Chapter III

Screenspace

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ABSTRACT

From tiny interactive cellphone screens (keitai) to supersized jumbo LED displays, Tokyo’s urban landscape is changing drastically. A corner that once displayed billboards that occasionally flipped has now become lit-up and is in constant motion. Keitai, with their built-in cameras, now allow images to be sent from one to another and have become essential to urban life. As these screens become architectural and fashion statements, Tokyo’s nomadic high-tech culture is commuting even greater distances, living in more compact housing, and allowing for “cellspace” and “screenspace” to merge.

Today we live in the imaginary world of the screen, of the interface…and networks. All our machines are screens, we too have become screens, and the interactivity of men has become the interactivity of screens.

–Jean Baudrillard

INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-1970s, with the development of the personal computer, interactive screens have slowly become part of our daily lives. The first interactive screens introduced were monochromatic, very much text-driven, and still referred to the structure of the printed page. Rudimentary images had to be cleverly created with the characters presented on the computer’s keyboard.

Today, we find ourselves surrounded by vast wireless networks that we interface with through the use of electronic devices ranging from simple text messaging to high-resolution graphics on laptop computers. Various sized screens with rich GUI’s (graphical user interface) are portals that allow us to interact with software on these devices. This invisible electromagnetic, hertzian space has been growing rapidly since the mid-20th century. Urban landscapes are not only changing because of the mobility and interactivity of these screens, but also because of the proliferation of large-screen LED displays that are at every corner vying for our attention.

From Times Square in New York City to Shibuya Crossing in Tokyo, urban space is changing drastically. A corner that once displayed billboards that occasionally flipped has now become lit up and is in constant motion. Even though these screens are neither mobile nor interactive, the graphics that are displayed upon their surfaces light up the streets and mirror the motion of the city.

With this chapter, I will be looking at the proliferation of screens found in Tokyo and how they have transformed public and personal space. I will look closely at the “keitai” with its tiny screens that dot Tokyo’s landscape, all the way up to the “supersized” LED displays found in major entertainment and shopping areas in Tokyo. I will examine various screens’ mobility, interactivity, social effects, and how graphics and typography are displayed on these devices.

CELLSPACE

Tokyo is a city in flux; it is in constant motion. With the daily influx of millions of commuters all with “keitai”, cellspace is a dominant structure upon its urban fabric. The term “cellspace” was first coined by David S. Bennahum while using his Palm Pilot with a wireless modem to access the web and send e-mail while waiting for a NYC subway train in 1998. Cellspace surrounds us with its tangible and virtual interfaces, as well as the invisible wireless network
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