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New Media Design to Augment Social Networks of City Residents

Project
A three-year study is underway to advance design knowledge of how residents in urban environments can be assisted to communicate and interact through the use of new media to bridge the physical and digital city.

Challenge
A central focus is to challenge the notion of the mobile phone as a personal artefact and explore ways in which the device can be used in conjunction with other technologies and interfaces such as urban screens. One of the desired outcomes is that co-located residents involved in content sharing activities gain a greater sense of belonging within their physical community. We explore which thematic approaches to content sharing, such as the collective enhancement of the environment, might galvanise people to engage in the sort of interactions normally reserved for members of their prefabricated social networks.

Approach
We propose a design to extend the sense of community in urban neighbourhoods beyond pure network sociality. Through a lens of ‘suburban nostalgia’ we envision how neighbourhood interactions might be retrofitted in new ways through civic engagement in the enhancement of environments.

Design
The design prototype features an urban screen that appears to have a primarily aesthetic presence; however, the display is embedded with rich data feedback that has meaning to those who wish to engage with it. The data takes the form of feedback loops that represent the changing state of the local environment. Those interested in the air quality look at the sky. Those interested in temperature look at the sun, those interested in UV levels look at the clouds. Bus times are represented by the bus which advances through the screen. Users can download data from the screen to their mobile phones via Bluetooth. To enhance the feeling of suburban nostalgia, the stylistic quality of the display references an Art Deco era suburban Australia with Mechano like building structures. A sense of ‘being there’ in real time is evoked with the night time sky fading to black and lights appearing in the building.

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