/New York, Routledge, 2003, pp. 179 – 180.
- 5 E.J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, p. 48.
- 6 L. Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, Cambridge/Massachusetts, The MIT Press, 2002, p. 55.

RESOURCES:

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Essay 04

The Dionysian Impulse in Modern Architecture:
Le Corbusier and Contemporary Design

Aaron Betsky

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Aaron Betsky (US, 1958) is the director of the Cincinnati Art Museum in the United States and writes on architecture and visual culture. As a trained architect, he has always been fascinated by Le Corbusier and his influence on contemporary architecture. This essay was written in connection with the large-scale retrospective entitled *Le Corbusier: The Art of Architecture* that opens in the NAI at the end of May. Betsky was director of the NAI from 2001 to 2006.

When I was attending architecture school on the East Coast of the United States in the early 1980s, I was completely fascinated by the work of the British architect James Stirling. What appealed to me most was the complexity of his floor plans and sections. Stirling seemed to be not very interested in creating coherent and monumental buildings. Instead, he designed intricate assemblies of fragmentary forms, tied together with long ramps, 'piano curves' (double curves that resembled the plan of a piano), and ribbon windows. Rather than being closed blocks, Stirling's buildings were open structures through which public paths ran, not only on the ground floor but also often diagonally through the building. Grids of columns marched through large halls where the stairs, ramps, and a miscellany of other fragments played off against the rigid system of the building's structure and pierced through what on paper appeared to be thin walls. The sheer delight in the ability to control so many elements seduced us students. Stirling showed us that buildings could condense the complexity of modern life into a new kind of order.¹

While some of us were sitting at Stirling's knees, others in the school were followers of Richard Meier and Charles Gwathmey. They loved those architects' palette of white walls (white everything, in fact), grids of columns, and freely disposed circulation elements. In the work of the 'New York Five', named after the seminal 1975 book that collected the work of these architects, as well as that of Peter Eisenman, John Hejduk and Michael Graves,² they saw the building blocks of a modern architecture that would offer a coherent answer to the complexity of the world within the confines of these serene structures.

Yet other students followed the Italian Neo-Rationalists, and most particularly Aldo Rossi. They were attracted to his simple geometric forms, including cylinders, cubes and long, rectangular galleried structures that evoked a timeless urbanism. Rossi's beautifully drawn sketchbooks offered collages of the Duomo of Milan seen in the evening light, a statue of Saint Augustine, a Coke can and geometric absolutes, all drawn as if they together composed a logical environment.³ In Rossi's *Libro Azzurro* sketchbooks, reproduced in