

IDENSITY^â: planning paradigms for the information/communication age

Elizabeth SIKIARIDI, Frans VOGELAAR

Elizabeth Sikiaridi, Professor at the University of Essen, invOFFICE for architecture, urbanism and design, Amsterdam

e-mail: sikiaridi@idensity.net, sikiaridi@uni-essen.de

Frans Vogelaar, Professor at the Academy of Media Arts Cologne, invOFFICE for architecture, urbanism and design, Amsterdam

e-mail: vogelaar@idensity.net, vogelaar@khm.de

‘Soft Urbanism’ is a new interdisciplinary field of planning, investigating the transformations of space in the emerging information/communication age and designing the interplay of urban and media networks. ‘Idensity[®]’ is proposed as a category for researching and developing these new “hybrid” (combined urban/media, analog/digital) spaces of the network-city. This approach is illustrated by some projects, for example, the project ‘Public Media Urban Interfaces’.

1. URBANISM IN THE COMMUNICATION AGE

Urban public space and the “space” of communication networks are usually considered to be competing, even mutually exclusive frameworks for social interaction. In fact, the traditional functions of public urban space are being taken over by telecommunication networks, their input/output devices implanted in (private) interiors.

Public space is imploding, not just in its urban component, but also in its media. The agenda is (being) set for the privatisation of the electronic mass media spaces. The gap between the immaterial, exclusive media spheres (Internet, television, etc.) and the dismembered urban sprawls is widening; the polarisation of global and local space is increasing.

Traditionally, the distinction between a global and a local public space is considered to be identical to the distinction between media space (which would be global) and “real” space (which would be local). But this concept has been revealed to be too simplistic: in fact, we are experiencing today not only a privatisation but also an atomisation of electronic media on a local scale, with for example the multiplication of local TV-channels or radio stations. On the other hand, global and local spatial hierarchies intermingle in urban agglomerations. Some urban fragments (banking and trade-fair districts, airport surroundings, etc.) gain qualities of “global” performance and can be seen as part of a “global urban condition”.

An attempt to reinforce the significance of public space therefore has to deal with at least two “public”, the global and the local public, by creating spheres where local and global public space can fuse and interchange.

At the end of the 80ies we introduced an alternative scenario for the interplay of mass media in order to reinforce the function of public (urban) space: ‘Public Media Urban Interfaces’ (see below), publicly accessible interfaces between the global media space and the local urban place. This project develops a hybrid urban network-space, a fusion of media space and urban space. It emphasises the role of the public in an increasingly privatised society and occupies the vacuum in between the local and the global. The products of this alliance of urban and media networks are bastards: “hybrid” spaces that are at the same time analog and digital, virtual and material, local and global, tactile and abstract.

This project represents a prototype for a new interdisciplinary field of planning and design (‘Soft Urbanism’), researching the transformations of architectural, urban/regional space of the emerging “information/communication age”, exploring the dynamic interaction of urbanism and the space of mass media and communication networks. ‘Soft Urbanism’, dealing with the “soft” aspects of the city, not only intervenes in the realm of infrastructures, but also adopts their concept and paradigm: by supplying networks, ‘Soft Urbanism’ creates new fields of possibilities and frameworks for self-organisational processes.

In the meantime the communicational paradigm, with its “network-cities”, “nodes” and “urban branding strategies” is infiltrating and transforming the urban planning discourse and practice. Within this framework, ‘Idensity[®]’ is proposed as a conceptual tool for developing urban space in the information/communication age: It is a composite term consisting of the combination/fusion of the word “density” of real /urban and “virtual”/media communication spaces (density of connections) and of the word “identity”.

