

Urban Culture as Interface Culture: Locative Media and the Concepts of 'Dwelling' and 'Public Sphere'

Martijn de Waal

University of Groningen, University of Amsterdam
martijn@martijndewaal.nl

I would like to address the concept of locative media from the perspective of urban culture. How does the emergence of locative media change our understanding of urban culture, and the related concepts of 'dwelling' and 'public space'? Are we moving from a 'BLVD-Urbanism' towards an 'MSN-Urbanism'?

I have coined 'BLVD-Urbanism' — named after life on the new boulevards of early modern Paris described by writers such as Baudelaire and Benjamin — as a way to generalize a number of theories on urban culture that have arisen over the last century. These theories — starting with the Chicago and German Schools of urban sociology up to current urban complexity theories — approach the city as a spatial 'organization of differences'. The mechanism behind this 'sorting process' differs from theory to theory. The Chicago School saw evolutionary ecological forces at work (Sennett 1969). Others see the city mainly as a superstructural effect of the logic of capitalism (Harvey 2005). Others again try to understand the city as an 'assemblage', a complex phenomenon on a higher level that arises from the many interactional processes of individuals and institutions on a lower level as well as through feedback processes between these levels (De Landa 2006).

What these theories have in common is that generally they describe the city as a 'situation' or an 'interface' that brings these differences together. Whatever the sorting mechanism, the modern city is an amalgam of people with diverse backgrounds and different identities, lifestyles and goals. Subsequently, this 'situation' has an impact on the subjectivity of those involved. It produces social class or forges (sub)cultural identities (Fischer 1975). It liberates from tradition or alienates, creating footloose individuals or even criminals (Boomkens 1998, 2006; Sennett 1969). At the same time the city also creates a spatial 'interface' that forces all these differences to relate to each other. It 'domesticates' these differences and makes the whole liveable (Susser 2002; Sennett 1970).

Three types of space are produced in these processes. Public space is the place of (identity) politics and

performance, where subjects show themselves, where they learn how they are different or similar from others, where they forge new alliances and relate to each other. Diametrically opposed is the private space of dwelling or the home, where the subject can retract himself from the differences that make up the city. Sometimes a third category is brought up: parochial or institutional space, the spaces that are claimed and marked by a certain group or institution where group rules determine behaviour and deviant behaviour is frowned upon.

Very often BLVD-Urbanism is not just a descriptive theory on the production of the city but also an ethical one. Take for instance this quote from Richard Sennett:

Cities have the potential to make us more complex human beings. A city is a place where people can learn to live with strangers, to enter into the experiences and interests of unfamiliar lives. Sameness stultifies the mind; diversity stimulates and expands it. (Sennett 2001)

To sum up, BLVD-urbanism is the idea of the metropolis as a place where people with different identities live together. Traditional ways of life are exchanged for a more free floating modern experience that is both exciting and threatening. A well functioning urban society cannot do without these public spaces. Yet, the mere existence of these spaces are not enough. It also requires that citizens do not get entrenched in their defensive dwellings. Nowadays, many critics fear that this BLVD-urbanism is under attack and threatened by four major cultural shifts: an attitudinal one in which citizens become consumers, an economic one from public space to privatized commercial space, a paradigm shift in design from space to non-space and a social shift from the ideal of inclusive community to excluding 'tribes'.

Yet what is striking about most theories on BLVD-urbanism is that they still are primarily *spatial*. Even if they include immaterial constructs such as the logic of the 'space of flows' as the driving sorting mechanism

of urban culture, the 'situation' or 'interface' of the city is still seen as a mainly spatial one (Susser 2002). I would argue that we need to extend this idea of urban culture with the notion of 'hybrid space' as theorized by De Souza e Silva: 'a conceptual space created by the merging of borders between physical and digital spaces.' These hybrid spaces are not constructed by technology itself, rather, 'It is built by the connection of mobility and communication and materialized by social networks developed simultaneously in physical and digital spaces' (de Souza e Silva 2006). With the advent of mobile and locative media the experience of the city is not merely spatial any longer, and this has consequences for the way we theorize and understand private, parochial and public space. We need to think of urban culture in terms of what I have called MSN-Urbanism. Our experience of urban space should be understood as a combination of a physical situation – the urban interface — and a mediated experience, through the interfaces of mobile or locative media. The mobile phone, Ito et. al. conclude, 'is a membrane between the real and the virtual, here and elsewhere, rather than a portal of high fidelity connectivity that demands full and sustained engagements' (Ito, Okabe, and Matsuda 2006).

