

# Cyberurbanity

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"The catalogue of forms is endless: until every shape has found its city, new cities will continue to be born. When the forms exhaust their variety and come apart, the end of cities begins. In the last pages of the atlas, there is an outpouring of networks without beginning or end, cities in the shape of Los Angeles, in the shape of Kyoto-Osaka, without shape."  
*Italo Calvino, Invisible Cities*

Since the late-1960s, observers have predicted the end of the metropolis. The same technological advancement that created a need for the industrial city at the end of the nineteenth century would reverse that draw by the end of the twentieth; urbanity, which lived in different forms over the millennia, would as its last act evaporate. Calvino, above, might be read as agreeing with Lewis Mumford and other urban scholars who suggested that the city would grow larger and larger until it became 'ethereal' and disappear from our sight. The rapid spread of computer networking and the emergence of a new 'cyberspace,' has led many to herald the Internet as the harbinger, if not the agent, of this final stage of the city. Given the complexity of the urban system, one wonders whether prognosticators have grasped its teleology so easily.

In fact, the death of cities was much exaggerated. It is true that during the early 1970s, more people left the large cities in developed countries than came. Urban theorists began writing about "edge cities" and the hollowing out of the metropolis. Despite some resurgence in urban residency during the 1980s, there seemed little doubt that telework, e-commerce, and home entertainment would once and for all put an end not only to city life, but to suburban congestion, and lead to a more even dispersion of populations. We know now how wrong that prediction was. Far from replacing travel, electronic communications networks have created new demands for moving people and goods. And while there are certainly cases in which those outside of the traditional core of global cities have taken advantage of the networking revolution-Bangalore's software industry and Ireland's telework centers come to mind-generally, the surge of creativity, production, and work in the new economy has been in the places where this has happened for centuries. In San Francisco, office and warehouse space has been snatched up so quickly by new media companies that the city is considering putting in place regulations restricting where 'dot.com' companies can locate. In my own much smaller city of Seattle, rents have doubled over the last five years, and the city cannot build new residential property quickly enough. New York, a relative new-comer to new media, now hosts more web content than any other city in the world.

## ***The Place of Space***

Clearly, there is something wrong with our expectations of the city. We all have some 'hands-on' familiarity with what a city is: a place where buildings and people scramble to fill every space, a point to which all roads lead. It seems natural that a city has something to do with space, and in particular with adjusting and molding that space. In such a view, a city is a grand technology of habitation, a process by which people may engage in a market of space and by adjusting it, define themselves and their reality. Much of the literature in urban studies is built upon the spatial nature of the city, from theories of where cities are located (at hubs of exchange networks), to their physical architecture. Von Thünen, in describing the economic development of the city, pictured it in its ideal form as having a high concentration of people and capital at the center, and gradually tapering outward into the hinterlands. Certainly, the spatial element of the city is the most natural direction from which to

approach an urban theory. It is, after all, what we can most easily make concrete of our urban experience. The emergence of 'cyberspace' as a common trope has, as with earlier communications technologies, made us question our relationship to spatial topographies. Such questioning leads not just to a rethinking of our idea of the city, but a fundamental change in the basis of our thinking about space and time; a shift from place to process.

This is not the first time a communications technology has raised such questions about urbanity. The telegraph brought about widespread claims that space had been "annihilated" by the new technology, since messages could be transmitted from city to city nearly instantaneously. Other technologies came with similar claims. In 1971, Melvin Webber suggested that increasingly large metropolises were becoming a single, city, knit together by the telephone system. The internet and world wide web have an even greater potential effect. My own research has shown that links are far more likely between web sites hosted in New York and London than they are between either of these cities and smaller towns surrounding them. But maintaining this spatial viewpoint quickly leads to increased complexification. The networked nature of communications technology means an explosion of dimensions that are unfamiliar to our everyday experience.

Examining connections and their spatial counterparts leads us to a different conception of what it is to be a city. When telephone exchanges began to expand, some suggested that they provided a unique sociological function: mapping the connections among people. It is common to think that where connections are available, there will be communication. In fact, the reciprocal relationship is potentially more important: where there is a need for communication, there is also a pressure for the technology to be put into place. Karl Deutsch and other scholars have suggested that by looking at communication flows, you can better locate social groupings. An effective way of mapping national borders, for example, is looking at how information - mail, telephone calls, etc.- flows geographically.

