

Skypeography. Investigating and mapping the public mind space of urbaness

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Abstract

'Skypeography: investigating and mapping the public mind space of urbaness' is an overview of the public space of Skype. This article discusses how mediation by screens is creating new urban concepts across an emerging new spatial geography and its new sociologies and cartographies. It begins by tracing an overview from perceptions of 'city' to experiences of 'urbaness' and explores the role of screens in creating a mobile state of being and a conceptualization of urban public space as transient and paradoxical mind space. The paper argues that an appropriate urban lexicon or cartographic recording is yet to be developed in relation to the public space of screens. In an increasingly visualized world, art practice has a significant role to play in exploring and mapping urban transience, movement, rhythm and paradox that forms a state of 'urbaness'. This article explores the concept of 'Skypeography' through the methods and aesthetics of artistic screen research practice undertaken in the fluid space of the SkypeLab research project. Key to the research is the project to identify 100 Questions emerging out of the practice of SkypeLab. Through its experimental approach in digital space, SkypeLab poses and exposes questions arising out of the practice, about urban space itself. Through both answers and questions, SkypeLab and its 'Skypeography' method contribute valuable knowledge towards an understanding of new conceptual territory within a profoundly changing urbanscape.

Keywords: urban consciousness, digital screen mediation, Skype space, urban lexicon, spatial urban mapping, urban public space, Skypeography.

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Introduction

This article provides an overview of the public space of Skype. It discusses how mediation by screens is creating new urban concepts across an emerging new spatial geography and its emerging sociologies and cartographies. It begins by tracing an overview from perceptions of 'city' to experiences of 'urbaness' and explores the role of screens in creating a mobile state of being and a conceptualization of urban public space as transient and paradoxical mind space. The article argues that an appropriate urban lexicon or cartographic recording is yet to be developed in relation to the public space of screens. In an increasingly visualized world, art practice has a significant role to play in exploring and mapping urban transience, movement, rhythm and paradox which form a state of 'urbaness'. This article explores the concept of 'Skypeography' through the methods and aesthetics of artistic screen research practice undertaken in the fluid space of the SkypeLab research project. Key to the research is the project to identify 100 Questions emerging out of the practice of SkypeLab. Refer to the Appendix for a summary of the SkypeLab research.

From City to Urbaness

Concepts of the 'city' are central to contemporary understanding of urban public space. 'What is a City?' This often-quoted question posed by Lewis Mumford in the 1930s (LeGates, Stout 2011) is today a far more complex question in the context of a fluid urbanized and digitalized world. Mumford was an American historian and sociologist, particularly known for his study of cities. While his view of the city as a theatre of social action recognized it as more than a constructed, physical space, he could not have envisioned the complex action and interaction of urban and digital networks that are experienced by today's societies. Mumford's thinking was framed at a time when the idea of the modern city was emerging and changing. Other urban concepts were yet to come. Among these was the idea of the 'Megalopolis' or urban cluster or corridor, posed in the 1960s by urban geographer Jean Gottmann (1961) that linked regionally connected cities such as BosWash (Boston and Washington), recognising the natural connections between existing cities. Later, this concept was extended to connect rapidly developing urban spaces within the economic zone of the Pearl River Delta in China, reflecting in part a changing emphasis in urban research from connecting cities of Europe and the USA to the expanding city space of Asia. This in itself reflects the rapid growth in urbanization across the planet and the speed of growth within the Asian region in particular. Sociologist Saskia Sassen (1991) coined the term 'Global City' in the early 1990s recognizing the interconnection between the three mega cities of New York, London and Tokyo. She observed that the flight between New York and London is one of the world's most heavily used connection routes, so it is not surprising to find that New York and London might have more in common with each other, than with other cities in the United States or the United Kingdom. For some, such journeys between physical cities are as much the city, as the two cities themselves. Gottmann's concept of BosWash (Boston/Washington) can now be extended to the NyLon (New York/London) concept. Going one step further in the conceptualization of the 'city' as a network of connections, the AMO Atlas published in Content (2004), aims to snap shot the world in transition. Devised by architect and urban thinker Rem Koolhaas with others from OMA Office of Metropolitan Architecture, it does this through visualizing data to record

physical and non-physical, interconnected, global information and trends that link cities across the world. From McDonald outlets to Chinatowns, the AMO Atlas records diverse urban connections, from commercial expansion to cultural dispersions. What this does, is create different ways of looking at spatially networked geographies and draws attention to new urban sociologies and cartographies.