2. PUBLIC MEDIA URBAN INTERFACES

A demo project, exploiting London's urban tensions and structure unfolds strategies and visualises aspects of these investigations. It speculates about processes of urban transformation and economic (empowering) strategies, confronting a working hypothesis with the idiosyncrasies of a specific urban situation. It creates a programmatic framework to develop the design tools, tracing and coding these “hybrid” analog-digital spaces:

2.1 Media Babies

A local-based public interface, the Media Baby, the primary unit of Public Media Urban Interfaces, is the instrument that seduces its public into exploiting the television medium, maximising its potential spontaneity by hijacking the publics’ imagination. The name Media Babies stands for the seeds of communication (environments) as well as for the public neighbourhood feeder houses (hybrid analog-digital environments) from which the Media Babies will be broadcast. One hundred and twenty-eight feeder houses distributed evenly over the sprawling London towns and interconnected by means of a digital network supply eight Bridge Clubs located on the Thames with a continuous stream of (non-)events. The Media Baby at your neighbourhood launderette consists of a Catching Gallery, two Intro Booths, a Debutantes’ Booth, a Connector Platform and a Microwave Transmitter. The Catching Gallery is the area where the public can view the narrow/broadcasting activities of eight other Media Babies and one Bridge Club. Interactive technology enables the public to intervene in those narrow/broadcasts but also creates the possibility to establish direct contacts, thus forming endless smaller networks within the larger framework of Public Media Urban Interfaces.

2.2 Bridge Clubs

The Bridge Club bridges the gap between programs meant for local distribution and those that deserve a larger audience. It forms the core of a North-South line linking eight Media Babies on each side of the river, connecting the north with the south of London. The Bridge Clubs are sophisticated and accelerated versions of the Media Babies providing the space for public events on an urban scale. One of the additional facilities they have is the Selector Platform where the Selection Ritual takes place. Using the larger broadcast facilities available to the club, the selected programs are experienced and transformed to suit a mass audience. The Bridge Club, being a knot in the net of translocalities, also serves the function of bridging programmatic events related to the site where the club is located. For example, the Hungerford Bridge Club on certain days (or nights) functions as a Debutantes' Ball in relation to the nearby Waterloo Station (Continental tourist connection).

2.3 replace the right to vote with the right to broadcast

The publicly distributed 'Air Time for All' Smart Card allows you to produce and narrow/broadcast and also gives you the opportunity to adopt a message (not your own) by giving it extra Air Time. At the Media Baby in the neighbourhood, you will find the necessary programming facilities to make your program and the means to monitor it as it goes on the air. You can also accelerate messages (not your own) by giving them extra broadcasting time with the help of the special Smart-Card. And as a message gains strength, its chances of reaching a much larger audience increase, reaching more Media Babies, a Bridge Club, the city or even the whole country, Europe and the rest of the world.

Replacing the right to vote, a right to narrow/broadcast is established. Once you have produced your programme, instant satisfaction is guaranteed. Check out the Connector Platform and see what reactions your program provokes in the network: get a five-dimensional overview of the life cycle, the pains and the joys of your message...

3. SOFT URBANISM

In architecture's and urban planning's role of defining and materialising the spaces for social interaction, designing the relationship between the physical and digital public domain is becoming more and more of a challenge: investigating the relation and interconnection of the "soft" city with its finite material counterpart, the living environment, speculating about interfaces between the "virtual" and the material (urban) world and designing "hybrid" (analog-digital) communicational spaces. These "hybrid" communal environments, transforming planning to an event-communication (space) and entertainment zone, emerge as 'trust heavens', 'battle fields' and 'idensity[®]-generators' (see below).

Soft Urbanism deals with information/communication processes in public space, the soft aspects overlying the urban sprawl and modifying it: the invisible networks acting as attractors, transforming the traditional urban structure, interweaving, ripping open and cutting through the urban tissue, demanding interfaces.

Soft Urbanism not only intervenes in the realm of infrastructures, but also adopts their concept and follows their paradigm. It brings an inherently flexible approach by expanding the field of possibilities of social interaction and opening new paths of urban development. Soft urbanism conceives the city as an organic entity, as "proteinic chains of networks". Soft Urbanism is therefore not about shaping, inscribing or determining places, but about creating frameworks that allow and enhance a variety of unpredictable developments.

Present urbanism is caught up in the dilemma of either trying to realise the dream of the omnipotence of planning or accepting being powerless in the face of the forces of the property market: on the one hand the modernist belief in scientific methods of determination and control of the urban phenomena violating entire cities, on the other hand, the neoliberal positions giving in to the interests of privatisation and declaring the dynamics of the market to be the only legitimate determinants of urban developments.

