[thesis pilot study]

Site-Specificity & the Urban Screens Project

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The ubiquity of commercial screens in contemporary cities instigated the "Urban Screens" research project. The project invites a critical reflection on the relation screens have to space. This relation concerns the physical spaces screens inhabit, the virtual spaces they construct and the play with the public and private sphere. On the project website Mirjam Struppek provides the following definition:

> URBAN SCREENS defined as various kinds of dynamic digital displays and interfaces in urban space such as LED signs, plasma screens, projection boards, information terminals but also intelligent architectural surfaces being used in consideration of a well ballanced [sic], sustainable urban society - Screens that support the idea of public space as space for creation and exchange of culture, strengthening a local economy and the formation of public sphere. Its digital nature makes these screening platforms an experimental visualisation zone on the threshold of virtual and urban public space.

Within the above definition I find that two issues need to be explored critically: the ambition put forward by Struppek for urban screens, what I call *social cohesion*, and the existing infrastructure of commercial screens.

The aim of this essay is to compare and contrast the commercial infrastructure of screens to the idea of their social application through *site-specificity.* I will develop the argument that at the root of the relation is a paradox concerning the necessitated immobility the urban screen prescribes and the mobility of modern-day subject traversing public space.

To start off, I interrogate the "fate" often assigned to contemporary space. In specific I discuss the idea of the non-place as put forth by Marc Augé (1995) and the interpretation of it by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999). Herein the role of digital technologies is addressed in contribution to placelessness. I find that this role is effective in two fashions. First off, by increasing commercialization that leads to sameness. Secondly, by conceptualizing these digital technologies as constructing virtual spaces disparate from physical space, an idea that Urban Screens disprove by further exploiting the reflexive nature of virtual on physical space. In relation to these reflections, I discuss the role of the urban screen in facilitating social cohesion.

Then I establish the theoretical framework on which my consideration is based. It begins with Anna McCarthy's (2001) recognition of the site-specificity of the TV screen. It concerns the materialization of place consequent of a dialogue between the ontological (space-binding) and geographical (the social, economic and political forces that shape physical space) notion of the screen. This concept is explored in the context of the twin paradox Anne Friedberg (2006) puts forward in *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft*. The twin paradox consists of the paradox of mobility/immobility and that of materiality/immateriality and functions as a tool by which to reflect on ideas concerning virtual/physical spaces and public/private spheres. The existing commercial infrastructure is argued to respond to the mobility, or *public flow*, of public space.

Next, in reference to McCarthy (2003), I examine the positioning of the screen in public space and how this positioning determines boundaries of virtual/physical space and public/private sphere. In turn, Nanna Verhoeff (2008) is addressed. She extends the scope of Friedberg's analysis to include mobile screenic

devices (MSD's). Together these theories help evaluate the dialectics of spaces and spheres in contemporary public space.

Concurrently, the insights by Scott McQuire (2006) and Verhoeff will provide the means by which I can hark back to the ideas of the twin paradox and in turn site-specificity. This serves to demonstrate that the commercial infrastructure of public spaces does not coincide with the ambitions of the Urban Screens project as formulated by Struppek.

In conclusion, the exploration of the existing infrastructure of commercial screens and the Urban Screens project will be summarized to argue that, first of all, the role that digital technologies have in relation to feelings of "non-place" is exaggerated. Secondly, that the Urban Screens project rests on a site-specific contradiction. Pivotal is this assessment is the relation screens have to mobility. While this works for the commercial infrastructure, but when replacing the "content" of these existing screens in order to enhance social cohesion in public space, proves problematic.

Public Spaces and the Aim of Social Cohesion

The non-place is symptomatic of, what Augé refers to as, supermodernity. Non-places are the spatial excess consequent of the increased mobility of goods and passengers. The non-place materializes as "the installations and the means of transport" that organize mobility (Augé 34). They are the hubs in the flow of goods and people (Augé 104). Exemplary of this phenomenon are supermarkets, highways and airports. These non-places are highly structured brackets of space and can be measured in units of time. This description is a testament to their instrumentality. In fact of matter, most public spaces today are places of transit.