The AMO Atlas exemplifies the text 'World = City' that appears on the back cover of another of Koolhaas's publications, on the project, *Mutations: Harvard project on the city* (2001). This project explored understanding the city well beyond its concrete manifestations in relation to 'what used to be the city' (2001: 19). Here definitions of the 'city' can be seen as shaped by the contemporaneity of the conditions shaped by rapid urbanization and digitalization. Koolhaas refers to this as a 'City of Exacerbated Difference (COED)', a copyrighted term he devised through the Harvard Project. While he was specifically referring to the Pearl River Delta, the concept also applies more broadly. The idea of 'exacerbated difference' finds its roots in such thinking as urban philosopher Henri Lefebvre's 'arrythmia' or colliding rhythms in his theory of *Rhythmanalysis* (2004) first published in French in 1992. While digitalization as we know it was a long way off, Lefebvre was in a sense observing through a screen of sorts as he used his Paris window to record and analyse the patterns of everyday life. The connection of urban rhythms was considered in earlier versions of this thinking in *The Rhythmanalytical Project and Attempt at the Rhythmanalysis of Mediterranean Cities*, co-written with urban philosopher Catherine Régulier (1986). These concepts laid the groundwork for deciphering the new urban situation where physical cities are created through rapid movement from place to place, and urban mind space is created through the digital movement in the space between those places. By its very nature this creates a connected territory of new urban rhythms or 'arrythms' constructed around difference. While difference is central to a great deal of thinking today in deciphering the lives we live and the spaces we inhabit, so too is transience or movement, often expressed as the 'mobilities paradigm' (Elliott, Urry 2010: 15). The term 'mobilities' emerged in the Social Sciences primarily in the work of John Urry (2000). Urry argues that for contemporary sociology to be relevant it needs to address a borderless world. While much of his research focuses on the impact of 'mobile lives' (Elliott, Urry 2010), on how people's lives are being reorganised, these studies also address the role the ubiquitous presence of networked screens play in shaping lives. Earlier sociologist Manuel Castells (1996) amongst others, outlined a networked society that changed concepts of the space of places - one could insert separate city spaces here - to a spatial concept of flows. Movement shapes experience. Digital movement shapes urban experience as observed by philosopher Marshall McLuhan. While it would be another thirty years before the World Wide Web became a reality, McLuhan had already begun to observe the urban/digital collision in the 1960s, predicting a shrinking world emerging out of what he described as pervasive electronic media. He coined the term 'Global Village' to describe what was happening. The two words do not belong together. To 'lose sight of the strangeness of these terms, speaks to an acclimatization' (Wark 2012: 27) to new thinking about the world we live in. Within these changing understandings of the space that is the 'city', the contemporary urban condition resides in a state of mobility and a space of transience and paradox that is best expressed as 'urbaness' (McCormick 2009).

Urban Lexicons

Tracing from concepts of the individual 'city' to the networked urban condition of 'urbaness' leads us to new questions about urban public space. If we ask Mumford's question again - 'What is a city?' - the answer may now be in another question - 'What is 'urbaness'? The term 'urbaness' refers to a specific state of urban consciousness, shaped by transience between, and compression of, space, time and difference, where collision is perceived as the norm. Forms of urban consciousness are as old as cities themselves, with concepts of transience and compression, embedded in the trains, cars and planes, that have increasingly diminished the distance and time between and within cities and people. The difference now, is not only the speed at which this takes place, but also an understanding of 'increased mind mobility' (McCormick 2013:117) and the concept that one is 'born urban, born transient' (McCormick 2009: 17) in both body and mind, as a contemporary life experience. Instantaneous satellite connection means we can simultaneously be in many places and time zones. Urban experience is both seen and unseen, within a cacophony of layered, fragmented, transient alignments, shaped by multiple screens. Our current urban vocabulary is closely linked to concepts of belonging to, and identifying with, individual city spaces. These terms include 'cosmopolitanism', 'urbanity' and even Saskia Sassen's more recent term 'cityness' (2005). While grounded in ideas of connectivity, the latter too is embedded in primarily global economic circuits. The term 'urbophilia' (Radovic, Dukanoic 2007) comes closer to capturing the essence of the times and the love of the urban. While architect, academic and urban thinker Darko Radovic may be right when he suggests the urban phenomenon by its very nature 'escapes complete understanding or any attempt at definite definition' (2007: 151) a new urban lexicon is emerging.

