

[Media Architecture] IDENSITY®: the architecture of public space.
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“The new city presupposes that the cables of the interhuman relations are switched reversibly, not in bundles as with television, but in real networks, respons(e)ibly, as in the telephone network. These are technical questions; and they are to be solved by urbanists and architects.”

Vilèm Flusser 1990.

Urbanism in the communication age

To reinforce the significance of public space we have to deal with at least two ‘publics,’ the global and the local public, by creating spheres where local and global public space can fuse and interchange.

Bridging the gap and connecting the global media spheres with local content and place, an architecture of communication spaces proposes a combined analog-digital infrastructure: publicly accessible interfaces between the global media space and the local urban place. ‘Public Media Urban Interfaces’ is an alternative scenario for the interplay of mass media in order to reinforce the function of public (urban) space. This project develops a hybrid urban network-space, a fusion of media space and urban space. It emphasises the role of the public in an increasingly privatised society and occupies the vacuum in between the local and the global. The products of this alliance of urban and media networks are ‘hybrid’ spaces that are at the same time analog and digital, virtual and material, local and global.

This project represents a prototype for a new interdisciplinary field of design and planning (‘Soft Urbanism’), researching the transformations of architectural/urban space of the emerging ‘information/communication age,’ exploring the dynamic interaction of urbanism and the space of mass media and communication networks. ‘Soft Urbanism,’ dealing with the ‘soft’ aspects of the city, not only intervenes in the realm of infrastructures, but also adopts their concept and paradigm: by supplying networks, ‘Soft Urbanism’ creates new fields of possibilities and frameworks for self-organisational processes.

Today, the communicational paradigm, with its ‘network-cities,’ ‘nodes’ and ‘terminal architectures’ is infiltrating and transforming the architectural/urban discourse and practice. Within this framework, ‘idensity®’ is proposed as a conceptual tool for developing space in the information/communication age. This composite term consists of the combination/fusion of the word ‘density’ of real/urban and ‘virtual’/media communication spaces (density of connections) and of the word ‘identity.’

Public Media Urban Interfaces

The local-based public ‘tele-feeder facility’ (at your neighbourhood’s laundrette), the primary unit of Public Media Urban Interfaces, enables the public to produce messages and to narrow/broadcast and receive them in a dynamic communication environment. Creating a locally-based dynamic media network from the bottom up, local events can be accelerated and reinforced to temporarily invade the glocal media space.

This link between global media space and local place having its interfaces in public space makes it possible to broadcast, access, influence the global media environment from the (urban) local neighbourhood.

A demo project, exploiting London's urban tensions and structure unfolds strategies and

visualises aspects of these investigations, confronting a working hypothesis with the idiosyncrasies of a specific urban situation.

Media Babies

128 feeder houses (Media Babies), distributed evenly over the sprawling London towns and interconnected by means of a digital network supply, 8 Bridge Clubs located on the Thames with a continuous stream of (non-)events. The Media Baby at your neighbourhood laundrette consists of a Catching Gallery, two Intro Booths, a Debutantes' Booth, a Connector Platform and a Microwave Transmitter. The Catching Gallery is the area where the public can view the narrow/broadcasting activities of eight other Media Babies and one Bridge Club. Interactive technology enables the public to intervene in those narrow/broadcasts but also creates the possibility to establish direct contacts, thus forming endless smaller networks within the larger framework of Public Media Urban Interfaces.

Bridge Clubs

The Bridge Club, providing the space for public events on an urban scale, bridges the gap between programs meant for local distribution and those that deserve a larger audience. Using the larger broadcast facilities available to the Club, the selected programs are experienced and transformed to suit a mass audience. The Bridge Club, being a knot in the net of translocalities, also serves the function of bridging programmatic events related to the site where the club is located.

replace the right to vote with the right to broadcast

The publicly distributed 'Air Time for All' Smart Card allows you to produce and narrow/broadcast and also gives you the opportunity to adopt a message (not your own) by giving it extra Air Time. At the Media Baby in the neighbourhood, you will find the necessary programming facilities to make your program and the means to monitor it as it goes on the air. You can also accelerate messages (not your own) by giving them extra broadcasting time with the help of the special Smart-Card. And as a message gains strength, its chances of reaching a much larger audience increase, reaching more Media Babies, a Bridge Club, the city or even the whole country, Europe and the rest of the world.

Replacing the right to vote, a right to narrow/broadcast is established.

Mobile Containers

A fleet of container-boats, caravans, rikshas, taxis, trucks and limousines (equipped with transmitters/receivers and interactive life jackets) form a transportation/communication infrastructure servicing the users of the network and also commuters, nomads, migrants and tourists. The traditional translocal (mobility/communication) networks are thus knitted to the new glocal media networks (Internet/TV).

These capsules containing (from rudimentary to more sophisticated) media units are mobile nodes in the translocal networked environments, 'vessels' within the complex multilayerings of the space of flows. They serve as spaces of exchange (export/import trade), as laboratories of glocal cultural bastardisation. With these containers, new hybrid, media and real spaces emerge, that are no longer tied to any one specific location but rather are the result of their interconnection.

