

Collective Territories: The Shared Space of Locative Media

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Abstract

Within the urban perspective, this essay looks at the space that location-aware media generates and the nature of flow that is projected from and is implied by the collective activities of locative media. How do these landscapes reflect and deform the intricate set of power relations that produced them? What happens to our relationship with the public space around us when we can collectively share information over time with others who are remotely nearby? How might locative territories renegotiate and redefine the original meaning of the spaces they occupy? Locative media is defined here as geographically-based media that can be used to actively create a reciprocal awareness between groups of people and their environment, thereby, merging various types of information and media within the limits of specific geographic landscapes; these limits may vary in dimension from a specific point in a landscape to large areas of space such as nodes and pathways. This essay is a brief analysis of several recent examples in the area of locative art and media, and an observation on the issues that they bring to the transforming public urban landscape.

Mobility and self-governing communities

Locative media can trace its foundations to the principles of circulation and mobility realised in urban cities. The precursor to this mobility is illustrated by social historian Richard Sennett as he describes the ancient Agora of 4th century BC, where people could move “from group to group, ...[to] find out what was happening in the city and discuss it.”⁵ Sennett’s assertion that this movement in the Agora, “made possible in simultaneous space, served participatory democracy as well”,⁵ emphasizes the empowerment that moving freely within a social space may bring. While the structure and definition of these social public spaces have transformed from markets, to public squares, to the coffee houses of the 19th century, the common dynamic within these spaces is the relatively boundless mobility of the individual.

Today, as a global community begins to communicate and move about cities on different scales with various media tools, such as mobile devices and locative media, what happens to our relationship with public space? Author Steven Berlin Johnson equates the significance



Figure 1: *Shadows From Another Place*



Figure 2: *Figurines along a street in London in Day of the Figurines.*

of circulation in his participatory website, *Outside.in*,³ to that of the city street. He uses a comparison of urban avenues where “everyone feeds onto the big streets, and you have insanely overcrowded streets and then side streets that are deserted” to shorter blocks where “the streets tend to gravitate towards the middle zone where there are always some people on them, but not too many”⁶ as a method for controlling web traffic and creating a democratised public web space. With *Outside.in*, Johnson has created a large-scale community blog for people to share discussions about neighborhoods and specific places that have been geographically tagged with digital information. Once geographic location data is associated with a weblog and it is retrievable, people who are interested in these smaller communities have a greater ability to engage with each other — similar to the dynamic of a small familiar neighborhood block as opposed to the anonymity of a crowded city avenue.

Renegotiation of space

As people experience their environments, the potential that location-based media brings to public engagement and communication; histories of a place, individual and collective sentiments, memories, and the tangible traces that may be left there — in what could otherwise be a fleeting occurrence — is a great shift in the meaning of an environment. Architects Diller and Scofidio, in their description of the beaches of Normandy, relate ideas of territory and the echoes of history that remain:

“The real traces of the battle do not offer me much to see, and nothing of that intense human drama. To me, this beach seems what it easily could have been before the event — an ordinary beach dedicated to the carefree recreation of vacationers. Now these shores are blank... while muffled cries and the roar and crash of guns echo in my imagination.”
[Diller and Scofidio, 1994 p.9]

There is a renegotiation of the landscape of Normandy, where the “the past perfect(ed) landscape there responds the echo of a reinvented history.”² From this point of view, how might locative territories similarly redefine the original or historically significant meaning of the spaces that they occupy? In his prescient observation of the late 20th century internet, theorist Paul Virilio remarks that the “screen has become the city square” where “the crossroads of all mass media” meet.⁷ As the internet has grown to include location-based media and communication, this idea of the territory where it may reside is beginning to shift, and the individual’s sense of the urban city square and its ‘crossroads’ could, in essence and meaning, become a virtual node

within the physical city where various communities can meet locatively. Conversely, the planned city-square, physically intact within a centralised structure, with the advent of new public engagement, may also have a shift in meaning, determined by peoples’ traces of media that are layered over the will of city planners.

Several timely examples of this renegotiation of territory are seen in the locative artworks of Paula Levine and the collaborative group, Blast Theory. Paula Levine’s *Shadows From Another Place* [figure 1], “imagines the effects upon San Francisco had the bombs which fell on Baghdad been destined rather for the American city”.⁴ Her work references geographic positioning technology to physical spaces, with a mapping of the first attack on Baghdad superimposed upon a map of San Francisco. Sites in San Francisco are associated with sounds and photographs of linked locations in Baghdad. Blast Theory’s *Day of the Figurines* [figure 2] is a vast miniature model of London, installed in a public space, where participants are invited to “create their own figurine: to name it, answer questions about its past and how it is represented to others.”¹ Participants see themselves, in the form of a figurine, placed in the town and they can continue to participate via a mobile phone. They can also revisit the physical model to see any transformations in topography made by the collective participation. In both of these examples, landscapes are being redefined. There is a new type of social engagement in the spaces they occupy. As we experience Levine’s *Shadows From Another Place*, we might now hear the horrific crashing of faraway bombs resonating on the streets of San Francisco. And as we experience Blast Theory’s *Day of the Figurines*, we may perhaps have a different relationship with the landscape of London as we see ourselves there.

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- 1 Adams, M. et al. 2006. *Day of the Figurines*. [online] <http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/>, accessed January 2008.
 - 2 Diller, Elizabeth and Ricardo Scofidio. 1994. *Back to the Front: Tourisms of War*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, pp. 9-12.
 - 3 Johnson, Steven Berlin. 2007. *Outside.in*, [online], http://outside.in/public/bloggiest_neighborhoods, accessed January 2008.
 - 4 Levine, Paula. 2003. *Shadows From Another Place*. [online], <http://paulalevine.net/projects/>, accessed December 2007.
 - 5 Sennett, Richard. 1994. *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization*. London: W.W. Norton & Company, pp. 52-55.
 - 6 Turnipseed, Joel. 2007. “Steven Berlin Johnson Interview.” [online], <http://www.kottke.org>, accessed January 2008.
 - 7 Virilio, Paul. 1987. “The Overexposed City.” In *Zone 1(2)*. Cambridge: MIT Press, pp. 14-31.