

TOWARDS GEOSPATIAL CULTURAL PLANNING: STRATEGIES FOR LOCAL CULTURAL INNOVATION WITH LOCATIVE NEW MEDIA ART

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This paper explores locative new media art in a contextual framework of cultural urban revitalization. I characterize two kinds of “site-specifics” in considering locative media art as a tool of “geospatial cultural planning”. I propose the application of “location-based media” to the “mediated locality” in a “performative program” of locative media art, which facilitates a platform for cultural innovation among citizens.

This paper explores a conceptualization of locative new media art in a contextual framework of revitalization of urban spaces. The intersection of urban and new media studies has opened up a dynamic field of practice and research. The engagement of citizens and urban environments through mobile activities is explored in practices of urban planning and community development; for example, in experiments of mobilizing people to use their mobile devices to collect data in the urban for re-constructing a sense of cultural community around data maps, and, of mediating a locality through virtual overlays of augmented reality, or in site-specific multimedia installations. The significant attention toward site-specificity and locality in multidisciplinary practices of urban revitalization is the topic of consideration in this paper; in particular, the application of locative media art to strategic urban revitalization and community development. The paper asks: How can we consider the “program” of the locative media art project as facilitating socio-spatial relationships in a way that cultivates a site and the activities in it?

Meaning and Matter in Space and Place

I will begin this paper by considering a conceptualization of the structures of the environment in which locative media art projects “work,” which is a condition for considering such projects as intervention strategies for urban revitalization. New media technologies, including mobile media, ambiguous and pervasive computing, have come to reconfigure our understandings and experiences of space and culture in between the microcosm of the everyday and the macrocosm of spatial flows. As noted by Scott McQuire: “If urban space has historically been defined by the relation between static structures and mobile subjects, this dichotomy is fast giving way to a hybrid spatiality characterized by dynamic flows which not only dissolve the fixity of traditional modes of spatial enclosure, but problematize the unified presence of the subject traversing the contours.” [1] Manuel Castells’ concept of the spaces of flow refers to “the material organization of time-sharing social practices that work through flows” and to the interrelated linkages across an infinite amount of local and global relationships. [2] In the spaces of flow, cities develop in between material and immaterial organizations as dynamic fields of shifting intensities and immersive environments, in which hybrid spatialities are formulating and reformulating new rhetoric’s for its urban spaces.

With the development of spaces of flow, we moved from one kind of conceptual, spatial geographical structure to another. We moved from what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari describes in “A Thousand Plateaus” (2004) as “striated space,” which is delimited, organized and has rules, to “smooth space”,

which is “flat” and contains no fixed elements, no barriers, and is unprogrammed. [3] In this conception, the spaces of flow has “smoothened” space, as it has broken down the fixed organizations of form, function and meaning. It is in this condition of smooth space, with a lack of consistency and pre-scribed functions, that locative media art projects become powerful in re-formulating the possibilities for appropriation, negotiation and imagination about locality, because site-specific media operates in the immaterial level of the spaces of flow but gains its matter from the space of places.

The Construction of Situations of Resistance

The mobile construction of situations was the program of the psychogeographic explorations of the 1960s (between 1957-1972) avant-garde movement, the Situationist International. Through the “dérive”, a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances, the Situationists explored a different appropriation of the city by navigating its psychogeography in a playful-constructive behavior of “drifting”. The dérive is the route in locative media art projects. For example, in the second location-aware album of the music band Bluebrain’s entitled “Listen to the Light”, this uses a cell phone’s built-in GPS-capabilities to let the music change as one moves around Central Park in New York City in a form of dérive (the project is to be released on October 4 2011) (www.bluebrainmusic.blogspot.com). The drift follows a psychogeographic map, which shows which locations are tagged with sound. In the dérive, a situation is constructed in the drift; in the re-composition of parts of experience by which an experienced “map” of the city is reformulated.

The Situationist intention was not just to interpret situations but also to transform them. Their ideas of resistance toward the homogenizing and disciplining effects of the functional urban planning ideas of the 1950s and 1960s called for the metro stations to be opened at night, for roofs to be available and designed for people to use them, for churches to be used as children’s playgrounds, and for the distribution of artworks in cafés and pubs rather than museums. This was to be done within the aesthetic notion of the détournement, which the Situationists Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman characterize in *Détournement as Negation and Prelude* as “the re-employment in a new unity of pre-existing artistic elements.” [4] Characteristic of all instances of détournements is that they emerge from people’s urges to appropriate and use the city in a desired way, which to different extents become expressions of claiming the city’s urban territories. The Situationists apply the aesthetic concept of détournement to a vision of a “unitary urbanism” of social and everyday life, a form of unification of space and architecture with the social and individual body, of resistance toward the organizational form of the built environment. When we think of locative media art projects as détournements, they become site-specific explorations of a human geography and seeks to “reclaim the street” through experiments with methods for navigating, exploring and experiencing the city. This is a creation of site-specific, artistic re-claimed situations in urban space. These acts of appropriating urban environments form the conception of places to become more mobile in their composition as urban constructs, because their use changes and so does the system of practice they become a part of, which their future use is eventually thought into. The détournement constructs a situation in the reformulation, or re-employment, of an environment.