The main attraction to spatial definitions is that they are a convenient-a seemingly natural-metaphor for communication networks. When communication was limited to face-to-face conversation, and when those who communicated face-to-face were limited in their physical movement by the distance their feet could carry them and by social convention, physical space might have been a useful measure of communicative distance. As waterways were increasingly used for "communicating" (a term roughly synonymous with "transporting" until the advent of the electric telegraph) goods, people, and information, some suggested that space was warped. Those who resided in areas adjacent to navigable bodies of water seemed somehow 'closer together' than those in less accessible, though more proximate, locations. Of course, distance had not changed, only the ability to connect.

A city is primarily a nexus of communicative exchange. Georg Simmel's view of the mental life of the city, and his examination of social networks generally, place the connections between individuals and groups at the center of the analysis of the city. This view of the city as a system of relationships can be found in the work of those directly influenced by Simmel, including Walter Benjamin and Robert Park, as well as more recent urban scholars like Jane Jacobs and Manuel Castells. All of these authors noted the character of a city is found in the complex webs of social relationships that it sustains. At times, they also touch on the primacy of these relationships, as when Jacobs sees the sidewalk as an artifact of human relationships. But rarely do they cross over in perspective, to see the structures as the calcification of a grand social structure, rather than a stage upon which such structure evolves. This is true even in much of the writings of William Mitchell, whose *City of Bits* did so much to popularize the relationship of information networks to physical cities.

All of this is not to say that space is meaningless or useless. It still turns out that communication networks are relatively isomorphic with the physical city. But cyberspace allows for cities to become far more dynamic. Relationships are less tied to physical institutions of the city, and cities therefore

allow for a more rapid mixing not only of goods, but of knowledge and of ways of knowing. An analysis of cities that bases itself in this function—the role of the city as a mechanism for processing exchanges of knowledge, and (by extension) of goods—sees the coming electronic networks as a further incremental evolution of urbanity. The physical, spatial, geographic and architectural nature of the city is a necessary byproduct of its processes, but its form—most often—follows its function.

## **Street Smarts**

Commentators on the psychology of cyberspace often note that it engenders a multiplicity of personalities, ways of thinking, and ways of knowing. In short, it makes plain the constructedness of inter-personal communication, and tends to lower the inhibitions and social penalties for those with differing identities. It is easy to find convergence among discussions of the psychology of cyberspace and of the mental life of the city. Too often, it is assumed that past work on human interaction has only a marginal impact in this newly informatized world. If the city and cyberspace are more than homologous, if indeed they are identical from a functional perspective, we find ourselves with a rich tradition of social thought rather than a *carte blanche*.

Popular depictions of intelligence describe a dialectic between "street smarts" (cosmopolitanism) and "book smarts" (intellectualism)—often with the former being somehow privileged precisely because it allows for discourse surfing, for the ability to speak to a more global audience. This dialectic also has a long tradition of being tied to the "natural" country and the "constructed" city. The link, epitomized by Aesop's parable of The Country Mouse and the City Mouse is played out in an often obvious way in modern popular film. Take, for example, *Crocodile Dundee*, who becomes the hero of the film by being able to quickly adapt to a new way of knowing and talking about the world, by proving that he is in possession of a cosmopolitan intellect despite coming from the periphery. Other films in which this dialectic is reinforced abound: *Good Will Hunting*, *Mighty Aphrodite*, *Pecker*, *Little Man Tate*, *Ridicule* and dozens of others. In each of these, the expectations of the 'country-bumpkin' are inverted, and characters show themselves to be surprisingly cosmopolitan despite their new arrival. Though such a division between the country and city is often overwrought, counterexamples in film and literature are difficult to find. In practice, urbanization has always been an interpenetrated affair: sophistication and polyglossia existing in the country, even as the ideals of country life made their force felt in the city. The two have never been distinct, but rather counterparts in a system of exchange. The traditional identification of the city with education, novelty, and cosmopolitanism, and of the country with traditional culture and ways of understanding, is reinforced by the stories we tell ourselves, even as that geographic basis of knowledge is being eroded.