Commenting on the non-place, Bolter and Grusin note that the non-place is the response to consumer demands of sameness and expresses a "quality of detachment" (177). They see non-places as high-technology spaces; "free floating, hypermediated experiences" and claim that the media within the non-place ascertain its identity (Bolter and Grusin 177-179). In relation to the Urban Screens project we find that its ambition is precisely to explore the ways in which these digital technologies, screens to be specific, can be used to battle, what Struppek refers to as the "feeling of placelessness" consequent of the consumer demands for sameness (np). Thereby, urban screens are seeking to replace the content of these commercial enterprises and culturally curate these platforms to create, as they write on their website, "local identities and engagement" (np). These assessments concern an experience of place.

There are two ways in which this estrangement can be conceptualized; both are dealt with when developing the argument of the site-specific contradiction of the Urban Screens project.

First off, in relation to the Urban Screens project estrangement is thought of to incur as a result of commercial enterprises permeating public spaces. Screens in public space have primarily concerned themselves with the broadcasting of live events and functioned as dynamic platforms for information and advertising (McQuire 11). Certain screen-based projects in public space, however, demonstrate the ability to mediate new forms of public relations, prioritizing an "affective experience" over informational speed and transparency that persists in the commercial infrastructure (McQuire 12-13). Examining the *Public Space Broadcasting project* in the UK, Scott McQuire, Nikos Papstergiadis and Sean Cubitt find "It [the project] recognizes the potential for large screen technologies to play a key role in urban regeneration by providing a new dimension of public space and civic agency" (1). In other words, commercial enterprises have instigated an urban "degeneration" and *large screens*, through granting civic agency, can contribute to an urban "regeneration."

McQuire sees the potential of screens to challenge the dominant role of "commodity spectacle" and surveillance in public space through the affective experience symptomatic of the facilitated civic agency (13). Within such a reflection spectacle and surveillance are contrasted to what I call social cohesion. In this regard what instigates this sense of placelessness is the lack of this social cohesion (the local identities and engagement proposed by the Urban Screens project).

A second way in which estrangement can be understood is in regard to the virtual/physical space dichotomy. The ubiquity of digital technologies and the focus of research on their space constructing capacity compartmentalizes virtual from physical space. Within such an understanding these digital technologies offer an alternative experience from one's physical surroundings. This too manifests as an estrangement and contributes to the "non-place" status of spaces. In particular such reasoning encompasses the ontological approach to screens, focusing on its space-binding and armchair traveling potential.[1] Within my discussion of dialectic space, this space dichotomy plays a crucial role in the experience of place.

Site-Specificity and TV in Public Space

The rhythm of public spaces is, on a larger scale, reflective of the social, political and economic institutes that characterize society. These factors determine, in part, what McCarthy sees as the site-specificity of the screen. The site-specificity relates to the material, the "console-ness" of the TV screen, a geographic approach to TV screens, and the dialogue it has with the ontological approach. The former approach concerns itself with the space-binding capacities of the technology. McCarthy states, "Because it [the television set] is *both* space-binding and site-specific, enmeshed in, and constitutive of, the ambient flow of everyday life in the home and other places, the television set must be seen as a central force in the dialectical construction of a place" (2001:105).

To my mind, inherent to the site-specificity of screens is a *content-specificity*. The content is plural in manifestation, but the general intent (commercial, informative, social or other) singular. Equally, it must not be overlooked that the material presence of the screen also shapes the physical space. The dynamic interfaces have the potential to "mobilize" static architectural structures and change the visual appearance and experience of the city.

Returning to the ontological and geographical approach to TV screens, the relation between the two, reduced to site-specificity, can best be understood within the frame of the twin paradox of mobility/immobility and materiality/immateriality as put forth by Friedberg. The paradox of mobility/immobility concerns the screen as an object, fixed in place, and necessitates that in order to engage with the content of the screen the viewer be anchored immobile directly in front of the screen. Public screens are situated fixed in public space. Passers-by thereby need to reduce speed, if not come to a temporary halt, in order to engage with the content of the screen. The screens of the commercial infrastructure demonstrate a "response" to the mobility of the traveler.