Facing the consequences of both positions today, Soft Urbanism is critical, demanding an alternative strategy: not being able to regain the optimistic view based on infinite growth and the dogmatism based on the confidence in control of the modern movement,

Soft Urbanism will not make the missionary promises of salvation of the early avantgardes. But it will nonetheless rethink the strategies of interventions to reintroduce programmatic speculations about the public domain in urbanism.

The interventions will not be about control and determination, but about expanding infrastructures, frameworks for processes of self-organisation. "Soft" strategies will be "bottom-up" strategies: rather than defining first the global result of the interaction and then determining the necessary relation between the elements in order to produce that interaction (which would be a "top-down" approach), simple rules for a set of independent elements will be developed and what emerges from the interaction of these elements is aleatory. According to biological models, these fields of interaction of plural forces could serve as a reservoir for the selection processes needed for the urban transformations.

4. INVERTING PLANNING

The acceleration of technological innovation, abrupt changes within the global economic and political order, individualistic lifestyles and a succession of very different types of accommodation/premises make urban/regional developments highly unpredictable. As the instruments of prognosis are failing us, we need to rethink the possibilities and the mechanisms of planning. We have therefore to research and to develop strategies and instruments for processing change, for encouraging, facilitating and connecting the ongoing processes of urban growth and transformation, for supporting the plural forces shaping our environment.

Planning has to invert, to change into the processing of the unplannable. This processing of change is not just the management of ongoing changes, following and reacting to market forces. Planning can develop "market-forcing" strategies, by providing public communication spaces for the processing of the "new". Public media event spaces and public "hybrid" (media and urban) interfaces

are proposed as an infrastructure for urban/regional planning, as communication spaces for urban issues, forums for developing communal visions of our worlds.

With the strengthening of (urban/local) interest groups and the exteriorisation of planning supported by digital techniques such as, for example, “Virtual Reality”, the processing of urban transformations (what we today call “urban/regional planning”) will become more and more a public affair. The processing of urban transformations, the processing of the unplannable, will develop into an increasingly central element of future politics, of the future locally-networked state.

“Hybrid” spaces, focused on the discussion of the future of our environments will function as generators of local identity (and trust). These media spaces, specialised in the communication of local/regional (planning) issues will become increasingly significant. They will support and enhance the regionalisation of politics, a trend that is emerging as a counterbalance to the developments of economic globalisation.

In these “hybrid” spaces targeting urban issues, rational discussion will mix with the seductive elements of pop-culture. This (infotainment) trend is embedded in the general development of politics into a media event and in the merging of political culture with popular culture. The campaigns will be integral parts of the programs of the “hybrid” (media and urban) “economy of events”, of the symbolic economy, this whole industry for the consumption of the “urban theme park” that is emerging, with its city trips and “urban safaris”, “urban images” and “urban brands”.

Urban/regional ‘un-planning’, transformed into an event-communication (space), could develop into a central element of the increasingly mediated, regionalised and globalised politics of the future.

5. IDENSITY^â

In the contradictory dynamics of today’s urban environment with its antithetical tendencies of concentration and decentralisation, of functional mix and segregation, traditional terms of spatial distinction are losing validity. In this fragmented urban landscape, categories like “centre” versus “periphery”, “landscape” versus “city”, “functional zoning” such as living, working and recreation, are becoming obsolete.

The polarity of private (domestic) versus public space is disintegrating. Public and private (domestic) environments are becoming intermingled and blurring in the fusions of media and “real” space: for example in the “hybrid” spaces of the publicly broadcasted privacies of “reality TV” and the “Big Brothers” or in the media presence of war intruding on the peacefulness of our private living rooms.

To understand these fusions, this superimposition and the interactions of media and “real” urban spaces, the new term ‘idensity[®]’ is introduced, replacing the obsolete conventional terms of spatial distinction. It does not differentiate between information/communication networks and urban/architectural environments and it offers an integrated model for dealing with “hybrid” (media and “real”) space in the information/communication age.

