

PPS: PublicPrivateSpace

Where the public space turns into private space and the private space opens up to the public

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What happens when our private life becomes public and we use the public space for our private concerns? What happens with the way we communicate, socialise and relate to each other and to the space around us? What happens when technology becomes invisible and disappears from our awareness? What happens to our autonomy? Who still has agency? These questions come up when we think about our relationship and the changes that have occurred over the past years where our environment has increasingly shifted towards the intangible: from mobile devices such as telephones, game controllers and GPS to CCTV systems and electronic tags (RFID) for travel and products. These changes have affected our experience of location, space and geographical positioning on a personal and global level in both a digital and physical way. Moreover it poses questions regarding the relation between our private and our public space.

Buildings are generally intended to last, through turnovers, wars, political changes, and the retrofit of new technologies. Buildings are sturdy and solid entities that without deliberate destruction are hard to change. Even though their form and appearance has developed over the centuries they retained their basic function as barriers against the outside. From the time that buildings were first defined as private spaces, the space outside almost automatically served as a public space. Public space referred to the streets, squares and parks of a city. The term public space was a symbol for the spatial and cultural aspects of urban life. However this particular space has not been as fixed as the buildings around it. From the marketplace in the Middle Ages, to the Coffee Houses in the eighteenth century and the publicly accessible libraries and shopping arcades in the nineteenth century to last centuries malls and other main commercial centres. The public space turns out to be an autonomous zone that throughout history continuously changed its nature. Nevertheless the meaning of public space has always been quite constant – a signifier of a space in which views and opinions could be shared with others. In other words a place where groups of diverse cultures, lifestyles, and ideas meet and exchange

ideas. At the moment an interesting turn is taking place. The rise of digital technologies has changed our ways of communication. Sociologist Manuel Castells characterised this period in time as a network society, not a new phenomenon but more pervasive than ever because the information technology paradigm secured an expansion throughout the entire social structure.¹ These technologies, from iPods to mobile phones and GPS receivers, have a large impact on our feeling and use of spatial dimensions, leading to the observation that the area of our cities is no longer determined by physical space alone. Moreover they transform our public space into a private space and vice versa.

Today the public space is most present on the internet. Through blogs, social networking sites and other online tools, people exchange ideas and public opinions are formulated. The contemporary city has moved into virtual space. A virtual public space that enables forms of sharing and exchange that was previously unimaginable. By extracting data from different blogs to create and form new stories and entities or through exposing images of CCTV cameras in commercial shops and private houses artists like Jonathan Harris, Michelle Teran or groups like MediaShed have pointed to the consequences of this shift from that what is private to what is now being made public.

At the same time where the private has become public, the public space is used as a private space. Electronic devices like mobile phones, GPS and other tracking devices personalise and privatise the public space. The mobile phone is the most interesting example of the changing status of public space. On the one hand the advanced mobile phones like the iPhone with integrated MP3 enables one while using headphones to move through a city without getting involved. More importantly, the use of these devices for making conversations fortifies the turn from public space to private space. By making private conversations and ignoring the other people around them, the mobile phone users cause a demise of public space by actively occupying the space for personal and private conversations denying the people around

them and building their personal bubble. These new ways of communication created new forms of privacy within public domains. With their project *Interactive Burka* Karen Lancel and Hermen Maat are presenting a new way to open discussion and debate, this time around the notion of being invisible in public space. Lancel and Maat are well known for their interactive installations and performances in public space where they confront people with questions about their digital media usage. Their present work *Interactive Burka* is a metaphor for the commotion in the Western world around the issue of being publicly invisible. Stories from different people can be heard by touching the delicate fabric of the burka. The stories that can also be added by the public deal with (in)visibility, transparency, security, privacy, trust, intimacy, the desire for an uncontrolled and unmediated space, etc. The installation is placed in public space as a playzone that hands the public through touch a poetic and visual interface, a way to deal with social, emotional and political conflicts that dominate the discussion between visibility and invisibility.

Another tool that changes our connection to the space around us is GPS. For a long time now our experience of the city has been influenced by various media, information and communication technologies. But apart from merely walking within a mediated world we are now also actively interacting with the space not through tangible cues but by making use of the ubiquitous technologies. With the arrival and popularity of location-based technologies a shift occurred from the material cues to immaterial virtual signs by which we navigate the streets. A new hybrid space is formed in which we are constantly moving between the virtual and the actual. Questions arise that address the notion of agency, the status of private and public life and the interlacing of virtual and actual worlds.

Many artists working with locative media focus and underscore the underlying structure and working of the techniques without questioning them. By creating geospatial narratives, games or walks these locative media projects tend to evoke (forgotten) histories and memories rather than enforce actions. While remaining in their own established social networks they at best make social-spatial relations visible. But there are also artists that try to find the opacities in the systems and by highlighting certain hidden or forgotten aspects they reclaim the urban space. Yolande Harris investigates in her project *Sun Run Sun* the split between the embodied experience of location and the calculated data of position. Harris questions some of the fundamental issues underlying the “efficient” and “functional” GPS

data: what is inside and what is outside, what does it mean to be located, what to be lost? Whereas the GPS system negates one’s relation to the environment, Harris encourages the listener to re-asses and to renegotiate their connection with the actual environment. By taking the different data from satellites and translating them into sounds *Sun Run Sun* delicately treads a path between technical data and actual experience, between the artificial and the natural.²

Interactive Burka and *Sun Run Sun* are focal points in the shifting conceptions of private and public space. They create a place for encountering difference and creating discussion or provide a space of resonance and meaning, by emphasising and renegotiating our position with and within our immediate surrounding.

These projects address the social dimension of human environments and possess qualities that make the communication of interaction visible in the realm of the public/private sphere. Moreover they reflect the essence of what is meant by “ubiquitous computing” and its effect on the changing relation of the public and the private space. Through artworks like these it will become possible to formulate and discuss our understanding of the specificities of location, which is mediated along political, aesthetic, social and scientific lines.

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- 1 The One-dimensional Network Society of Manuel Castells, a review essay by Jan A.G.M. van Dijk. <http://www.thechronicle.demon.co.uk/archive/castells.htm> (last viewed April 25th, 2008).
 - 2 The specific use of sound resonates the origin of communication and demarcation of space. David Dunn remarked during the discussion “Navigating the Space of the Future” at the Netherlands Media Art Institute, 15 April 2008 (<http://www.nimk.nl>): “Music was in a fundamental way, defined and structurally coupled to the physical environment. Sound was a modality of communication. In many ways there seems to be a recirculation that started in the earliest time when we used sound to communicate and perceive our environment as a way of coupling to the external world. Little by little we have narrowed that down to this cultural form, and now we come back to the most ancient modality of listening through technology.”

References

- Yolande Harris: <http://www.yolandeharris.net> & <http://sunrunsun.nimk.nl>
- Jonathan Harris & Sepandar Kamvar: <http://www.number27.org/#wefeelfine>
- Karen Lancel & Hermen Maat: <http://www.lancelmaat.nl/>
- MediaShed: <http://mediashed.org/videosniffin>
- Michelle Teran: <http://www.ubermatic.org/life/>