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**title: Situations and Encounters:
Social Technologies and Public Space**

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abstract

The space of the city is not a static reality defined by built forms or demographic facts, but is instead a form of spatial practice created by the interweaving of everyday actions and interactions of its citizens. In this sense, it can be considered as being constructed out of sets of interrelations, the simultaneous co-existence of social interrelations and interactions at all spatial scales, from the most local to the most global (Massey 1992, p. 80). These interactions are no longer confined to face-to face contact, as communications media have re-arranged many social environments so that most people now find themselves in contact with others in new ways. Walls, doors, gates and distances still frame and isolate encounters, but new technologies have increasingly encroached on the situations that take place in physically defined settings. This paper will look at the potentials for situated technologies to inform the role of interactional territories in urban public space.

situations

Our conception of the world is fundamentally spatial and the idea of 'space' is essential to our everyday experience (Lefebvre, 1974). The way in which we communicate with others also bears a strong relationship with space, and our interactions with others can be considered as situated in that they are shaped by both the physical setting (Goffmann 1963), as well as being guided by a rich unarticulated background of social experiences and circumstances (Suchman 1987). Consequently people behave differently in different situations depending on both where one is and who one is with, and this is influenced by the degree to which they are present in the situation. But communication technologies overcome the limitations set by such physical boundaries and situations, and in so doing they not only offer more effective or comprehensive access to environments and behaviours but also they provide new opportunities (Meyrowitz 1986). The key aspect is that the physical setting no longer determines the nature of social information flow and the degree of access to a situation attained directly affects behaviour.

encounters

Social behaviours are differentiated by so many factors; whether they are public or private, individual or group, planned or chance. The physical distance over which one experiences another varies according to many factors, as does the types of events or occasions which often structure interaction in spatial settings. But imagine that many of the walls that separate rooms, offices and houses were suddenly removed, and that many once distinct situations were suddenly combined. Under such circumstances the distinctions between the different selves we project in different situations do not disappear, but are changed. This is exactly the type of change that communication technologies bring to our everyday encounters. In such situations we still manage to act differently with different people, but our ability to distinguish between encounters is no longer guided by the physical setting (Meyrowitz, 1985). Instead the networks and nodes of communications technologies enables us to play different roles in different situations in terms of access to social spaces. Mobile phones for instance have changed the nature of meeting places, such that they have become indeterminate, fluid territories rather than precise spots (Graham, 2004). Communications technologies, like physical places, include and exclude participants in encounters, and they can create boundaries equivalent the walls and windows in physical space. In fact the boundaries created by such technologies lack common ground, one does not spill over from one space to another, as one does when bumping into a friend on a street corner. The consequence is that the encounters experienced through such technologies often exist in isolation of each other; private social worlds segregated by access codes. These multiple communities, no longer linked by some common territory, do not interact with one another and there is little opportunity for shared encounters.

urban public space

Public spaces or territories have a temporary quality and an individual has free access and occupancy rights (Altman 1975, 118). These areas are often considered as 'in-between' spaces; streets, parks and

transit routes. The underlying dichotomy of public versus private in public space is rendered more fluid by new locative technologies, which in turn imply a fundamental transformation in the norms of public action and conduct (Couldry, 2002). Social interactions and activities are dependent on settings or situations (Goffmann 1969) and electronic media can be understood as overriding the boundaries and definitions of situations supported by physical settings. Since 'where' you are no longer defines 'who' you are, new media eliminates a traditional dimension of civic legibility (Mitchell, 1995).

