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Title: Locative Media as Critical Urbanism

Abstract:

If public space was once considered the geography of the public sphere—as a physical place where people come together to voice and discuss matters of public concern (Habermas, 1992)—today the two are perceived as increasingly separate domains. In New York, for example, long before the events of 9/11 and the clamp-down on civil liberties by legislation such as the US Patriot Act, the curtailment of popular uses of public space was well under way (Low and Smith, 2005). With the reaction to the liberalism of 1960s politics, the onslaught of neoliberalism in the 1980s and the concurrent rise of the public-private partnership, Mayor Rudy Giuliani's "zero-tolerance" policy, and the more recent Disneyfication of "new" 42nd Street, state and corporate strategies had already begun to whittle away conditions supporting the free and open use of urban public space. Access to (and behavior within) public space have become subject to ever-greater regulation.

During the same period, we witnessed a corresponding displacement of the public sphere to the immaterial nodes and networks of electronic media and information systems. "The public", "publics" and "public opinion" are today formed more through cable and network news channels, Internet blogs and websites than on the sidewalks, streets, cafes, parks or shopping arcades of the contemporary city. Online social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook have replaced the street or the mall as the preferred place to "see, be seen, and connect" for today's youth. Sociable web media such as Flickr enable forms of media sharing and exchange previously unimaginable in physical space. We are witnessing today the devaluation of physically localized public space in favor of a globally networked public sphere.

The experience of material public space, on the other hand, has been radically transformed with the proliferation of mobile and pervasive media technologies throughout the physical space of the city. The use of mobile phones and audio devices like the iPod provide varying degrees of privacy within urban space, affording the speaker/listener certain exceptions to conventions for social interaction within the public domain, absolving them from some responsibility for what is happening around them (Ito, 2006; Bull 2000). Talking on a mobile phone while walking down the sidewalk, text-messaging with a friend while on the bus, or listening to an iPod on the subway are everyday practices for organizing space, time and the boundaries around the body in public. To a certain degree, these practices contribute to a "retreat" of the modern citizen from the public realm. Urban public space, and the unpredictability of the encounters nominally found there, ceases to function as a site for the tensions, frictions and interactions so vital to a democratic society.

If we understand space as something that is produced through social practices (Lefebvre, 1991; Certeau, 2002), then new spatial possibilities emerge along with new practices. At the dawn of an age of ubiquitous computing and an "Internet of Things", when everyday objects and spaces are in the process of being networked with computational intelligence, new techno-social practices are emerging. Recent technological developments in location-based services, the geospatial web, and the field of Locative Media are introducing novel ways by which immaterial bits of media

and information are tied to physical locations in urban public space. These techno-social practices have the potential to generate new hybrid spaces and forms of public participation that reconnect the material dimensions of urban public space with the participatory affordances of the networked public sphere. Yet if Locative Media is to be considered in terms of its potential to address these social and political contexts, its practices need to be evaluated in the larger framework of everyday life and urban public space. Only then can it move beyond the production of novel experiences for limited (art) audiences, and critically engage the social and political realities of contemporary cities.

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Mark Shepard (<http://www.andinc.org>) is an artist and architect whose cross-disciplinary practice draws on architecture, film, and new media in addressing new social spaces and signifying structures of contemporary network cultures. His research focuses on the impact of mobile and pervasive technologies on architecture and urbanism. His current project, the Tactical Sound Garden [TSG] Toolkit <http://www.tacticalsoundgarden.net>, has been presented at the Contemporary Museum, Baltimore, Maryland (2007); Conflux Festival, Brooklyn, New York (2006); ISEA | ZeroOne San Jose, San Jose, California (2006); Futuresonic Festival of Electronic Music and Media Arts, Manchester, UK (2006); Sonar Festival of Advanced Music and Multimedia Art, Barcelona, Spain (2006); Responsive Architectures, Subtle Technologies Conference, Toronto, Canada (2006); and the Mobile Music Workshop, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK (2006). Mark received the Jacob K. Javits Fellow in the Humanities and earned an MS in Advanced Architectural Design from Columbia University; an MFA in Combined Media from Hunter College, City University of New York; and a BArch from Cornell University. He is an Assistant Professor of Architecture and Media Study at the University at Buffalo, State University of New York, where he is a co-director of the Center for Virtual Architecture and coordinator of the media|architecture|computing graduate program.