What additional language have we developed to express and record urban experience mediated by digital screens? In the 1990s, architect and urban designer William J Mitchell described the digital city using familiar city terms like 'digital highway' (1995). While such language helped us to begin to understand this space, new terms have now entered our vocabulary to explain the urban phenomenon more fully. In a digitally connected urban world, we now understand space through urban perception and experience within the framework of such concepts as sociologists Manuel Castells 'space of flows' (1996) and Zygmunt Bauman's 'liquid times' (2000). Media theorist McKenzie Wark describes the condition as 'telesthesia', where information and ideas move faster than people or things between spaces, 'to bring what is distant near, and make what is distant a site of action' (2012). It is argued here that the term 'urbaness' (McCormick 2009) comes closest to expressing the consciousness of networked urban space. To decipher 'urbaness' as a spatial experience of transience and paradox, there is a need to expand our urban lexicon beyond words and towards the visual. Significant advances have been made in the development of urban visual design lexicons in such fields as Space Syntax and Urban Informatics in relation to spatial analysis, but neither focus on the extended language needed to express the impact of mediation by the screen itself on urban perception and experience. Rather, both employ visualized digital language of embedded mathematical algorithms and geospatial computer technology to decipher urban spatial behaviour. These visual translations of complex data conveyed through digital screens, similar to the example used earlier of the AMO Atlas, have opened up different ways of conceptualising space as well as new areas of thinking and collaborative design in relation to the

effectiveness of social and built public space. In these fields of urban study through digital methods urban place and space are central rather than the collective idea of being urban and its associated mind space. Bill Hillier, Professor of Architectural and Urban Morphology (Bartlett School of Architecture, University of London) is credited as the originator of the conceptual framework of Space Syntax through the Space Syntax Laboratory, UCL. While he has written about the human mind in this equation (2012) his focus is on understanding cities through a geometric mathematical prism. A gap has still been left in the urban lexicon and the potential for analysis of the public space of collective urban mind space through the specific expressive language of art. This move to visualization sits well within our everyday experience of the visual language we are increasingly relying on in our everyday digital communication such as Selfies, Emojis and the endless Facebook photos we send, as well as evident in our contracted 140 characters Tweets social platform. Information is conveyed to us through mobile phone, iPad, and computer screens. Amongst the screen mediators is Skype. Created by Scandinavians Niklas Zennström and Janus Friis in 2003, it today has multiple versions to choose from, such as Zoom and WhatsApp, but it is 'Skype' and 'Skyping' that have entered the urban lexicon as verbs. By now (2018) over 560 million people have used Skype at one time or another. Experience of such dense, transient, and at times fragmented and frustrating space plays a pivotal role in the formation of knowledge. In contrast to Facebook, Instagram, or Email, Skype communication is directly through seeing each other's face. We are actively engaged. Skype continues to be one of the screens that we 'see' the new everyday conceptual transient 'city' of paradox through, by seeing the other, the self, space and time concurrently.

Skypeography and SkypeLab

As we have seen, like the subject itself, a study of the public space of 'urbaness' requires a cacophony of interconnected disciplines. Amongst the mix is art practice which is often overlooked in the wider fields of urban studies. In this article, the focus is on the particular practice of 'Skypeography' through the methods and aesthetics of artistic screen research practice undertaken in the SkypeLab project. The term 'Skypeography' like the term 'urbaness' has been purposefully created in an effort to expand the lexicon to better express the experience of our times. 'Skypeography' plays with the idea of Skype as public urban space, as a new geography with a new cartography. Embedded in its processes is a networking of understandings drawn across urban studies, including geography, sociology, cartography and art. Carto-City for example is the title of cartographer Denis Cosgrove's chapter in *Else/Where: Mapping New Cartographies of Networks and Territories* (Abrams and Hall 2006). Cosgrove concludes with the statement 'Urban space and cartographic space remain inseparable; as each is transformed, their relationship alters' (2006). In our contemporary situation, Cosgrove's conclusion reminds us of the continuously changing understanding of both city and cartography, and how each is intertwined. Being urban is embedded in paradox and mediated through screens, while cartography itself is dominated by screens. GIS (geographic information systems) are designed to capture, analyse and present all manner of spatial or geographic data, resulting in Google Maps and GPS global positioning systems, offering real time navigation. While this technology gives unprecedented access to information and to spatial engagement, it rarely addresses the implications. On the

other hand, transience and paradox are the territory of contemporary art practice and its specific mode of research and mapping.

