

Introduction

Augmented Urban Spaces

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It is becoming increasingly evident that the gradual development of an enriched media environment, ubiquitous computing, mobile and wireless communication technologies, as well as the Internet as a non-extraordinary part of our everyday lives, are changing the ways people use cities and live in them. Architects and urban planners, human geographers, sociologists and other scholars have been looking at this in the past few decades, some of them well pre-dating the internet with their reflections. Computer scientists obviously directly contribute with their work to this re-definition and extension of space, though they are not always fully aware of this circular relation between space, society and technology. And this occurs to the point of them getting often surprised by unpredicted and unplanned uses and transformations of the very technologies they develop and deploy.

What is less clear, however, is how these technologies are actually modifying city living and the fruition of urban spaces. Influential scholars and critics from computing, media and social studies, and built environment disciplines have depicted scenarios that would range from the demise of the city altogether to leave the scene to a displaced “cyber” society based on nearly total fluidity of its spaces and related functions, to the establishment of a parallel, “virtual” city enhancing, rather than annihilating, the physical one. Both utopia and dystopia have been heavily involved in predictions on mega-scale transformations of society, cities and space. And yet, when we observe things around us we can notice how cities are not giving any sign of obsolescence, how people are still people who just happen to use technologies, how space has not been replaced by virtual environments – despite the recently renewed hype on phenomena like Second Life – and basically how deeply “embedded” digital technologies have become, and how “real” their functions feel. There are no entirely digital lifestyles – or if there are we are talking about a fairly irrelevant minority – yet at the same time most lifestyles are digitally-enhanced, in many different as well as subtle ways. In the augmented city, ‘virtual’ and ‘physical’ spaces are no longer two separate dimensions, but just parts of a continuum, of a whole. The physical and the digital environment have come to define each other and concepts such as public space and “third place”, identity and knowledge, citizenship and public participation are all inevitably affected by the shaping of the reconfigured, augmented urban space.

Popular wisdom suggests that it is easier to look far away into the horizon than observe our eyebrows, which are yet so near. Similarly, it is not trivial at all understanding what happens to our ability to understand and “live” urban space when this, right here, right now, “intersects” with everyday usage of our mobile phone or wireless networks, or what software and code, embedded within so many objects and practices, could mean to us even if we are not programmers or computer geeks.

To try and understand better all of this immanent “augmentation” we believe that we need to look at the “micro”, local but real and significant aspects of the articulation of physical and digital, and that in doing this a truly cross-disciplinary approach is needed. However, a really effective cross-fertilisation of disciplines is hard to achieve. Often, different professionals and scholars have looked at “other” perspectives as some fancy add-ons helping to boost their discourse, rather than a challenge to literally contaminate, question, modify and enrich their own disciplinary niche.

This book was born as a humble but passionate attempt to contribute to this “contamination” of perspectives. It is the joint effort of two different editors. On the one hand, an architect/urban planner who since his own first graduation thesis has been looking at ICT as much more than “infrastructure”, focusing on high technologies as potentially part of that urban “glue” that keeps people together in social as well as business life, and cannot be separated from space and place. On the other hand, a computer scientist who made of the cultural clout of architecture as well as sociology a fundamental informer of her approach to designing software technologies and applications for the urban dimension. All other chapter contributors, as well as their diversity within the book, are also testimonials of such contamination, together with the often overlapping themes of their papers.

For all these reasons, this is a book of questions, experiences, suggestions and – in one word – exploration. The contributions in *Augmented Urban Spaces* consider the emergence of the phenomenon from three main perspectives which become the sections the book is organised into.

The first section on “augmented spaces” is informed by a theoretical and conceptual analysis of the nature of the relationship and combination of physical and digital environments, supported however by “here and now” empirical observations and studies. Some of the chapters look at how to interpret and reflect on the ways these combinations could redefine the public sphere of the city as well as people’s individual ways to live and relate with urban space. These are all useful elements to try and understand ICT-enriched spaces’ potential to support successful interactions, public-ness as well as meaning-making in cities, and the numerous issues that are raised by these “enhancements”.

The second perspective – and section – looks at the social constituents of urban space: the communities living in and shaping them. This part of the book explores ways in which communities themselves are becoming “augmented” and indeed “augmenting” themselves from the grassroots, and what this can mean for the enhancement of democratic participation, public discourse, and shared knowledge.

The third section of the book aims at considering issues and challenges which economic regeneration strategies, planning and urban design face as civic spaces are getting increasingly augmented. On the one hand it looks at what institutions, municipalities and designers can or could do, in a proactive and structured way, and presents some different approaches and ideas on ICT-based regeneration. On the other hand considers how fine-grained, everyday changes cannot be entirely controlled and become part of the spontaneous transformations of urban fabric and society, asking what could be done to wisely and positively react to this new

condition. It addresses where built environment practitioners stand in this situation, and how they can start successfully addressing this changing arena.

Each of the sections of the book is individually introduced by one of the editors, so we refer the reader to those specific introductions for a more detailed discussion. It is important to remark – in a way obviously – that dividing up a text into sections such as these serves well for giving an overall framework to the reader and “pace” to the volume. But – yet again – it can make us fall into the trap of creating a degree of “boxing” of themes, contributors and discourses. We just hope that readers will agree with us in appreciating how difficult dealing with interdisciplinary books can be, and reading the “story” presented here as a progression in which themes, concepts, ideas constantly overlap and complement each other despite any specific disciplinary or professional “labelling”.

Finally, we would like to thank our colleagues – some of whom have taken part in this book – who helped organising or participated in the “Digital Cities: the Augmented Public Space” workshop, held in Milan within the wider “Communities and Technologies 2005” international conference. Although this volume does not represent the proceedings of that event – having gone well beyond it in many different ways, and with only six chapters somehow related to work presented in that occasion – the idea itself of working on such a project started as a consequence of the workshop, and was strongly inspired by it.