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O HABITAR NA PANDEMIA DA COVID-19: A TRANSIÇÃO PARA LUGARES VIRTUAIS
DWELLING IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE SHIFT INTO VIRTUAL PLACES
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Abstract

Ever since the Internet became ubiquitous and accessible through technology that performs like extensions of human bodies, the space humans live in became hybrid. The pandemic-necessitated quarantine has imposed a drastic shift from in-person human activities to the virtual environment, making us more digital than ever. This shift informs our understanding of how the Internet creates alternative environments for dwelling, and how physical spaces are meaningful in the context of ubiquitous Internet (UI) by providing environments for embodied experiences. Looking into the concept of dwelling through Christian Norberg-Schulz's perspective, this paper discusses how *orientation* (one's ability to wander)*, identification with places* (one's development of belonging), and *meaning* (the gathering and concretization of the meaning of existence) have unfolded in a context of UI and during the quarantine. Society is still adapting to the changes in human dwelling brought about by UI, and though the Internet has sometimes been cited as the cause of alienation, we argue that dwelling and alienation are instead a result of one's attitude towards places and life.

1   Introduction

In an attempt to contain the spread of Covid-19, a quarantine[1] was established in several parts of the world, limiting the amount of physical contact, shifting activities to virtual spaces as much as possible, and making us more digital than ever. In the early years of the Internet, virtual space was seen as an environment detached and in opposition to 'real life' (De Souza e Silva, 2017, p. 151). As Internet access became mobile, it poured out from screens into the world (McCullough, 2004) and transformed the space where we live into hybrid space (De Souza e Silva, 2003). This will be further discussed in section 2.

An extensive and growing portion of society had increasingly been incorporating the use of virtual spaces over time, but the pandemic imposed a widespread and dramatic shift towards them. In-person classes transitioned to the virtual classroom, work that could be done remotely was done from home, and more grocery stores and restaurants began offering delivery or curbside pickup for online orders. Basic needs were able to be attended to from home, and the activities that would usually draw people to physical places were cancelled or have happened in a virtual manner. For many, life was physically confined to the home, with the Internet enabling activities to take place in virtual spaces and making it possible for one to feel connected to others despite the physical distance. Looking into the concept of dwelling through Norberg-Schulz's perspective, this paper discusses how orientation, identification with places, and meaning were experienced during quarantine and the role of ubiquitous Internet (UI) in this experience. Society is still adapting to the changes UI brought to human dwelling, and while the Internet has been blamed as the cause of alienation, we argue that dwelling and alienation are instead a result of one's *attitude* towards places and life. This paper will also make reference to observations collected from six in-depth interviews with subjects who had all extensively incorporated UI into their lives and had their routines affected by the pandemic. The interviews investigate how the Internet was used in one's daily routine, what aspects of virtual places were appreciated and brought more meaning to life, what aspects of physical places were being missed, and how the Internet affected one's sense of belonging. The interviews were conducted through tele-conference, recorded, and were subsequently coded according to the categories of analysis of this research.

This paper is structured into five sections. This first section presents an introduction to the theme and the structure of the article. Section 2 presents how the Internet evolved from a parallel reality to being ingrained in physical space and daily life, and discusses space and place in the physical and virtual environments. Section 3 discusses dwelling and alienation, and how one's attitude determines their relationship with each. Section 4 will approach Norberg-Schulz's perspective on dwelling and discuss how UI affects *orientation*, *identification with places*, and *meaning* in the context of quarantine. Section 5 concludes the article with a discussion of the impacts of UI on dwelling and the observations gathered by approaching this theme through the perspective of dwelling.

2   From cyberspace to hybrid space

Since its early years, the Internet was seen as creating a space of its own, a virtual environment that enabled certain human activities (Lévy, 1999). The language used to describe it was associated with this spatial notion, and such terms as *site, space, address, room, window,* etc. were used (Aurigi, 2005). Initially this space was known as 'Cyberspace', an environment detached from physical reality and accessed through stationary machines. These machines acted as portals to this mostly text-based parallel dimension that did not have much connection with other parts of life (Mitchell, 1995). The Internet was used to search for information, or to communicate with those that were at a great distance, but it was largely seen as a place separate from one's daily life and from the physical world in which it occurred (Turkle, 2011). As technology evolved, the Internet became mobile and accessible to a larger portion of the population, making it ubiquitous and an ingrained part of contemporary life (McCullough, 2004).