Contemporary artistic modes of practice reflect a shift from individual to what is often termed relational or socially engaged, mirroring the digital network where each collision creates a new direction. In this era is not new for the arts to engage with the digital sphere in a multiplicity of ways. Of its time, SkypeLab 2014-2018, grew out of its predecessor Skypetraight 2012-2013. Both explore the cartography of 'urbaness' through the interconnection between art practice, public space and digital technology. The SkypeLab concept grew out of a Skype conversation between Henning Eichinger, Professor at Reutlingen University in Germany and me, in 2012 about our observations of the increasing use of screens by our respective art in public space and design students. Unlike much of the engagement between art and technology, the SkypeLab interest is not in digital art as such. Rather, questions arose about the impact of 'seeing' and 'knowing' through screens: Questions about the impact of the everyday experience of connecting across contiguous urban digital public space on urban perception. Questions about how art and design practice might interpret and map this space. Questions about what role the hand, and the body still played in an urbanized and digitalized world. What answers, but more importantly, what questions might arise from this approach? While all research is by nature investigating the unknown, SkypeLab allows the unknown state to remain a core part of its philosophy reflecting the nature of art practice that begins with an idea and comes to the question through the practice itself. Integral to its processes, SkypeLab is compiling the 100 Questions project over 2018/2019. The questions arise out of the experience of the participants of both the state of 'urbaness' and the practice of 'Skypeography' through the filter of screens. To enquire into the questions, SkypeLab is being undertaken as a series of research laboratories across increasingly expanding networks, across urban public space as well as disciplines and mediums. Labs to date have created a networked 'city' or urban space between universities in Reutlingen, Melbourne, Shanghai, Rio De Janeiro, Barranquilla, Hobart and Barcelona. Within long timeframes and geographical distances, SkypeLab purposefully brings together differing and colliding urban time zones, seasons and cultures, mediated through digital screens where all are collapsed into a common urban space – a common 'city', if you like.

SkypeLab is witness to Castell's urban 'space of flows', Bauman's 'liquid times' and Wark's 'teleshia', first hand. In this context, the research curatorial practice 'Skypeography' was designed by Henning Eichinger and me and employs a methodology shaped by ephemeral and transient urban experience, mediated by digital screens. In the process, contributions are made to an urban lexicon that expands our capacity to express our experience of this new conceptual cityscape. The interest in how difference plays out in this space as well the interest in the role of the hand in a digital space, led us to invite German, Australian, Chinese and South American artists, who had not met previously, to work in pairs or opposites. They undertook Blind Contour Drawing sessions via Skype over periods of several months. The technique is intimate as it involves looking at your partner intensively on the screen, and drawing with one continuous line, reminiscent of cartographic contour lines. A stranger crosses this public space to enter the private space of your bedroom or living room, while you traverse in the opposite direction. The meeting place is somewhere else. While Blind Contour Drawing was originally conceived as an innovative drawing teaching technique in the 1940s (Nicolaïdes 1941) and was later

adapted by art educator Betty Edwards in her book *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* (1979), here in SkypeLab it is transformed into a research tool - a tool for investigating urban ephemera mediated by digital screens while concurrently exploring the role of the hand in our digital world. The methodology, as employed by the artists, favours the juxtaposition of difference (including culture and language), long time frames, and geographical distance. While, in more traditional cartography, contour lines indicate the shape of the earth's surface, here contour lines record the connection between complete strangers. They look directly at each other through the screen, at much closer distances than the usual physical encounter, and yet separated by distance, time, culture and often language. Here perception is transformed, as it responds to paradox, through frozen moments and fluidity, distance and nearness, connection and disconnection, hand and brain, light and dark, clarity and loss of detail, confidence and awkwardness, limitation and possibility, amidst a myriad of other apparent contradictions. Paradoxical fragments become everyday framing of how knowledge is formed and how perceptions are created, and experiences recorded. 'Drawing via the Skype screen interface reinforces the idea, that when we draw we mirror ourselves, as much as the other, and in the process, we redefine ourselves' (McCormick 2013) as mapmaker and the map itself - 'I have got you at the end of my pen' (Eichinger, McCormick 2013: 76).