Soft Urbanism

In architecture's role of defining and materialising the spaces for social interaction, designing the relationship between the physical and digital public domain is becoming more and more of a challenge: investigating the relation and interconnection of the 'soft' city with its finite material counterpart, the living environment, speculating about interfaces between the 'virtual' and the material urban world, and designing hybrid (analog-digital) communicational spaces.

Soft Urbanism deals with information/communication processes in public space, the soft aspects overlying the urban sprawl and modifying it: the invisible networks acting as attractors, transforming the traditional urban structure, interweaving, ripping open and cutting through the urban tissue, demanding interfaces.

Soft Urbanism not only intervenes in the realm of infrastructures, but also adopts their concept and follows their paradigm. It brings an inherently flexible approach by expanding the field of possibilities of social interaction and opening new paths of urban development. It is therefore not about determining places, but about creating frameworks for processes of self-organisation. Not accepting powerlessness in the face of the forces of the market, Soft Urbanism rethinks the strategies of interventions to reintroduce programmatic speculations about the public domain in urbanism.

The interventions will not be about control and determination, but about expanding infrastructures, frameworks for processes of self-organisation. 'Soft' strategies will be 'bottom-up' strategies: rather than defining first the global result of the interaction and then determining the necessary relation between the elements in order to produce that interaction (which would be a 'top-down' approach), simple rules for a set of independent elements will be developed and what emerges from the interaction of these elements is aleatory. According to biological models, these fields of interaction of plural forces could serve as a reservoir for the selection processes needed for the urban transformations. under the pavement (piercing the beaches) run fiberglass cables

Idensity®

In the contradictory dynamics of today's urban environment, with its antithetical tendencies of concentration and decentralisation, of functional mix and segregation, traditional terms of spatial distinction lose their validity. In this fragmented urban landscape, categories like 'functional zoning' (living, working, recreation), 'centre' versus 'periphery,' 'landscape' versus 'city' are becoming obsolete.

The polarity between private and public space is disintegrating. Public and private environments are becoming intermingled and blurring in the fusion of media and 'real' space. We see this in the hybrid spaces of the publicly broadcasted (inverted) privacies of reality TV and the 'Big Brothers,' in the media presence of war intruding on our living rooms and in the private communication space of mobile telephony within public urban space.

To understand the fusions, this superimposition and the interactions of media and 'real' architectural/urban spaces, the new term 'idensity®' replaces the obsolete conventional terms of spatial distinction. It does not differentiate between media networks and urban/architectural environments and it offers an integrated model for dealing with 'hybrid' (media and 'real') space in the information/communication age.

This model can incorporate the widest range of (future) spaces:

- from the "tele-feeder unit at your neighbourhood's laundrette", a public infrastructure for teleshopping, telelearning or teledemocracy, see 'Public Media Urban Interfaces,'

- to new 'club' facilities, providing the space for 'hybrid' (media and 'real' space) events on a larger urban scale, see 'Bridge Clubs,'
- and the networked 'Mobile Containers,' see for example, "ReBoot-NRW.NL," a networked boat with 80 participants on board, descending the Rhine in 1999, connecting the network and the nodes (harbour-cities) of the river with media networks (Internet/ TV),
- or the combined media and 'real' space of your bank, presenting itself in its telebanking application with the corporate identity of its 'real' architectural building while fusing in the representational entry of its headquarters a high-touch architectural space with the media spaces of its net presence, in the form of monitors, projections, etc. (just visit your bank).

'Idensity®' integrates the concept of 'density' (density of connections, density of physical and digital infrastructure, density of communication-spaces, etc.) with the concept of 'identity' (image policies, urban brands, etc). It can therefore, for example, help in understanding the processes of spatial segregation and distinction between urban fragments that have qualities of global performance and that can be seen as part of a 'global urban condition' and those other, sometimes neighbouring (parts of) cities that lose in relevance and disappear from (global) mental maps. 'Idensity®' can be implemented as an operative tool to steer the processes of urban development. But it is not a mere summation of the two concepts of 'density' and 'identity.' It is rather a fusion, as it inverts 'identity,' linking it to communication: 'identity' being defined by connectivity.

Therefore, it does not just address the 'clear-cut identity, the particularity, the individuality of the traditional places or cites (like centres and monuments)' but also the layered 'idensity®' of the 'non-lieux' ['non-places'] of today's generic cities, which are to be found especially in the realms of mobility and consumption (airports, hotels, shopping malls, motorway rest areas, etc). It does not refer only to object-qualities but describes a field of superimposed communication spaces: the branded space of the chain-shop, the symbolic space of the traditional building the shop is housed in, the media space of teleshopping, the communication space of the GSM...

This new term is implemented to describe and analyse the communication spaces of the coming 'network society,' a society not so much based on the traditional, relatively static structures of belonging in the family, the corporation or the state, but on flexible, dynamic, ever-changing networks of exchange and communication. It carries the discussion on the urban from the morphological level of a formal description of the network patterns of the 'network city' to a more integrated structural understanding of the networks of spaces for social communication.

The term 'Idensity®' is a conceptual tool for researching and developing space in the information/communication age.