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ON THE SEARCH FOR SPACE IN THE DIGITAL CITY: A DISPATCH FROM GRANARY SQUARE

In understanding the impact of the future or smart city on daily experiences of urban inhabitation, many of the inherited terms are unhelpful and send us into dichotomies between the imagined digital and the real, or suggest fantastical ways in which the two merge.

Loss of connection with place is one of the prevailing narratives around the rise of smart, networked communication technology. Theorists and journalists not in the work of predicting technofutures regularly lament the death of social interaction in and engagement with public space, place and locality. It is often assumed that given instant access to a global network 'in digital space' we will lose interest in coming face to face with the 'real' world.

However, assuming that continuing technological change and its impact on the city is inevitable, it seems important to remind ourselves of the mundane yet reassuring truth that (for the foreseeable future at least) there will always be streets, parks, buildings: three-dimensional forms in cities made of concrete and stone that have to be traversed physically to get around. In the end, you can't go for dinner

or have your hair cut online. We may happen to use devices to communicate with people in other places as we move about the city, but must we accept that this precludes us from genuine presence? Could it be our devices even offer us new ways of being in urban public places, as mobile workers? In overhearing phone conversations or overseeing screens, are we offered new ways of carrying out those timeless activities of nosing and people watching, which have been given weight sociologically as essential components of the urban experience?

Asking myself these questions, and armed with computational and communication devices, I went in search of space in the digital, or at least hybrid, city. I came across Granary Square in London's King's Cross. Let's say I'm writing a dispatch from the real world, in fact: sat outside, in public space, using a laptop.

It's a newly built and generously-proportioned public square (albeit on a privately owned estate, with the arguments around that particular issue skirted on this occasion). It provides a free Wi-Fi connection via The Cloud. The day is quite cold and overcast, but it's not unpleasant to be outside, and makes a refreshing change from a strip-lit PhD room at UCL. Like most people, I'm checking Facebook, Twitter and email every now and then as I work.

So what does the experience of being connected to the Internet in public space tell me? It doesn't tell me much about the 'smart city,' or 'digital urbanism.' These somewhat techno-fetishist concepts—currently the buzzwords at 'Future City' research initiatives led by Intel, Cisco and the like—are looking two steps ahead to a utopian citywide

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Digital users in public space do not equal digital space. Granary Square, London N1C.

system perfected by the constant feedback of environmental data to control systems and users. All the well, but do digital systems entail digital urbanism? In 1996 Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin pointed out that predictions of the ‘dissolution of cities’ had become the popular norm in urban theory dealing with communication technology.¹ But certainly I’ll still require a solid, usable, and fully material kind of urbanism to provide me with a real square to sit in and access those systems.

What then about ‘digital space?’ This concrete bench is as cool, hard, and grey as ever, even though I’m using it while I access a digital screen. When I close my laptop all that noticeably changes is that I’m not left with as much with which to occupy myself.

Frances Cairncross hailed *The Death of Distance* in the title of her 2001 book, and similar readings of ‘global’ communication experiences still abound.² Yes, I can certainly look at images of other places, and across various formats I can have conversations with friends who are *in* other places, just as I can look at and converse with *this* place. At any given moment my attention may be more occupied with here or with my communication with somewhere else, but importantly it can still switch at will in either direction. What is opened up is a highly conducive communication channel between distinct and different places, not a wormhole.

William Mitchell predicted in the now orthodox text *The City of Bits* that ‘the net negates geometry...it is nowhere particular but everywhere at once’.³ But if someone were to ask

me where I’ve been and what it was like I would surely describe the observable three-dimensional space of Granary Square. If I told them I’d been ‘in/at Facebook’ or ‘everywhere at once’ I’d be seen as having misunderstood the experience of communicating online.

Around me there is a steady stream of people coming to and fro from the adjacent Granary Building as well as several people sitting on seats and benches, with the usual activity mix of smoking, eating, talking to other people or using phones and computers. Though I am absorbed in my work, I don’t believe this precludes me from the classic units of social interaction between

Photos by John Bingham-Hall.



A digital device is not a place. Tavistock Square Gardens, London WC1.



strangers; giving directions, offering a light, and so on. Paul Virilio didn't know about laptops and smartphones when he poetically described the home as the 'last vehicle,' from which we would access the world purely in the virtual and have no need for space.⁴ Now we can see it is in fact extremely pleasant to be socially available in public space and yet productive in work at the same time.

Arguably, this is a successful public space on this none too hospitable day it is occupied by a mix of people, some using technology and others not. Just as reading here would not necessarily make it a literary space, using the Internet does not make it a digital space. It would be even better if there were added, say, photovoltaic canopies over the benches, powering and sheltering outdoor workspaces for people. A real public space with great digital amenities might encourage even greater mixed occupation here, with groups of students and faculty working together on computers mixing with the families that come here to bring children to play in the fountains in summer.

It was in the formative stages of theory on urbanity and networked communication that arguments concerning 'placelessness' became orthodox, and this legacy is still in evidence. The sensationalist soundbites of Mitchell, Cairncross, Virilio and others make for easy reading.⁵ Coined by William Gibson in *Burning Chrome* in 1982, the enduring term 'cyberspace' needs no introduction and is interchangeable with 'digital space.'⁶ Now though, in understanding the impact of the future or smart city on daily experiences of urban inhabitation, many of the inherited terms are unhelpful and send us into dichotomies between the imagined digital and the real, or suggest fantastical ways in which the two merge. We perhaps shouldn't forget that Gibson later described 'cyberspace' in the 2000 documentary *No Maps for These Territories*, as an 'evocative and essentially meaningless' buzzword.⁷

The game of naming new types of space suggests instant, dramatic shifts in experience, hiding the mundane reality of which most city life consists on a day-to-day basis. Cities by definition cannot change as fast as technology, and human evolution is slower still. Yet technological development is an economic inevitability and we have the opportunity to work with its grain to shape the deployment of technology into helpful urban forms that improve life for city-dwellers.

In order to do this we must aim for a much more nuanced, tempered understanding of the coming together of digital and urban that is based in, and can therefore help to shape, reality.

1 Steve Graham and Simon Marvin, *Telecommunications and the City: Electronic Space, Urban Places* (Hove: Psychology Press, 1996).

2 Frances Cairncross, *The Death of Distance: How the Communications Revolution Will Change Our Lives* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 1997).

3 William J Mitchell, *City of Bits: Space, Place and the Infobahn* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 8.

4 Paul Virilio, *Polar Inertia* (New York: Sage, 2000).

5 William J Mitchell 2000, *E-topia 'Urban life, Jim—but not as we know it'* (Cambridge, MA: the MIT Press, 1999).

6 William Gibson, *Burning Chrome* (London: HarperCollins UK, 1982).

7 *No Maps for These Territories* Directed by Mark Neale, 1999. New York: Docurama.

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