Futures Fair ⁰⁹

SOCIETY AND STIMULUS

Settlement: Structure & New Paradigms
26/05/09

'SOFT CITIES AND THE FEAR OF THE NANNY ROBOT.'

In the third instalment of the Futures Fair 09 breakfast seminar season, the virtual city was explored and its limitations revealed.

Alan Penn opened the debate with the image of 'soft infrastructure' – the spatial and taken for granted structures between physical realms. He claimed that emerging technologies better enables these structures to manage human relations and determine how new forms of settlement evolve. Penn showed a film of school children interacting with each other within their contained space- the playground. This film revealed the movements of the children over time - a kind of spatial research project which allowed us to watch how the space was used, the rhythms of their movements and where they tended to congregate. It was suggested that if this kind of study was employed on a grander scale, to public spaces and buildings, better ways of designing these spaces can be hypothesised and realized in future.

Lesley Gavin spoke of the need for cheaper, more integrated technologies. She told the story of *Peter the Architect* – a man living and working in 2029 with technologies as advanced as biodegradable nano technology screens and 'Nanny Robots'. As these technologies 'compress space', people can begin to interact with each other without having to be within the same physical proximity. Gavin claimed that the refined Nanny Robot of the future will teach our children Chinese and offer Schwarzenegger-type care and surveillance. However, with such advanced machines comes inevitable social backlash. Would you entrust a robot to educate and care for your children? Even if these robots of the future hold expert knowledge in their microchips, a pervading fear of technology continues to ensue. Speaking from the audience, structural engineer, Jane Wernick highlighted a further limitation of digital technology by raising the issue of it not being accessible to all - it is harder for older generations to grasp how new technologies operate and low income groups can only imagine.

Moving the conversation into the gaming world- fusing media and built space- Stephen Boyd Davis spoke of *'Ere be Dragons'* - a game that is wired to the gamer's body, building a virtual landscape on screen as the body moves about in

real space. Could these virtual landscapes be applied to buildings? Can the patterns of our movements be recorded in this way to achieve the 'psycho geographical' utopian cities akin to Constant's New Babylon? As media are becoming more spatialised, multimodal, physical and social, the way we perceive our cities and the distances between them is changing; can the architect and the spatial planner keep up?

The difficulty in applying technology was developed by David Bott. By comparing London's current cityscape with how it looked in 1989 he noted that not much *has* changed in 20 years and despite huge advances in all sorts of fields we could expect Britain's cities of 2029 to be instantly recognizable. Radical change, he noted, lies in localities or small interventions such as consumer products. Despite the potential of integrating innovative technology into our cityscapes, developers have followed mainly what markets permit or where risk will be absorbed. The challenge therefore is to work with markets to lead where government or civic authorities lack the resources to do so.

The discussion that followed picked up on society's conflicting mistrust of various forms of implementable technologies- especially on the part of government. The group mused over the curious phenomenon that most personal details are willingly given over to private companies- in the form of credit cards and networking services such as Facebook online- rather than given over to the public sector. The fear of such schemes as ID cards was deemed to be a mixture of mistrust of civil servants to lock things away properly and the lack of tangible benefits for the citizen. Their impact on the built environment was yet to be seen, but the pervasive attitude towards surveillance could be felt in numerous subtle ways in shopping centres and transport nodes.

The potential of technology to subvert traditional city movements can be felt already via online shopping and banking services, the music industry and its affect on the traditional nature of the CBD and life there. Future developments over the next 20 years in gaming, media spaces and informal/professional networking and communications may further dismantle the dominance of the centrally focused city as skills are exchanged and local service providers are identified. The central effort of pulling spatial planning and technology together remains to give people the opportunity to create the spaces they want to be in. Despite fears of big brother style intervention the broad consensus was that, for better or worse- progress or regression- people still have the power.

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