The proximity of intellects found in the city leads to a condition in which difference must be 'handled'—in which the shock of incommensurability must be either resolved or sublimated. Depictions of the city highlight this process of hybridization in thought, custom and language. Nowhere is this more evident than in the emblematic pidgin street language of *Blade Runner*, which portrays LA as a newly global city which has attempted to unify a disparate set of Pacific Rim cultures. The city has always been the place in which this process of mixing and reformulating has taken place. The fads and the trends of the city are driven by the unplanned collisions of rural cultures and texts displaced into a central location. Some of these trends are then re-distributed to the hinterlands, where they become a part of a more temporally stable culture. This circle of trends, fashion, art, literature, and language has existed throughout the history of the city. One could describe the process as 'evolutionary' (and many have), but this implies that there is somehow an optimum state to be reached, an urban teleology. In fact, the city behaves as an organism, shifting into states of imbalance rather than balance.

## **Cyber-Urban Difference Engine**

In *Sociology et philosophie* (1924), Durkheim writes:

"When individual minds are not isolated, but enter into close relationship with, and act upon, each other, a new kind of psychic life arises from their synthesis. It is clearly distinct from that led by the solitary individual because of its unusual intensity. Sentiments created and developed in the group have a greater energy than purely individual sentiments -- periods of creation and renewal occur when for various reasons men are led into a closer relationship with each other, when gatherings and assemblies are more frequent, relationships closer and the exchange of ideas more active."

For Durkheim such concentrations are necessarily temporary. Their ludic nature defies hierarchical control, and leads to striking events in history, both creative and destructive. The metropolis is the site for social change. While social movements may be agrarian in genesis, to have a larger impact they must enter into the social dialogue of the city. As the Zapatistas have shown, this need no longer occur physically in the streets of the capital. At the same time, one could turn to protests at the Seattle meeting of the WTO in 1999 (among other examples) to show that protest has not, and will likely never, transcend the physical place of the city.

The city acts as an information processor. Symbolic content from the margins of the city, relatively homogenous because of its relative lack of connections, is imported into the city, collides in planned and unplanned ways, and generates a new permutation that is then thrown back out into the margins. The idea of the city being omnipresent betrays the symbiotic relationship with relatively isolated areas in which the urban frisson is far less frenetic. That we do not recognize the city as a symbolic machine says more about us than about it. In particular, it indicates a blind spot for creativity without authors. This is changing. Increasingly we are more aware of emergent collaboration and with that awareness we are becoming more capable of understanding the chaotic authorial nature of the urban system.

Durkheim indicates a consistent view of the city over the last century as the location for such processes, the place that coincidentally allows for the collisions of cultures and ways of knowing. Simmel's view of technology "distancing" us from the important elements of interaction again places the material world as a medium rather than as a result of this processing. He insisted that the telephone and telegraph in fact distanced us from what was important: the content of communication. With the rapid diffusion of information and communication technologies, this mediation has reached such a 'critical mass' that it is increasingly difficult to define the city as anything but a communicative process. Perhaps more importantly, while views of the city have focused on the increasing rationality of exchange, it becomes clearer that it is in the creation of chaos and not order that the city excels. It remains difficult to capture the nature of these collisions, as we are always looking for more static consequences of this chaos. Like physicists watching for collisions that cannot be observed directly, we must rely upon our own models of how this occurs, and must be reflexive in doing so. In the realm of information science we have moved from theories of information as noise, and of cybernetics as the reduction of that noise, to a recognition that noise itself is a process of understanding, of incorporation. The observer makes a difference.

Calvino writes not of a change in the city, but of our understanding of cities; of a removal of the distance between our imagined city and our place in the world. The fragment at the beginning of this essay ends his book entitled *Imagined Cities*, throughout which he aptly demonstrates the textual character of cities. Our imaginations make up a built environment. If cities are, in the end, vanishing, it is because we no longer know how to imagine them. I have no fear of our losing the city; as a social phenomenon, the idea is inconceivable. There is a vital need, however, to reinvigorate the way we see

our cities. Cities provide the greatest potential for collaborative creativity. How that potential is realized depends entirely on how we construct our stories about ourselves in our cities. We must each become flâneurs of cyberspace, and by putting ourselves into the machine, make it a part of us.

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