The situations of resistance found in the dérive and the détournement might “work” in two different, perceptual levels of city. These are illustrated in the two perspectives characterized by Michel De Certeau in the essay *Walking in the City*. De Certeau report from his position on top of the high-rise building of the World Trade Center, which gives him a birds-eye perspective on Manhattan, and sees how the city is laid out, legible and resolved, and how things relate to each other. [5] This is a particular logic of rationality of seeing in the city. In particular, if we consider Guy Debord’s illustration of the

dérive in his psychogeographic map, although this is performed at the street level, it gains its significance from the re-composition of urban environments in the psychogeographic map on a mental level above the street – where the experienced urban elements are brought together to form a new map. The contrasting view, which he then describes, is explored in the act of walking in the city, of moving around on the street level. In the street-level perspective, the urban environment is a site of practice, embodiment, and sense-experience. The détournement “operates” from a street-level perspective, which is the level where the city is experienced and physically appropriated.

Location-based Media and Mediated Localities

The two perspectives sketched by De Certeau characterize two directions of spatial thinking in mapping and GIS technologies; as two directions in “the spatial turn,” which with the developments in technologies and new mobile media came to change spatial conceptions and geographical imaginations. Edward Soja defines “the spatial turn” as “...fundamentally an attempt to develop a more creative and critically effecting balancing of the spatial/geographical and the temporal/historical imaginations.” [6] Thielman characterizes the two parallel developments in the spatial turn as 1) a spatial turn in media studies, which can be characterized as concerned with how geographies shape and explain social processes and social action, and 2) a media turn in geography, characteristically concerned with how social processes shape and explain geographies. [7] These diverging approaches compose a double determination of the idea of “site-specificity” in the “genre” of locative media art projects.

The spatial turn in media studies is characterized by “location-based media”, which is often explored through tagging and tracking with GPS and Wi-Fi. This is the spatial situation of the “geo-tagger,” in which media documents geography, and by which our handling of space and place is reorganized sociotechnically. [8] Examples of this notion of locative media is found in the project “A Map of Our Own: Kwun Tong Culture and Histories,” which is a multimedia project programmed for a discussion of urban renewal while Kwun Tong, a town in East Kowloon of Hong Kong, is undergoing a large urban renewal plan. The project started in 2009 and is scheduled to end with the end of the renewal in 2021 (www.kwuntongculture.hk). The project uses locative media in an audio-visual mix and rendering of sound, still image and moving image, which are documented on site and collected in a digital map of Kwun Tong. The project traces history, documents unique parts of culture and spatial practices, and raises public attention to the changes in the town in period of renewal. The collected media comes to compose a culturally shared narrative of Kwun Tong. The videos and images of Kwun Tong are collected in an online forum, which comes to formulate site-specificity in a birds-eye perspective, from which enactment (of mediating a form of cultural coherency) has been overlaid on the city. In this form of site-specificity, time becomes in a sense superior to space, which is literally illustrated in the organization of the project in a time line in the online forum.

The connection of people’s geo-tagged urban experiences in a map of Kwun Tong online forms into what Scott McQuire refers to as “network logic.” This follows the logic of interconnection in “the rhizome”, in which every point is connected to innumerable numbers. [9] The connection of urban experiences and narratives in this network forms into situations of possibilities for negotiating urban practices and relationships in a mode of inter-subjectivity, in a Habermasian sense of community. Christine Satchell identifies a potential in the culturally loaded, social nature of using the mobile phone and the “mobile iden-

tity” around such practices, to be re-contextualized into a notion that includes involvement in the collective enhancement of one’s physical community and environment. She points at an opportunity of re-contextualizing the mobile phone as an artifact that encourages users to identify themselves as culturally and civically aware individuals of urban citizens. [10] Through the shared memories of Kwun Tong, the city’s citizens are invited to discuss and negotiate the future of the city, based on their shared memories of the city’s past, during the urban renewal process. I will point at a significant potential in this network logic, when considering how “program aspects” of locative media art might apply to a framework of urban revitalization. The network, and the logic among participants that forms it, for example about a place’s history and cultural narrative as in the given example, can enhance an intercultural sense of citizenship and foster a *shared* sense of meaning in the local, and a platform for cultural innovation.

The second direction of practice in the spatial turn, which followed the media turn in geography, is found in the “mediated locality.” This is explored in a phenomenological mode of sense-experience, in a sense of re-animating a place. [11] The mediation of a locality or urban environment is for example found in projects of augmented reality—in which the subject is enacting with the physical world through a virtual overlay. The project “Museum of the Phantom City” (2009) by Irene Cheng and Brett Snyder is a locative media art project that displays could-have-been architecture in urban spaces of Manhattan, New York City, in an augmented layer that is only visible through one’s phone, and only as one goes by the physical location where the architecture was supposed to have been built (www.phantomcity.org). The form of site-specificity formulated in this project depends on the content that plays out in a particular physical environment. Another example of augmented reality is the “MoMA AR Exhibition” by Sander Veenhof and Mark Skwarek, which was part of the Conflux Festival program in 2010 (www.layar.com/layers/moma). In this project, the physical space inside the MoMA in New York City hosts a virtual exhibition, which is only visible through people’s cell phones. In the mediated situation in this and similar projects of mediated localities, the real-place experience can be considered as superior to the real-time experience.