In recording 'Skypeography' practice, artists talk of the physical contradiction of 'Drawing faster/moving slower to capture a moment' (Eichinger, McCormick 2013: 75), and the ambiguity of the screen itself, where 'Textures of the city swallow her face' (Eichinger, McCormick 2013: 74) as one sees the other, the self, their space, your space and layered reflections on glasses and mirrors. Some project participants gave all their attention to the space around the person, the partially visible space that opens up the imagination, some tracked the virtual space between the two screens, some recorded those somewhat undefinable noises that can be heard on line, some recorded soundscapes while walking and Skyping in physical public spaces and in the process erasing the distance. For others erasure itself was the focus referring to 'the ephemeral nature of online encounters and the idea of 'trace' as a memory in connection to temporality' with the intention 'to follow the drawn line back to its origin to map its journey' (Eichinger, McCormick 2016: 41). While the hand was engaged in the preliminary drawing process, the hand and the body reappeared in the artistic interpretations of the Skype encounter in the form of multiple mediums employing photography, projection, painting, printing, installation, video, fashion design, montage and performance. These do not illustrate the Skype experience but rather map this through the impact on each artists' practice. Through the interconnection between art and design practice, public space, and digital technology, this practice-led research develops new insights and new ways of building on contemporary knowledge of urban space. It compliments and enhances other forms of urban study leading to a fuller understanding of our urbanized and digitalized world. This is best expressed by social geographer and researcher for the Joint Research Centre, Stephane Chaudron, co-author with Henning Eichinger of the most recent publication associated with SkypeLab. In the report on Identities in the Digital World for the European Commission she says 'I could not but be intrigued by the similarities between the SkypeLab project research questions and mine while having different approaches, reasoning and process' (2017: 5).

Conclusion

This article has explored the impact of mediation through digital screens on the meaning of the contemporary 'city', and how experience of urban public space is being redefined. Rather than viewing cities as separate spaces, the concept of 'urbaness' poses the idea of 'being urban' within perceptions of the contemporary 'city' as a state of urban consciousness. The need for an expanded urban lexicon and new ways of mapping the contemporary 'city' have been discussed through the method of 'Skypeography' and the research project SkypeLab. Through its non-traditional and experimental approach within public digital space, SkypeLab poses and exposes questions arising out of the practice about the impact of the digital screen itself. In so doing it contributes to broader fields of urban inquiry. As we look into this new mind space of 'urbaness', SkypeLab asks: How do the layers, reflections and fragmentations of 'seeing' and encountering each other via digital screen space shape our urban experience and inform our urban perceptions? What role does artistic practice play in the language and cartography of contemporary urban public space? Through both answers and questions, SkypeLab contributes valuable knowledge to an understanding of new conceptual territory within a profoundly changing urbanscape.

Appendix

SkypeLab is undertaken in collaboration with the Goethe Institutes in Australia and China and funded through the Baden-Württemberg Foundation, Germany. Its predecessor Skypetrair received a research and teaching award in 2013 in Germany. Over 2012 to 2018, the mapmaking evolving out of this research process has taken multiple forms. These include street projections, street performance, public space interventions, exhibitions, publications and online presence at ARTE Creative TV France/Germany and the SkypeLab web site, and associated Blogs and Facebook. The concept was initiated by Maggie McCormick, RMIT University, Australia and Henning Eichinger, Reutlingen University, Germany in 2012 as Skypetrair. This Australian/German project which began with a focus on the face and the nature of portraiture in the digital screen age, soon expanded to consider the public space of the screen itself. As SkypeLab 2014-2016, the network expanded to include East China Normal University, Shanghai, China. In 2017 The Federal University, Rio De Janeiro, Brazil and the University of Atlantico, Barranquilla, Colombia were added to this network. In 2018 an archive 2012-2018 under the title of Skypescape was shown at the Salamanca Art Centre, Hobart in association with the University of Tasmania. Later in 2018, 22@ Barcelona SkypeLab will take place at RMIT Europe in Barcelona. This forthcoming dialogue will take the 100 Questions and SkypeLab publications as its starting point and will take the form of a symposium and mapping laboratory leading to a SkypeLab event in Berlin, Germany in 2019.

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