This model can incorporate the widest range of future (communication) spaces:

- from the ‘tele-feeder unit at your neighbourhood’s laundrette’, a public infrastructure for teleshopping, telelearning or teledemocracy (see ‘Media Babies’ in ‘Public Media Urban Interfaces’),
- to new “club” facilities, providing the space for “hybrid” (media and “real”) space events on a larger urban scale (see ‘Bridge Clubs’ in ‘Public Media Urban Interfaces’),
- or the combined media and “real” space of your bank, presenting itself in its telebanking application with the corporate identity of its “real” architectural building while fusing in the representational entry of its headquarters a high-touch architectural space with the media spaces of its net presence, in the form of monitors, projections, etc. (just visit your bank).

This new term ‘idensity[®]’ is implemented to describe and analyse the communication spaces of the coming “network society”, a society not so much based on the traditional, relatively static structures of belonging in the family, the corporation or the state, but on flexible, dynamic, ever-changing networks of exchange and communication. It carries the discussion on the urban from the morphological level of a formal description of the network patterns of the “network city” to a more integrated structural understanding of the networks of spaces for social communication.

It is a composite term consisting of the combination of the word “density” of real (urban) and “virtual” (media) communication spaces (density of connections) and of the word “identity”.

‘Idensity[®]’ can be implemented to steer the processes of urban development. It integrates the concept of “density” (density of connections, density of physical and digital infrastructure, density of communication-spaces etc.) with the concept of “identity” (“image policies”, “urban brands” etc.). It can therefore, for example, help understand the processes of distinction and spatial segregation between “urban fragments that have qualities of ‘global’ performance and that can be seen as part of a ‘global urban condition’” (see above) and those other, sometimes neighbouring (parts of) cities that lose in relevance and disappear from (global) mental maps.

But it is not a mere summation of the two concepts of “density” and “identity”. It is rather a fusion, as it inverts “identity”, linking it to communication: “identity” being defined by connectivity.

Therefore, ‘idensity[®]’ does not just address the “clear-cut identity, the particularity, the individuality of the traditional places or cites (like centres and monuments)” but also the layered ‘idensityTM’ of the “*non-lieux*” (“non-places”) which are to be found especially in

the realms of mobility and consumption (airports, hotels, shopping malls, motorway rest areas, etc.). Thus 'identity[®]', can deal with today's "generic cities", where these same (chain-)shops, cafés etc. pop up, levelling local differences and rendering places around the globe interchangeable. It does not refer to object-qualities but describes a field of superimposed communication spaces: the branded space of the chain-shop, the symbolic space of the traditional building the shop is housed in, the media space of teleshopping, the communication space of the GSM...

"The new image of Man looks roughly like this: we have to imagine a network of interhuman relations, a 'field of intersubjective relations'. The threads of this web must be conceived as channels through which information (ideas, feelings, intentions and knowledges, etc.) flows. These threads get temporarily knotted and form what we call 'human subjects'. The totality of the threads constitutes the concrete sphere of life and the knots are abstract extrapolations. [...] The density of the webs of interhuman relations differs from place to place within the network. The greater the density the more 'concrete' the relations. These dense points form wave troughs in the field [...] The wave troughs exert an 'attractive' force on the surrounding field (pulling it into their gravitational field) so that more and more interhuman relations are drawn in from the periphery. [...] These wave troughs shall be called 'cities'." (V. Flusser, "Die Stadt als Wellental in der Bilderflut", 1990.)

The term 'identity[®]' is a conceptual tool for researching and developing space in the information/communication age.

For background information see also: Sikiaridi & Vogelaar "The Use of Space in the Information/Communication Age – Processing the Unplannable", under: http://www.infodrome.nl/publicaties/domeinen/07_rui_vog_essay.html

© Elizabeth Sikiaridi and Frans Vogelaar, 2001.

This text is a general introduction to our presentation. The presentation is a free talk. It is supported by a visual-based, interactive multimedia presentation (image, animation, bits of film, sound, text). This general/theoretical introduction (see text) is illustrated with a series of speculative as well as realised projects on the regional and urban scale.