Chapter 2

The Co–Creation of the City

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ABSTRACT

Is it possible to imagine novel forms of urban planning and of public policies regulating the ways in which people use city spaces by listening to citizens’ expressions, emotions, desires, and visions, as they ubiquitously emerge in real-time on social networks and on other sources of digital information? This chapter presents the theoretical and methodological approach, the investigation and research phases, the design and prototyping processes constituting the ConnectiCity initiative, a collaborative, multi-disciplinary series of projects in which artists, scientists, anthropologists, engineers, communicators, architects, and institutions participated to the design of innovative ubiquitous and pervasive systems which were able to transform the ways in which the concepts of urban planning and city-wide decision-making are defined. Novel forms of urban life were imagined, in which cities became the time/space continuum for multiple, stratified layers of information expressing the ideas, goals, visions, emotions, and forms of expression for multiple cultures and backgrounds, producing new opportunities for citizenship: more active, aware, and engaged in the production of urban reality, and in the transformation of city spaces into possibilistic frameworks.

INTRODUCTION

Rom Hoob Market, Mae Klong, Thailand.

Sheds, shacks and shanties line up on both sides of a tight pathway, completely filled with all sorts of merchandise: fruit, textiles, tools, t-shirts. A typical street market. Life runs busy in every direction, as people flow continuously, shoulder to shoulder, minding their daily business.

Noise approaches, together with a low-frequency vibration of growing intensity, and everything changes.

Vendors and dealers quickly rise up and start assembling all their goods in compact batches, piling everything up onto the sides of their shops. Curtains and sun shields disappear in seconds.

The pathway clears up in a few instants, revealing the ground, which was almost invisible a few moments earlier.

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The train tracks on the road surface are clearly visible now. And hypotheses start forming in our minds about the noise and vibration that has been growing in volume and power in the last few instants.

Everyone quietly and orderly steps to the side. The pathway is completely clear.

A train – yellow, placid, slow – passes by, through the passage, its sides only a few inches away from the piles of objects and people.

As soon as it passes – right after it, a few inches away from it – things instantly get back to their places, as if the train was a knife cutting through water, causing a temporary perturbation which closed right behind its blade’s path. Curtains reappear, merchandise is back on the floor. The noise and vibration is gone, replaced by the sounds of footsteps and the low hum of street conversations.

Scene change. Guangshen Superhighway, Shenzhen, Guangdong, China.

The Superhighway corridor presents a linear cut through the urban fabric of factories and dormitories.

Here people of all sorts assemble to perform a diverse set of activities: from improvised markets, to services and entertainment, to social practices of multiple types. The imposing structure of the highway towers above all these emerging processes.

The Superhighway is extended by a 25 meters free zone serving the electric lines. Activities happening underneath are continued in this open space in the form of light appropriation: pools, bicycle park, storage, etc.

A market is divided into two stripes – merchandise and food. They both use the roof of the Superhighway to create an interior condition supported by diverting electricity from nearby power poles. Light, ventilation, and small equipments (refrigerators, TVs, computers) are freely powered by this illegal diversion.

On one side of the space, something unexpected is found: a line-up of dozens of television sets placed on scrap pieces of furniture, each showing a different image.

People take a chair, order a meal and watch a DVD on TV. Instead of using a remote to change film, customers change table. The restaurant is a collective living room where to watch TV, a video or meet with friends.

Where several chairs cluster together, entertainment islands are created for playing interactive games. Computer networks or Internet cafés are proposing other possibilities and forms of exchange.

The scene changes, again.

Turin, Italy. The market in Piazza della Repubblica.

A man lays out his merchandise on the floor, neatly placing objects on a plain white sheet of fabric. After a while a call on his mobile phone grabs his attention. A few fast words and a decision is taken: the man grabs the four corners of the sheet and pulls them together, turning the “shop” into a “bag”. He drags it over his shoulder and quickly heads off to a new destination for his commerce. Nearby, a few meters apart on the same sidewalk, two arabs have just started praying, while people of all kinds and nationalities quickly pass by, chat, check their email using smartphones, or just wander off with their thoughts about their daily lives.

The scene could change many more times. Maybe going off to the La Salada market in Argentina, where remains of a once popular resort on the fringes of Buenos Aires have mutated into a florid market for textiles. Or to the snowy border of the Czech Republic, in which a peculiar combination of laws and opportunity have allowed the formation of a chaotic Vietnamese market.

The opportunities are endless, from mass phenomena to micro-retail processes.

Individuals and social groups of many kinds live in a constant state of re-invention of the spaces around them, transforming, re-programming, repurposing, re-combining places, and creating new layers of meaning, knowledge, information and practices during the course of their daily routines.

This is true at large and small scales, and the practices through which we personalize our real-