Chapter I

Urbane-ing the City: Examining and Refining the Assumptions Behind Urban Informatics

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ABSTRACT

This chapter critically examines the notion of “the city” within urban informatics. Arguing that there is an overarching tendency to construe the city as an economically and spatially distinct social form, we review a series of system designs manifesting this assumption. Systematically characterizing the city as a dense ecology of impersonal social interactions occurring within recognizably public places, this construction can be traced to turn-of-the-century scholarship about the metropolis. The idealized dweller of these spaces, the flâneur, functions as the prototypical user for urban computing technologies. This assumption constrains the domain of application for emergent technologies by narrowing our conception of the urban experience. Drawing on contemporary urban scholarship, we advocate an alternative perspective which foregrounds the experience rather than the form of the metropolis. Users become actors embedded in global networks of mobile people, goods, and information, positioned in a fundamentally heterogeneous and splintered milieu. Grounding this approach in a preliminary study of mobility practices in Bangkok, Thailand, we illustrate how urban informatics might refine its subject, accounting for local particularities between cities as well as the broader global networks of connection between these sites.
INTRODUCTION

Over the past several years, “urban informatics” has emerged as a significant research area, drawing together researchers from various disciplines to focus on problems and opportunities at the intersection of computer science, design, urban studies, and new media art. This volume, for example, attests to the richness and diversity of this program.

Relying on the city as a unique and important context for investigation and design, the endeavor remains, in many ways, marked by contradictions. On the one hand, a city can be a specific setting for technologies that might otherwise be dubbed “ubiquitous” and, in their ubiquity, be located nowhere in particular. On the other hand, “the city” is a highly generalized site; to speak of “the city” is to strip away the specificities of particular cities. Indeed, urban informatics is marked by a focus on world cities at once globally similar but locally specific: New York rather than Boise, Paris rather than Arles, Sydney rather than Wagga Wagga. Similarly, while the city is a social and cultural phenomenon that speaks to complex ensembles of economic, technological, spatial, and social production, it also allows itself to be reduced to problems of scale and navigation.

As a focus for the development of ubiquitous computing technologies, the city is framed as a source of problems to be resolved: problems of location, resource identification, and access. Wayfinding applications, which might operate in terms of cartographic navigation (e.g. Sohn et al., 2005), or particular forms of commodity or cultural consumption (e.g. Axup et al., 2006; Brown & Chalmers, 2003), instead draw upon research in mobile and positioning technologies. The urban environment becomes no more than an appealing design resource. Providing rich and familiar social settings, they are environments already thick with information technologies and infrastructures, full of mobile people using mobile technologies.

We have three goals in this chapter. The first is to critically examine a series of assumptions about the nature of “the city” underlying many efforts in urban informatics. Locating the specific historical, geographical and cultural circumstances of early 20th century urban scholarship that still colors our design efforts, we begin to understand the characteristic perspective of urban computing systems. Scrutinizing the types of user experiences favored by this paradigm, we then question designers’ role in their construction.

Second, we advocate a perspective shift, replacing emphasis on the urban form with emphasis on the urban experience. Focusing on what it is like to move through and live in contemporary cities brings the multitude of experiences co-existing within even the same urban space into plain view; this heterogeneity is critical to our approach. A focus on experience informs both analysis and for design.

Third, we ground our perspective through ongoing ethnographic work in Bangkok, Thailand. This choice of globally connected non-Western city not only expands the corpus of field engagements in urban informatics, but more importantly, provides a specific standpoint from which we can critically examine assumptions about “world cities” as generic, usually (culturally) Western, and indistinguishable from one another. The ethnographic treatment strongly counteracts any elision of the designer’s subjectivity as part of fieldwork. Engagement with Bangkok speaks simultaneously about the places we are studying and the places from which we come (Marcus & Fischer, 1986).

Across these three goals, then, we advocate a reconstruction of urban informatics that emphasizes how cities operate in more particular, divergent relations. We hope our work usefully complements more technically oriented scholarship on urban informatics, rendering contemporary discourse on the topic not just more urban but also more urbane.
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