

# Urban Gallery, Urban Curation

*Raoul BUNSCHOTEN*

(Raoul Bunschoten, director CHORA architecture and urbanism and CHORA research,  
24A Bartholomew Villas NW5 2LL London UK

## 1 A PROTOTYPE PLANNING TOOL

This presentation will give a brief introduction into a prototype for a new planning tool which combines the use of an interactive web based digital database in four layers (the Urban Gallery) with a methodology which consists of fieldwork, research in innovation, scenario games and dynamic masterplanning (Urban Curation). The methodology has been developed by CHORA architecture and urbanism based in London, in collaboration with the Architectural Association in London and the Berlage Institute in Rotterdam. The Urban Gallery is a virtual space that enables the storage and management of information and research, but it also is a public space that connects different actors and agents and creates a continuous meeting place for the sustained development of dynamic masterplans for regions, towns or localities. An important factor of the Urban Gallery is the potential for comparative modelling and simultaneous development in different locations. Versions of the Urban Gallery have been tested in Tokyo, Copenhagen, and Sector E, a territory stretching between Rotterdam and the Rhein-Ruhrmetropole. Currently applications are in preparation in Aberdeenshire, Scotland, and Hackney, in London, and a project joining up five Urban Galleries in five different continents to test prototypes related to ecological processes in urban environments is in preparation for a major event in a few years. This prototype and methodology was also presented in my keynote speech at the EU conference 'European Cities in a Global Era', 14,15 November 2002, as part of an argument about new tools for urban planning in the expanding Europe.

## 2 TAMING THE DIGITAL STORM

There is something like a permanent storm of data, information flows and digital spaces raging through our urban spaces, uprooting habits, social patterns, modes of doing business, and the ways that cities are inhabited and organised. As with many storms, it can be frightening to be undergo its powerful forces, to lose control in its violence. But it can be exhilarating too, to feel the winds tearing against everything permanent, literally becoming winds of change, to be blown away with its force. There is real drama in the way the digital revolution is affecting us and all those that try to understand, map, organise regulate and design cities. Major questions are facing us in this storm. What are the stable zones, where some form of permanence remains, where are the quiet areas in which speed is not an issue yet? Precisely what is the nature of the storm, of the forces it unleashes, of the types of winds that it consists of? What will it destroy, and what should we protect against its forces? But the most exciting questions are about its positive aspects. How can we use its forces, how fast can we travel on its winds, and how can we harness its forces in order to produce new cities, better qualities of life, new forms of mobility and communication? In many institutes of architecture you see this exhilaration being expressed in exuberant designs, strange new shapes, endless amorphous objects that appear to take the digital storm literally and answer that misunderstanding with quasi aerodynamic aesthetics, not unlike the fins that appeared on new cars in Detroit during the fifties. The question will be more about a real understanding of the kinds of spaces that emerge through the power of the digital storm, and the new ways that patterns of behaviour, action, production and communication are organised.

### 2.1 Curating emergent phenomena

Taming the storm is but a metaphor, an image to focus on the nature of the emergent phenomena we are dealing with. The problem is how we can adapt our current methods and tools to the phenomena emerging from the storm. We recently published a book, *Urban Flotsam*, in which we ask four questions: How to see? How to play? How to tell? How to act? The book traces the recent history of our attempts to develop a methodology that could answer these questions. The problem is two-fold: how do you see new phenomena without knowing them, and how do you use them? That means how do we see, classify, order, name what we do not know initially, or what we have no inkling of? The assumption is that we need to cross the boundaries of disciplines and professional sectors, to mutate existing tools and methods in order to observe and register new urban phenomena emerging from the digital storm. But we also have to be able to play with them, to experiment with their potential, so we need modelling techniques that allow us to grasp them, to handle them in simulations, in scenario games. Scenario games are exercises in telling stories about the future, creating possible narratives of how things may evolve, and narratives about how different futures can be imagined and what has to be done to choose one or the other future, and how and at what point to act. What tools do we have that can be used to bring out the potential of the storm. The digital storm in conjunction with other global forces require forms of management of information and orchestration of processes that are relatively new, and more akin to the work of an art curator than to the traditional urban planner. We have introduced the term 'Urban Curation' in order to have a name for the practice that is involved in the handling of urban changes in the digital era.