Commercial screens in public space are predominantly designed for fast consumption. Most often we encounter what McCarthy labels textual screens. About these screens she notes, "They are cheap to produce, requiring nothing more complicated than an electronic character generator, and the minimal cognitive and

[1] For more on this "disembodied" engagement with screenic technologies, read about virtual travel: Huhtamo, Erkki. "Armchair Traveller on the Ford of Jordan: The Home, the Stereoscope and the Virtual Voyager." 2005. 9 June 2008. <http://www.mediamatic.net/armchairtraveller>

emotional investments they solicit are easily in the coming and goings of public space" (McCarthy 212). What she describes as the coming and goings of public space can be interpreted as part of this ambient flow of everyday life or, what I call, the *public flow*. These textual screens are characterized as requiring minimal cognitive and emotional investments. This is the exact opposite of the affective experience aspired by the Urban Screens project.

An explicit illustration of the response of the screen's content to public flow is apparent in the W8 screen at Utrecht Central Station, the Netherlands. To prevent the traveler from the monotony of watching the same segment twice, the programming has been adjusted to correspond to the seven-minute average waiting-time of travelers. Another interesting example of a commercial screen-installation that reflects flow is the SyncMovie system at Amsterdam Schiphol airport. It uses twelve projectors that project on a 36 meters long screen. It enables commercials to stay in sync with the viewer on the conveyor belt. It is a rather ingenious means by which to escape the restraints of a mobile audience. Additionally, it demonstrates explicitly how digital space enters a dialogue with physical space.

Within the paradox of materiality/immateriality the moving-images can mobilize the viewer's gaze. It sets a strict border between the physical space inhabited by the console and its viewer and the immaterial images flickering on the screen. The binary opposition reinforces placelessness as it prescribes that the space of the virtual is unrelated to the space of the physical. Herein digital technologies are assessed in their technological capacity to construct virtual spaces.

Dialectic Space: Shifting Spaces and Boundaries

Below I interrogate urban degeneration, not just in the sense of the decentralization of city centers, but by the shifting and converging boundaries of virtual/physical spaces and public/private spheres instigated by digital (mobile) devices. This oscillation between these creates, what I typify as, *dialectic space*. It provides an understanding of the transformations digital technologies have had on the experience of place. Particularly in relation to Friedberg's twin paradox it clarifies the manner in which digital technologies can contribute to placelessness, but equally, in light of the Urban Screens project, how they can be used to overcome it.

McCarthy (2001) provides keen analyses of how the position of the screen creates public and private spheres. She interrogates three main positions of televisions in public space: screens in store windows, overhead screens and single viewer structures. The positioning of the screen prescribes a certain address and has the power to either transform the subjects passing through public spaces into autonomous individuals or establish them as a homogeneous public.

What McCarthy has labeled as the store window position of screens, which she uses for an analysis of multiple viewing positions, is what Verhoeff identifies as a "composite dispositif." To be more specific, Verhoeff defines this as "an arrangement that is comprised of many different screens and composes a *screenspace* for variously distracted and attracted, mobile, and passing spectators" (np). The composite dispositif comprises a screenscape and prescribes screenscape-ing. The former is best understood as the process of oscillating and merging the spatial and temporal dimensions within the spaces permeated by technologies. In other words, this is the competition amongst the digital devices that inhabit, or circulate, public space for attention. These create overlapping public and private spheres. The gaze of the spectator oscillates across the immaterial spaces that dissect the once smooth physical space.

The overhead placement of the screen addresses the viewing subject as an anonymous individual (McCarthy, 2001: 121-122). This anonymity means that these individuals loss their identity and become part of a homogenize mass. Furthermore,

whilst the overhead placement grants public viewing access, it places the screen out of reach, designating it as private property (McCarthy, 2001: 121). The screen's position hereby underscores the homogeneity of the public that traverses the commercial public space. The paradox of public access and private ownership conforms to the commercial model of the infrastructure of public screens.