Thus, locative and mobile media enable their users to retract in private or parochial 'telecocoon' while in public or to 'tame' the wilderness of public space and domesticate it with one's own soundtrack or social environment (Ito, Okabe, and Matsuda 2006; Bull 2000). Identity has become not only a matter of physical performance in public and parochial spaces, but also of display through profiles on social networking sites. Physical parochial spaces are connected to virtual social networks. Search or 'discovery' algorithms allow the subject to organize the space around them in identifiable categories or to forge new contacts. They might lead to the formation of new reputation systems and the formation of smart mobs (Rheingold 2002). These can be used both in progressive ways to forge new political alliances as well as in restrictive ways, in which 'software sorting cities' electronically deny or de-prioritise access to those without the right qualifications (Graham 2005; Graham and Marvin 2001).

Home is no longer a secluded place to retract into from the wild and dangerous city, a place to foster one's private identity. Rather the idea of 'home' should be understood as a mode of being. It means 'feeling at home' or 'making oneself at home' through the use of digital technology rather than being at a certain location that bears one's home address. The boundaries between being in public or in private soften. It is not so much where you are, it is more like being on MSN or Skype: a green icon means, 'I am up for a chat'; a red one says, 'don't disturb I am not really here.' Systems like this combined with all sorts of social software might reinvigorate public space and provide new ways for experiencing and demarcating

physical space. But it could also undermine the whole concept of a public sphere, if users will start seeing the city no longer as a possible community of strangers but as a range of services they can or cannot consume, and where the production of those places is solely geared towards those consumers and their consumption patterns.

Boomkens, Rene. 1998. *Een drempelwereld: moderne ervaring en stedelijke openbaarheid*. Rotterdam: NAI Uitgevers.

Boomkens, Rene. 2006. *De nieuwe wanorde. Globalisering en het einde van de maakbare samenleving*. Amsterdam: Van Gennep.

Bull, Michael. 2000. *Sounding out the City*. Oxford: Berg Publishers.

De Landa, Manuel. 2006. *A New Philosophy of Society*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.

de Souza e Silva, Adriana. 2006. "Mobile Technologies as Interfaces of Hybrid Spaces." In *Space and Culture* 9 (3), pp. 261-278.

Fischer, Claude. 1975. "Towards a subcultural theory of urbanism." In *American journal of sociology* 80 (6).

Graham, Stephen. 2005. "Software-Sorted Geographies." In *Progress in Human Geography* 29 (5), pp. 562-580.

Graham, Stephen, and Simon Marvin. 2001. *Splintering urbanism: networked infrastructures, technological mobilities and the urban condition*. London; New York: Routledge.

Harvey, David. 2005. *Spaces of Global Capitalism: A Theory of Uneven Geographical Development*. London: Verso.

Ito, Mizuko, Daisuke Okabe, and Misa Matsuda. 2006. *Personal, Portable, Pedestrian: Mobile Phones in Japanese Life*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Rheingold, Howard. 2002. *Smart mobs: the next social revolution*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Perseus Publishing.

Sennett, Richard. 1969. *Classic essays on the culture of cities*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.

———. 1970. *The uses of disorder: personal identity and city life*. New York: Norton.

———. 2001. A flexible city of strangers. *Monde Diplomatique*.

Susser, I; Castells, M., ed. 2002. *The Castells reader on cities and social theory*. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers.

Biography

Martijn de Waal (1972) is a PhD-candidate at the department of Practical Philosophy at the University of Groningen and the department of Mediastudies at the University of Amsterdam. Het also works as an independent writer and researcher. Recent publications include 'From Medialandscape to Media Ecology. The cultural implications of Web 2.0' in the Dutch magazine *Open* (2007), and 'Powerifications', a contribution to *Visionary Power. Producing the Contemporary City* — the official catalogue of the International Architectural Biennale Rotterdam (2007). He participated with the exhibition 'Greeting from Pendrecht' in the Biennale of Architecture of Urbanism in Shenzhen and Hong Kong (2007). He is also the co-founder of TheMobileCity.nl, a weblog and a conference on locative and mobile media and urban culture. Contact: www.martijndewaal.nl martijn@martijndewaal.nl