The consequence of communications technologies in urban settings is that multiple social realities can occur in one place. The same physical space may be caught within the domain of two different social occasions. The social situations that occur in these overlapping behaviour settings support gatherings that possess a special characteristic in that they exist on more than one social level. The possibility that the same physical space can come to be used as a setting for more than one social occasion is regularly recognized. Thus in the case of public streets, there is a tendency in western society to define these places as the scene of overriding social occasion to which other occasions should be subordinated (Goffmann, 1963, 20). For example, presence in public space and interaction has traditionally been equated with face-to-face contact. Yet, presence in public space as mediated by new technologies has a different type of aesthetic, no longer dominated by visual access but by informational access. The features and structure of the interaction is enabled by a connection, which is not necessarily achieved through physical movement from one location to another. As such, everyday actions and behaviours no longer belong to particular places, and are now multiplexed and overlaid; there now exists the possibility to switch rapidly from one activity to another while remaining in the same place, so we end up using the same place in many different ways. On one hand this gives rise to confusion, and ambiguous and contested zones emerge (Mitchell 1995, 101), where the multiple and overlapping behaviours created create disparate, fragmented and discontinuous spatial references. On the other hand we can consider space as a field of interaction, composed of intersections of mobile elements it is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it (de Certeau 1984, 117). In this case space is a perceived as practiced place rather than a fixed and intransitive bounded entity, and as such emerging practices can only serve to enhance the richness of our spatial experience.

situated technologies

New mobile and wireless technologies such as WIFI, GPS, RFID, 3G Mobile, and Bluetooth running on a whole range of handheld and wireless devices are enabling new, highly contextual action and communication. Such mobile technologies are characterized by the fact that they are considered contextual or 'context-aware' (Dey Abowd, 1999), i.e. they respond dynamically to changes in the physical environment, with location currently considered the primary feature of context (Dix, 2000). The interaction in the world can be considered as situated, because it is no longer simply a case of the individuals' isolated interaction with the device, but of a much more complex highly situated interaction. The proliferating use of such devices is most marked in public space, with urban spaces becoming increasingly densely interwoven with mobile and wireless media. As such technologies move out of structured and enclosed physical environments their interaction with the physical world reconfigure established structures of spatial identification in physical environments. Simply put, physically bounded spaces are less significant when information is able to pass through walls and simultaneously travel great distances. As a result, where one is has less and less to do with what one knows and experiences. (Meyrowitz 1986 viii). But communication technologies are inherently spatial, in that they enable communication at a distance, and as such free communication from a fixed location in urban space. On the one hand such communications technologies, which whilst crucial in supporting the mobility and flux, are also fixed networks that must be embedded in space. But they also consist of physical systems made up of links and nodes that are constructed fundamentally of spatial systems linking together places (Hepworth 1987 quoted in Graham and Marvin 1996, 50). The media theorist Castells has popularized this space as the 'space of flows'; a concept where space is understood as linking up electronically separate locations in an interactive networks that connects activities and people in distinct geographical contexts. He contrasts this with the concept of the 'space of places'; which he defines as organizing experiences and activity around the confines of locality. The complexity of the urban condition arises when the emerging space of flows is folded into the space of places (Castells, in Graham 2004, 86). Similarly, the view of space as some sort of container, which bounds perception and action, no longer provides an adequate description for the spatial manifestation of media technologies. Instead a more complex framework is necessary, where multiple space and times become overlaid within the framework of a single experience such that places are no longer defined by their physical boundaries. Physical boundaries still exist but only to the extent that possibility exists for access to information to be restricted by physical access.

interactional territories

In order to investigate the transformation of spatial concepts through new media it is useful to explore the relevance of concepts of neighbourhood and territory; commonly understood spatial frameworks used to define social settings. When cities become essentially transitory social spaces for many of those who

experience them. In particular we investigate how we can rethink the concept of 'interactional territories'; geographical locales in which situated interaction occurs among a group of people (Lyman and Scott 1967) and how this comes to be transformed through communications media.

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Katharine S. Willis is an artist, architect and researcher whose focus on exploring ways in which we interact with our spatial environment. This work has included installations, temporary and permanent public artworks in UK and Europe. In particular she has been researching and creating installations which adopt new approaches to understanding how we can create legible environments. These projects investigate navigation, wayfinding and identity and the transformative possibilities of mobile and locative technologies.

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