

Informing the Design of the Future Urban Landscape

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ABSTRACT

This workshop will identify emerging themes that will impact on the design of the urban environment, through exploration of the boundaries between the virtual and physical worlds. Participants in the workshop will collaborate in a practical exercise designed to act as a stimulus for thought concerning the nature of the products and services that will populate the urban landscape in the near future. The outcome of the workshop will be the identification and description of a series of issues that designers and technologists will have to address as they shape the interactions within the media-rich urban landscape. This will form the basis of new collaborative networks with the aim of taking this technological design research agenda further.

Keywords

Urban landscape, ethnography, design, technology, virtuality

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.2 [Information Interfaces and Presentation] Theory and Methods, User-centred design.

INTRODUCTION

It is envisaged that the urban spaces of the future will be saturated with both visible and hidden media that gather and transmit information. How we as physical beings connect with, interpret and shape the increase of data residing in our environment will be a significant challenge. The forms in which this data will be presented, and how we decide to conceptualise it, are as yet unknown. Will the technologically enriched environment adapt to accommodate human/city contact points, and, in response, how will we choose to interact with and navigate through, this information landscape? Today's urban experience is

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enhanced by technology that increasingly enables simultaneous existence in both the virtual and real worlds.

There is an increasing trend towards the use of aggregate data when projects seek to reveal or make explicit invisible urban phenomena such as pollution, noise, patterns of movement and peoples' emotional reaction to places. The city has become a kind of 'blogject' that provides data for applications and services that seek to visualize urban dynamics in real time thereby helping individuals to make informed decisions about how they behave in the physical environment. Examples of such prototype systems include Christian Nold's Biomapping [1], mapping emotional arousal with geographic location; Tripwire [2] by Tad Hirsh monitored noise pollution while Sensing Atmosphere [3] measured air pollution. Each of these prototypes provide different ways for viewing, interpreting and interacting with the urban environment

Such technology offers a number of bridges between these worlds but in so doing places an increased tension on the sense of place and subsequently the identity of the individual. Identity has many components that have to be woven in our everyday lives. It is postulated that in order to cope with the demands of our society, people must be capable of switching between identities actively and quickly while stitching these different identities in place [4].

Furthermore, it is possible that a 'fragmentation' of identity is part of our experience of modernity [5]. Today identity is just as much about stitching multiple identities in separate virtual places as it is with their physical counterparts. Our sense of place, both physical and virtual, contributes to our feeling of presence and the subsequent identity that is created, maintained and communicated. It is at the border of these physical and virtual worlds that the urban dweller's sense of place resides and it is through collaborative enquiry, using techniques such as those to be employed in this workshop, that the crossing points can be identified and shaped.

APPROACH

Humans have always been in constant engagement with their surroundings, often without being consciously aware of the process or nature of this interaction. By investigating the activities that currently take place in this liminal space

we may be able to identify important themes and issues. Taking inspiration from ethnographic design research methods, the workshop will take an experimental approach to the recording of these human activities. By using the everyday technologies that people have to hand, the participants in the workshop will be provided with a new perspective on the traditional techniques that designers have employed, such as the creation of scrapbooks, mood boards and sketches. It is envisaged this approach will widen opportunities for participation in the design process. These can assist the technologists and designers of the future as they work to shape physical and virtual environments in such a way that they can be made sense of and manipulated.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The workshop will seek to address questions such as: What form will the information landscape take? How will people adapt their behaviours and indeed how will the nature of the urban landscape alter as increased amounts of information is overlaid on the physical environment? What new products and services will be available given the increase of targeted information aimed at specific communities and interest groups? Will this result in an increase in segmentation and fragmentation associated with the urban experience leading to the possibility of the creation of multiple experiences of the same physical space. What will inform the visual aesthetic of the future information landscape?

The workshop will seek to explore the ‘bleed points’ where the physical and virtual worlds connect or indeed, disconnect. Examples will be drawn from advertising, product design and digital art works. Furthermore the workshop will focus on the small ideas that underpin the ‘big questions’ that too often overwhelm researchers. Indeed, it has been said that the ‘devil is in the detail’, subsequently the workshop will invite participants to adopt an attitude of curiosity as they seek to unpack the nature of peoples’ rituals, habits and priorities, focusing, in particular, on the potential for behaviour associated with existing technologies.

WORKSHOP DESCRIPTION

Activities

The workshop will comprise of the following activities: an introductory presentation that will orientate the participants to the aims of the workshop and the context of the data

gathering activity. Immediately after this, the detail of the workshop activity will be introduced. Based on their experience and interests, participants will undertake a collaborative data gathering activity. The workshop will employ (very) rapid ethnography as a means of gathering rich visual data about the urban space in which we engage. This will involve the participants using camera phones to record images from the urban environment. In particular, participants will be asked to go out into the immediate surroundings of the workshop to photograph examples of ‘close’ interactions between humans and their environment. These images will form the basis of a ‘digital scrapbook’ that will be transformed into a visual presentation, which will be used as a stimulus for participants’ discussion and debate of the emergent themes. Initially discussions will take place in small breakout sessions. The groups will recombine towards the conclusion of the workshop in order to prioritise the identified issues and to reflect on the experience.

Format

As the background of the organisers is in the field of Interaction Design, they have a research interest in how personal technologies are used and appropriated to record and share thoughts, times and places. Therefore, while this workshop uses technology in its delivery, it is an important factor in this experience that the technologies should be those that the participants carry with them (i.e. mundane) in their everyday lives.

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