Book Review

Netspaces:
Space and Place in a Networked World

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Netspaces: Space and Place in a Networked World
Katharine S. Willis
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In *Netspaces: Space and Place in a Networked World*, Katharine S. Willis explores how technology might change the experience and design of the built environment, the meaning of these changes, how they are taking place and the effects this is having on urban space, all matters of great importance for all those working in the field of urban e-planning. The aim of the book, as Katharine S. Willis refers, is to interpret and explain the way networked technologies and infrastructures impact on how we experience and inhabit urban space and to infer from these impacts the consequences for the design of cities. The evidence and the insights the author offers makes this book an important addition to the literature on urban e-planning and as such should be commended. The book is organized in six main chapters. Each chapter addresses a different aspect of how networked technologies and infrastructures affect space, being each of them illustrated by a case study (e.g., cloud/data centre; foursquare; public Wi-Fi network; urban screens; media use in transit spaces; smart home). The book ends with the discussion of future challenges for the design of urban spaces. Each chapter has its own bibliographic list and at the end the book includes also a consolidated list of references.

In chapter 1 (‘Infrastructures’, p. 9-31) Katharine S. Willis starts by exploring how technical infrastructures in the past have impacted on the urban form, and examines the changes digital infrastructures are producing now in the organization of urban spaces and the problems this raises. Among other issues, associated with the increasing ubiquity of digital infrastructures in the city, the author examines, based on the case of cloud / data centres, the lack of visual and material presence of digital infrastructures, which has impacts on the visual organization of cities. The black boxing and the de-socialization of these infrastructures and their non integration within the existing built structures in the city are some of the other issues Katharine S. Willis discusses. This is followed in chapter 2 (´Places’, p. 33-53) by the discussion of the changing nature of place, namely of how networks create a new sense of place, based on the use of Foursquare, a location-based social network. This case study allows Katharine S. Willis to show how these spaces are socially constructed through the practice of checking-in at particular sites, namely in spaces of transition or places of temporal occupation.

The following two chapters explore two other important dimensions of networked spaces, boundaries and publicness. In the first of these chapters ('Boundaries', p. 55-79), Katharine S. Willis explores ideas associated with the notions of containment and proximity (e.g., threshold and edge; inside and outside; public and private, and so on), arguing that networked technologies change the nature of boundaries and the characteristics of those relationships. For instance, in networked spaces, boundaries are "defined by the degree of linkage or access to the network and less by physical structures of connection and separation created by walls and doors", as Katharine S. Willis argues. Based on a case study focused on the use of public Wi-Fi networks, the author examines how these networks affect patterns of access, and the processes of public and private inclusion and exclusion. In the following chapter ('Publics', p. 81-106), the discussion is centred on how networked technologies reconfigure existing definitions of what constitutes public space, questioning whether networked spaces can also become a site for encounter and participation, creating the conditions for people to experience the public sphere, instead of the traditional view that sees public space as the only stage where publicness can be present.

The last two chapters deal with time or the rhythms of urban life and with the networked world of objects. In chapter 5 ('Time', p. 107-126) Katharine S. Willis explores how highly coordinated rhythms impacts on how we occupy spaces, comparing these changes with what happened in the beginning of the industrial society. This is illustrated through a case study that shows what happens when groups co-ordinate activities in real-time and the new patterns this creates in the city, in particular in transition spaces as airports or transport stations. In the following chapter ('Things', p. 127-145) Katharine S. Willis looks at the networked world of objects and things, referred as Internet of Things or Big Data. It questions the nature of materiality, when data and information, in this highly connected environment of sensors, become resources, and discusses also how coded and password protected space create problems for inclusion and exclusion. Taking the smart home as a case study, Katharine S. Willis discusses, among other aspects, how we construct a sense of identity in this new home spaces, and the nature of agency and control in our interactions with this new environment. The book ends with chapter 7 ('Future challenges', p.147-153), highlighting the main arguments put forward in the previous chapters and discussing future challenges for the design of urban spaces.

In sum, as Katharine S. Willis so well documents, it seems unquestionable that we are building a different relationship with the urban space, streets and buildings, due to the increasingly widespread use of these networked technologies and online devices. The nature of spaces in the city, seen as a framework for how we act, is shifting due to the emergence of these networked technologies and infrastructures. Networked spaces, or Netspaces, as the title of this inspiring book suggests, may well become the standard in the built environment, and in our daily lives, in the near future, a shift that will certainly raise important challenges in the professional practice of all those engaged in urban e-planning processes. And a shift, or expected shift, that planning schools and planning curricula should consider and look at from now on.

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