Perhaps we can think of mediated localities with support from Anders Fogh Jensen’s Deleuze-inspired concept of “the groove,” proposed in his dissertation “The Project Society” (2010). The “grooved space” is a marking of an environment in the “smooth” space of the digitalized society. The groove invites for people to stop up and join a “projectary activity,” which Fogh Jensen characterizes as a structure of organization in the project society. This has followed the hierarchical organization of the disciplinary society as the key organizational mode of the contemporary developed society. [12] The groove of the mediated locality, mediated through locative media art projects, can be considered a “marking” in the meeting between the material and the immaterial urban level. Locative media art projects conceptualized as grooves interrupt the form of appearance and mode of experience of the urban fabric and invite for a re-appropriation of a location, if only on an imaginary level. This echoes the Situationist quest for liberation from the pre-scribed organization of the city’s urban environment in the *détournement*. Grooves can apply new goals to a place, by inviting for new creations of meaning. The projectary activity that takes up the mediated locality in the groove, which interrupts the routines of a place and allows for local re-imagination, can be considered for a significant program aspect in the sense that it is situated in the specific locality. This includes a creative thinking about “acting in the world” by creating a territory for the projectary activity.

The “groove” in a mediated locality is found in the site-specific renewal project “Mixed Reality Tent” (2009) by IP City in Graz, Austria. In this project, mixed reality technology—the combined representation of real and overlaid digital data—is enclosed in a shelter on the site-specific location of the urban re-

newal project (<http://studierstube.icg.tugraz.at/ipcity/mrtent.php>). With participants of both professionals and citizens, the shelter hosts a workshop for a creative space for experiments in integrating many different points of shared views on a mixed-reality reconstruction site. While this example represents a site-specificity of a mediated locality, it also represents a program of a *détournement* in the projectary activity.

Conceptualizing the “Program” of Urban Intervention in Locative Media Art

The “program” of locative media art, when conceptualized in a context of urban revitalization, regards how the project engages with socio-spatial practices in an urban environment. The program employs forms of knowledge to reform or radically challenge an operation, to reorient toward new goals and objectives, and to act upon the desires, aspirations, needs, and attributes of the agents within them. To think of a program in locative media art in this respect, is to think of how the locative media art is coded with an intention to *affect* a locality in a particular way, by affecting the spatial practices and urban imaginations among citizens.

When considering the program, we are to consider what the locative media art project should and could “do,” meaning how it could transform a place by intervening in a place’s socio-spatial practices. The program characteristics of respectively location-based media and mediated localities, which I have pointed out in this paper, regard the connection of subjects in a shared sense of project and cultural consensus in a network, which is possible from people’s site-specific geo-tagging and spatial documentation through mobile phones; and the groove, which is established in the mediated locality and applies new goals to a place and invites for projectary activities which reformulate local meaning. These, I propose, are to be thought together in a program of locative media art as a tool of urban revitalization. While the program of the location-based tagging allows for a particular shared sense of geographic interpretation and cultural consensus in a dimension of networked de-territorialization from the fixed form of the urban, the program of the mediated locality is that by which the intervention is situated in place – and designed to operate for a particular project in that place, building on top of the place’s specific aesthetics. Through location-based media of geo-tagging, people are enabled to identify features of embodied interaction and develop a language for shared creativity in a network-extension of the relational site. The mediated locality serves to direct this attention to a geographical site-specificity to bring the inter-subjective creativity “back to place.”

The Performative Program

I will propose that such a conceptualization of a program of locative media art, to function as a tool in urban revitalization projects, is “performative” rather than “performing,” as it responds to a processual aim of urban revitalization through an aesthetics that is designed, or programmed, with attention to the active action of the installation in the urban environment. While the program of the “Listen to Light” project and the “MoMA AR Exhibition” can both be considered as performances, with the subject as an audience of a pre-defined experience, a performative program is one that provides the subject with a lens to explore without the narrative being pre-defined. The narrative is to be constructed along with the exploration, and among participating subjects in the network.

In the performative program, which combines the two modes of site-specificity in organizing location based media to work in mediated localities, geo-tagging is combined with sense-experience in the “geo-

spatial”; meaning, the mediated narrative is concerned with place but its matter of intervention is constructed in the network among participants. This enables a form of cultural innovation among citizens in the double experience of site-specificity. This opens up for questions to be pursued further, about how the socio-spatial is being produced with locative media, and about what motivates citizens for participation in projectary activities in such forms of “geospatial cultural planning”. What I am proposing here is a consideration on the potentials in the program of projectary activities in locative media art to enrich urban development by bringing citizens together in networks while reveal new possibilities in the locality of the urban environment.

References and Notes:

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