General

The Visual Ecology of Public Space

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Edward J. Valauskas (ed.), *Urban Screens: Discovering the potential of outdoor screens for urban society, First Monday, Special Issue #* 4, iSSN 13960466, University of Illinois at Chicago Library, 2006

Who is not familiar with the image of the electronic billboards on Times Square in New York? Ever day over 5,000 ads pass by, dominated by the show of neon lights, texts and advertising for Roxy Deli, Hershey's, Cup Noodles, Coca Cola and Cadillac. Companies like hbo and Kodak pay over $150,000 a month for the exposure. The publication *First Monday* , a 'peer-reviewed open access journal' on and about the Internet, has devoted a special issue to these urban screens, as they are called. The electronic screens are filled with advertising, news and entertainment and are springing up in all shapes and sizes. They not only define the public domain – the appearance of squares and streets – but they are also found in museums, schools, shopping malls, conference centres, hotels, theatres and cinemas.

The issue featuring urban screens has no introduction highlighting the importance of addressing the theme. That is odd. Yet, as you read, two lines stand out. The first relates to the creative scope of the screens for behaviour in the public domain. Do they have sufficient potential to intervene meaningfully in that space? So, we would like to know how the screens influence social relationships embarked upon in public space. The second line reveals that the screens also have a repressive side. A reactive force that can be interpreted in terms of surveillance. So one wonders what impact urban screens have on managing and controlling public space. The first question is of social significance, the second has a political dimension. So where do the two lines connect up?

Images have always been part of society. But in the worldwide occurrence of digital globalization, which Peter Sloterdijk describes in his study *Sphären* as the third stage in the globalization process, the status of the image has risen, literally and figuratively, to great heights. Everywhere images flash at us from newspapers, magazines, books, computer and television screens, and especially from billboards in the city. What effect does imagery have on the dynamics of the street, the birthplace of modernistic ideology? Scott McQuire refers in his article to a 'media city'. In his view the term is preferable to the 'informational city' conceived by Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells, because it places less importance on ict and more on the role of the media. The media city is a relational space, one which has been stripped of inherent qualities and stable structures. Relational space is instable, shifting, contingent. According to McQuire, the heterogeneity of relational space is a key experience in present-day globalization. It requires new ways of thinking about the spaces we share and ways to constitute collective experience.

The history tracing the start of life-size screens dominating the urban street scene goes back to mid-nineteenth century Paris. There, the organization of public space was ruled by glass architecture. The department store with its huge windows displaying its wares for passers-by to see is, unquestionably, one of the first urban screens in the public domain. For many years, glass was the obvious material for separating indoors and outdoors, but

today the electronic billboard serves that purpose. After all, architecture and media technology are clearly becoming increasingly integrated. Urban screens are becoming an element of urban architecture which in turn, Tore Slaatta concludes, is itself becoming media infrastructure. A new aspect is that the electronic façade enables the building to merge into its surroundings. The building, with a front elevation consisting of pixels, can adapt to the place or location where it is. Not glass, but the screen is the medium of an ever more diaphanous and transparent society.

Urban screens show things to passers-by, giving up-to-date information on the weather, soccer results and share prices, for example. But electronic urban screens are more than modern town criers. Several authors correctly make mention of the 59*th Minute* project. That enables artists to display their work in the last minute of every hour on the Panasonic screen (Panasonic being the major brand of the Japanese Matsushita, the world's biggest electronics manufacturer) in Times Square. Well-known artists like Jeremy Blake, Fischli & Weiss and Carlos Amorales have availed themselves of that platform. It is one way for art to escape from the museum. By using the available media platforms, it succeeds in penetrating public space.

With respect to the social relationships entered into in public space, both Julia Nevárez and Rekha Murthy observe that the embedding of the screen in the city has brought about dialogue and involvement, Murthy speaks of a 'reclaiming of community'. However, the article does not specify the way that occurs and the form the 'community' takes. The author does make it clear that it is not about constructing an image or an object. When artists create artistic interventions in the public domain, they are seeking to shape, substantialize and direct social relationships.

Weighty words. And electronic urban screens do indeed have creative potential. Not the medium, as Giselle Beiguelman writes, but the interface has become the message. Yet this *First Monday* issue about urban screens does signal problems. Not only do these screens provide creative possibilities, but they have repressive consequences as well. Only a few authors elaborate on that given. In the article 'The poetics of urban media surfaces', Lev Manovich writes about permeating physical space with virtual data flows. Information is not only added to the space (electronic displays), but also extracted from it (surveillance). To be sure, the structure of public space is occupied virtually. But Manovich does not provide sufficient insight into the political impact of data extraction by means of surveillance. In other words, what are the critical limits to the representation or visual ecology of public space?

That question is important because public space has long been thought of as a combination of static objects and mobile subjects. However, the static objects are linked increasingly with technology equipment. Mike Davis refers in his classic works on public space in Los Angeles, *City of Quartz* and *The Ecology of Fear*, to the phenomenon of rational buildings: buildings that are fitted with sensitive equipment and heavy weaponry, instantly ready to scan, identify and, if necessary, bar visitors. But to my mind there is something more important than combining the electronic display surface with the building's architecture: in a media city, or mediapolis, the scope of the media is permeating everyday life. Surely one of the most noticeable urban screens is the display of our mobile phone. Few authors write about the consequences of such mobile screens – to which the burgeoning iPod and PDA might be added – for the issue of managing and controlling public space.

When addressing the matter of surveillance, it is interesting to note that the mobile phone screen has become the medium with which citizens can do their bit for crime prevention. In that strategy of 'responsibilitization', fighting and preventing crime are not only tasks for the authorities or the police. Crime prevention is decentralized, has become a wide, shared

social responsibility, in which the public plays an important part. More and more crimes are being solved using photos taken with mobile phones. The police have produced a databank from photos and films of citizens in suspicious circumstances, hold-ups and assaults, using them to track down suspects. That demonstrates how the conception of public space has changed since the advent of urban screens and information technology. In a media city, literally all space is now public. There is no longer any distinction between private and public space.

So the *First Monday* issue featuring urban screens demonstrates that the combination of artistic interventions and heightened surveillance is the success formula for the development of public space. The cross fertilization between the two lines will, however, also mean that the system of social relationships needs reinterpreting. What new kinds of community are created? What values or convictions for correct behaviour and responsibilities does it take to shape those communities? Who will be excluded? One of the next issues will have to address those questions.

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Tags

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