Multiple viewing stations have a different effect from overhead placement. They provide "the ability to separate oneself from others through spectatorship" established by means of what McCarthy calls "sensory isolation" and through a "visually induced sense of travel" (2001: 137). However, in these situations the content of what is screened is either controlled by the institution, or, as is the case in inflight-entertainment, the parameters of choice is restricted by social, economic and political forces.[2]

It should be noted that the terms used by McCarthy (separation, isolation and visually induced travel) presuppose a partition of the visual field, beyond the frame, and the inhabited physical space. Hereby engaging with these "private" screens invokes an estrangement from one's direct surroundings.

Mobile devices are of a profoundly different order. They provide an interesting potential for the ambitions to social cohesion. They are *person-specific* first, site-specific second. In other words, unlike the earlier discussed large, static screens in public space, they are the property of the individual. Furthermore, the console is mobile and its mobility is in direct relation to that of its engager. Michael Bull (2004) finds people can create their own personalized bubbles of experience, much like in the case of multiple viewing stations. However, in this case the virtual space, constructed by a mobile digital device (a *console*) is carried through the physical space. A dimension of mobility is entered into the equation.

With respect to the paradox of immobility/mobility, mobile screenic devices (MDS's) are defiant of the underlying assumption of the immobile spectator and immobile screenic device. Verhoeff analyzes how MSD's can complement and extend the workings between virtual/physical space and public/private sphere through a course of reflexivity. The mobility of the engager doubled as the virtual abstraction of space and physical space is navigated simultaneously. The position of the traveler in physical space is represented on the interface. However, when the symbiotic relation of the virtual and physical is absent, the engager remains immobile to play games, view films or engage with other screen-based activities. Particularly, GPS devices can fuse the mobility of the screen and the mobility of the traveler in a reflexive practice. It collapses the virtual/physical space dichotomy, overcoming the estrangement and placelessness.

What I find somewhat problematic within most discussions of the screens in public space is how they underscore a binary opposition between virtual and physical space. This opposition, discussed earlier, is equally inherent to the materiality/immateriality paradox. In light of the Urban Screens project upholding this division of virtual/physical space makes little sense. After all, the social cohesion is for the most part reliant on the ability of the virtual space to enter a dialogue with the physical space. This is the reflexive quality I have addressed.

Particularly concerning mobile devices I have pointed out that such an interrelation is readily explicit. I am wary of the determinism that now dominates the discourse on the impact of digital technologies within the public space that proposes

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[2] To read more about this subject matter see: Govil, Nitin. "Something Spatial in the Air: In-Flight Entertainment and the Topographies of Modern Air Travel." *Mediaspace: Place, Scale and Culture in a Media Age.* Eds. Nick Couldry and Anna McCarthy. New York: Routledge, 2004. 233-252.

a detachment from physical surroundings as a result of the permeation of the virtual facades. In light of site-specificity, even in relation to the existing commercial infrastructure of screens, I would thereby suggest that the site-specificity of screens, the reflexive interrelation of the virtual and physical, is of a different nature than social cohesion. It is rather a matter of agency: "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (Murray 121). The consequence, the feeling of placelessness, is, however, the same.

The Immobile User of the Urban Screen

The definition by Struppek of the Urban Screen demonstrates an indirect and implicit dependency on a mobility of a different order than that of the commercial infrastructure. Verhoeff extracts and turns it explicit when she defines the *Playing Flickr* installation at the bar/restaurant Club 11 in Amsterdam as urban screen. She states, "While these screens are indoors, I do consider them as urban screens – screens on site – because they are situated in a public place. They are large, and they are visible for a large numbers of passing or temporary spectators" (np). Her clarification reveals the inherent association that urban has to the outdoor city environment.

From Verhoeff's description of the urban screen three characteristics of the urban screen can be drawn. First off, it is large. We have seen this "large" requirement of the screen suggests in the *Public Space Broadcasting Project* discussed earlier. Secondly it is situated in public place. Lastly, the observation reflects on the mobility of the spectators.