### 2.2 metaspaces

Spaces in which we can see temporality are metaspaces. They are spaces above or beyond the space in which we live, the Skin of the Earth. The metaspaces has an innate ephemeral character. It is the site of the search for knowledge; it is the container of knowledge management processes, but it is also a vehicle for the search for meaning in the dynamic chaos in which we live. The metaspaces is a vehicle for thought processes, a vessel in which urban consciousness has a chance to gel. When dynamic processes are given form, this form gives meaning to the processes, a handle to their understanding, and, if necessary, their manipulation. The metaspaces is the

---

<sup>1</sup> Raoul Bunschoten, Takuro Hoshino, Helene Binet and CHORA: *Urban Flotsam*, 010 Publishers, 2001, Rotterdam

space in which this form becomes visual. Whether it emerges or is described is a second debate that depends on the character of the metaspace: self-organizing organism (life form) or mechanical instrument. The challenge for us is to use this concept of a metaspace for the development of a planning instrument that is simultaneously a new public space for the interaction and intertwining of urban actors and their desires and interests. In the process of developing a specific metaspace as instrument, we are constantly oscillating between research and production: using the metaspace as a laboratory in which to learn and also applying the instrument to specific situations and urban environments, increasingly as commissioned projects.

### 2.3 The Gallery: an incubator of urban evolution

The Urban Gallery is a peripatetic instrument of instable, dynamic and ultimately ephemeral phenomena. It is a device for the management of transient states. This management is done with the help of four service structures or floors: the Database, Prototypes, Scenario Games and Action Plans. They contain the following:

- Database: Mini-scenarios and Operational Fields
- Prototypes: Urban Prototypes as moving singularities
- Scenario Games: simulation and testing of dynamic environments
- Action Plans: theses that lead to the proliferation, adaptation, and implementation of the prototypes

The Urban Gallery is like a cabinet with drawers: four drawers contain the main service structures, but each drawer has another set of drawers inside it. However, the substance of the structure of the cabinet is porous—all contents communicate with each other, or are linked according to specific trajectories. In the database floor for example we employ random sampling methods to determine processes that form the dynamics of a particular territory, combined with research into the nature of these processes. The random sampling points are called ‘bean sites,’ named after the technique of throwing beans that we introduced to demonstrate the principle. Recently the Database has been expanded to include a layer of Operational Fields alongside the catalogue of Mini-scenarios. Each Mini-scenario is constructed with four basic processes: Erasure, Origination, Transformation, Migration. Together, these four processes are able to describe any of the dynamic conditions at a given point, but they have a specific sequence: they follow a metaphoric succession of stages that are modelled on a seed. This set of basic processes is both a taxonomy as well an unfolding, both as narrative and as proto-evolutionary map. We have been working on this particular component for over ten years, but discovered much later that some of the work done by the Santa Fe Institute (in Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA) also contained a basic set of four processes, fairly close to ours.

Prototypes are organisational forms that combine processes from the database in a new way. Prototypes are new in the context in which they are introduced, but they are never one-off solutions: they become significant only if they proliferate in different situations and adapt to the circumstances specific to these different situations. Scenario games are played by actors involved in particular processes, with agendas and desires. They play simulations of specific evolutions, and create and test in these the conditions for specific prototypes. The action plans contain the tools, both traditional (the blueprint, the masterplan, the building regulation, the business plan etc) with which prototypes can be realised.

Urban Curators observe emergent phenomena and, as keepers of the transient states, act as animators for the dynamic contents of the Urban Gallery. Urban Curation is a new profession, although it can be recognized in many instances as being part of existing actions. In a recent competition project for the City Museum of Contemporary Art in Rome, we looked at curatorial prototypes that could cater to emergent and quite fleeting art forms that apparently disdain the institutional and physical structure of the museum. Our project searched to create an interactive meeting place in which curatorial prototypes intertwine different interests and actions in order to give form to a particular movement or vision. This development in curatorial practices in the art field inspired us to develop, together with the artist Jeanne van Heeswijk, the concept of Urban Curator.

### 2.4 Knowledge management, moving singularities and artificial life

The Urban Gallery is a knowledge management tool that creates temporary holding patterns for knowledge and intertwines these patterns to fuel the urban prototypes. Inside one of the layers, the Action Plan, the thesis forms an inspirational core, containing deep research. This is something like the soul of the system, introducing potentially a highly specific “wind of change.” It provides the system with a kind of conscience and intention. This intention is aimed at the main product of the Urban Gallery: the evolution (adaptation) of Urban Prototypes and their proliferation through an action territory; adaptive states shift the prototype forward into a multiple proliferation, the multiple proliferation shifts into new states or situations, and the prototype is forced to adapt.