The characteristic of a large screen suggests urban screens require public access and overhead placement in public space. To my mind, the visibility of the screen and its size suggest that urban screens demand the overhead placements of screens. However, in relation to the commercial infrastructure the addressed paradox concerned that the content of the screen was beyond the control of the audience. For the urban screens project, a "democratization" of the interface of the commercial infrastructure needs to occur. It is only by becoming more "democratic" that the screen can facilitate interactivity and dialogue. However, even then, the screens position is effective of social, political and economic factors that should not be ignored. The installation adheres to ambition of the Urban Screens to mediate social cohesion. The objective of the installation is to unify the subjects within the space.

Verhoeff suggests that the spectators of urban screens are either "temporary" or "passing." In relation to McCarthy, discussed earlier, I have stated that this is a fundament characteristic of contemporary public space. Quintessentially these are places of transit. Based on the interpretation Verhoeff presents herself, I find, however, that the *Flickr* installation would not correspond with the description of the urban screen she puts forward. This because whereas people passing the streets and through buildings are mobile, within the confines of the Club 11 the participants of the installation remain relatively immobile seated at tables. This equally provokes questions as to whether this place constitutes a public space and whether the screens of the restaurant can be considered part of the existing commercial infrastructure. Within the scope of this essay, the relevance of these questions is directed at the public flow. The example has been used to underscore the mobility paradox urban screens have in relation to the demands of the present infrastructure.

The public address of the screens that constitute the existing infrastructure is profoundly different from the public establishment aimed for in the research program. It responds, or regulates, the public flow. The former public is homogenized and in motion. The Urban Screens project, in pursuit of social cohesion,

needs its public to exclude themselves from the naturally established public flow. It necessitates a withdrawal from the homogenous mass of public space.

Conclusion

Examining the site-specificity of screens and relating it to the existing commercial infrastructure of public space juxtaposed to the ambitions of the Urban Screens project I have suggested a fundamental paradox inherent to the project.

To begin with I examined contemporary non-places and discussed them in relation to the ambitions formulated by the Urban Screens project. The project is targeted at counter the transformation of the traditional public spaces to have become increasingly commercialized and hypermediate. The project, as I have interpreted it, aims to combat the consequent "placelessness" by using the commercial infrastructure of screens as platform for communication and interaction amongst people within the space. Hereby it functions to facilitate social cohesion by providing agency within physical space.

I have proposed that public space is saturated by digital technologies that shift the boundaries of virtual/physical space and private/personal sphere. Unlike many theories suggest, however, I find that these technologies and the virtual worlds they facilitate are often deeply interrelated to the physical spaces they inhabit. The otherness of virtual space that screens facilitate, I find, is not entirely accurate, as the virtual is subjected to a dialogue with physical space through site-specificity and its inherent content-specificity.

Furthermore, in extension of this, I concluded that if the commercial infrastructure of screens is built on the principle of mobility and homogeneity, which I propose, the directives of the Urban Screens project is based on a contradiction in terms. The objectives, as I understand Struppek's assertions, involve exploring situations of the engager's relative immobility. The overemphasis on the technical capacities of existing infrastructure, neglects the social forces that have given form to public space in the first place.

Within this system of logic I am somewhat skeptical of the project's aspirations to developing ways by which to stimulate social cohesion based on the existing commercial infrastructure. I find that highly interesting screen based installations can facilitate social cohesion, but to my mind, only within context-specific frameworks, the *Playing Flickr* installation addressed by Verhoeff being one of them. This rather than pursuing the ideal that screens could contribute to a lasting sustainable society within existing public spaces, based on site-specific infrastructures. The focus the research project attributes to the infrastructure and mediating role of the large screen for a potential "sphere" ignores the social, political and economic forces that designate the existing infrastructure in the first place. It relies too much on the assumption of placelessness. Quintessentially, the public flow is the manifestation of these factors and, presently somewhat neglected, demands due consideration. However, in my theoretical evaluation, I have suggested that great social potential lies in the capacity of MSD's that are person-specific above site-specific.

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