In the context of educational collaboration, initially at the Architectural Association, later at the Berlage Institute and other institutes, we have created Urban Galleries as teaching experiments, turning them into temporary abodes in which collaborations of teachers and students simulate the workings of the Urban Gallery in an urban context. The Urban Gallery in Sector E (the territory between Rotterdam and the South Flank of the Deltametropool and the Ruhr Rhine metropolis) has been such an experiment. The experiment turns the Urban Gallery into an artificial life-form in which the main structure becomes an organism given ‘life’ through the individual input of the participants. The concept of ‘life organism’ is both a metaphor and a reality: interactions in a Urban Gallery are like a life-form, but the intertwining of prototypes actually create new evolutions of prototypes that introduce ‘newness’ or ‘birth’ into the system. The Urban Gallery is like a frame imposed on a particular territory undergoing transition, it is a moving singularity, as well as an incubator for urban evolutions. The collaboration with Gordon Pask, one of the world’s great experts on Cybernetics, in the Architectural Association in London has proved fruitful in that he linked the early explorations on the Urban Gallery with scientific models and work done in Cybernetics. Takuro Hoshino, one of the initiators of the Urban Gallery, is currently taking these links further with the help of a pupil of Gordon Pask, Gerard de Zeeuw, professor of theoretical physics at the University of Amsterdam. Takuro Hoshino has introduced the notion of new life forms into the Urban Gallery, and is doing tests on that notion.

## 2.5 The Urban Gallery in action: tools and governance

Project W, Sector E, and the Netherlands in the context of a new Europe

We are now involved in several projects that implement the Urban Gallery as a planning tool and methodology. In fact, we have become Urban Curators of a large organizational process to bring together a variety of actors that want to apply the Urban Gallery, and are similarly training organizations to play this role. In the Netherlands, we are working with a consortium that aims at being a Community of Practice related to the development of Sector E. The consortium comprises planners on a national level, local authorities, private enterprises, and experts on a case project for a logistical node that simultaneously will be city and landscape. We act as process-managers for this community with the help of the Urban Gallery. While this guidance is based on the intersection of individual interests, we also have to act as planners and begin to tune the Urban Gallery as an instrument to the processes of planning, implementation and even inhabitation. We are now at the start of stage two in which we have introduced a game board into the actual site under consideration in order to orchestrate sub-groups of the consortium—subgroups that have vested interests in specific prototypes but can interact with others. These groups we also call communities, but in this case the term community refers to the product: a community of inhabitants, users and agents. In the second stage we will take the Community of Practice through all four service structures: the Database, Prototypes, Scenario Games and Action Plans. The project is not fixed yet in its location. It may move through a larger space for which it eventually must act as a model project. This space, called Sector E, stretches from the harbor of Rotterdam – still the largest in trading volume in the world – into the heart of the Ruhr area in Germany. Sector E is an emergent Eurozone, but also a site of the growth of a new urbanity. It is situated within the growing conflicts generated by the intensification of the flows of goods between this harbor and large parts of Europe. Because of the need for the regulation of these flows, the invention of dynamic systems for this regulation, and the management of the urbanization process, the Urban Gallery is a potential planning tool for Sector E. But for the time being it is a support system for a model project inside it, Project W.

Trans-national flows of many kinds—migration, expanding financial markets—are some of the products of the radical transformation Europe is currently undergoing. We have studied these phenomena at the Berlage Institute, in which individual students have developed one or more Prototypes and created Action Plans for their proliferation and adaptation in Sector E. This project will soon be on-line as an interactive version of the Urban Gallery. This is an experiment in real time dynamics, in which the educational space becomes a kind of Metaspace. In simulating the evolution of an environment, the professional actors in the consortium for Project W gradually move through different stages of the construction of an actual and virtual planning environment with concrete, physical products: a harbor, new landscape processes, new forms of living, education, and industrial enterprise. In the long run, the Urban Gallery Sector E may form a tool to test new forms of governance for such regions, but this is an ambitious agenda, and will take time.