The advent of mobile laptops and wifi gave people the ability to access the network in different places, allowing them to combine distinct needs and desires – such as the need to work and the desire to be in a park or café, rather than in a windowless cubicle (McCullough, 2004). The Internet seemed to be freeing humans from being confined to specific physical locations by enabling activities and needs to be solved from anywhere, without physical movement (Aurigi, 2005)..

Smartphones and 3G continued this trend by making Internet access even more available, thus creating hybrid space: where aspects of both the physical and virtual are accessible and combined into a single experience (De Souza e Silva, 2003). Walking in and out of virtual spaces often and easily, humans inhabit

the threshold between the worlds, wandering between virtual and physical space to fulfill their needs and desires (Turkle, 2011). The mere availability of the Internet affects how physical space is seen and experienced (Frith, 2012) by enabling access to virtual 'layers': one can see a 'map' layer, checking position and directions, or an 'information' layer to know more about the history of a certain place, or a 'review' layer to check what people are saying about the nearby restaurant, or the 'social' layer to check up on what their friends are doing. Mind and attention wander through these different 'layers', informing one's choices and actions and changing one's overall experience of living. In the world of UI, the physical space is the foundation for places that are experienced as complex and multi-layered.

Malpas (2012, p. 6) says that, as humans, we are embodied and 'minded' beings that live *in place*. The body exists in physical space, has physiological needs, and senses the environment; the mind can be lost in thought and vicariously inhabit places or imagine things that it has never seen, lived or experienced. Mind and body need to be seen as parts of one holistic being in understanding one's experiences. One may be lost in a book, totally immersed in its story, and be brought 'back' to the physical realm by the need to go to the bathroom or some other bodily discomfort. To think of virtual space as a replacement of the physical would be to ignore the embodied nature of being, just as denying that the Internet contributes to one's experience would be to ignore the thinking nature of being human. To understand how life happens in the hybrid world, physical and virtual spaces need to be understood as both being environments where human life takes place.

Norberg-Schulz says, referring to physical space, that space "denotes the three-dimensional organization of the elements which makeup a place" (1980, p. 11). Holischka (2019, p. 166) states that the term 'space' in CyberSpace "symbolizes infinite territory and technical opportunities", but that "to let immersion happen, we necessarily grasp [what we see on the screen] as a place". Space, thus, refers to the supporting environment where life takes place, while places are processes (Kempf, 2011) that, being "more an *event* than a *thing"* (Casey, 1996, p. 26), emerge through the experience of dwelling*.* Experiencing a place encompasses the environmental context (physical surroundings or the virtual setting, for example), the people present, the activities taking place, the access and use of the Internet, and all other factors that take part in the experience. We argue that the places that emerge in hybrid space can be understood as having three different natures regarding how the relationship between physical and virtual is experienced. (1) Physical place is experienced as such when one's attention is solely in the physical place where the body is present and focused on the events happening within it – what could also be referred to as 'being present', 'mindful' and aware of one's surroundings. A wandering mind, that instead of concentrating in the present moment thinks of anything else, already entails a different experience of place. (2) Virtual places are experienced when one's attention is fully in an alternative environment and the body's physical location tends not to matter, such as when immersed in a story, a book, or a virtual game. When in a virtual place, the body may even feel like a hindrance, occasionally pulling one out of the experience due to physiological needs or physical discomfort. (3) Hybrid place is experienced when one associates aspects from both realms. One is not fully immersed in the virtual environment, but is also not totally focused on the physical surroundings. Events and actions happening in physical space are informed, affected or shared in virtual space, or vice-versa, like when we are sharing something on social media, talking to someone on a videoconference, or searching information virtually to inform the experience taking place in physical space. Hybrid place is where people often dwell nowadays, being in physical space while informed and assisted by the virtual, hopping between the different layers in search of information, accomplishing tasks, buying items, communicating with family and friends, and so on.

3   Alienation and dwelling

There is plenty of criticism about how smartphones take one away from the environment, impairing the capacity to dwell, bringing more loneliness, and, generally speaking, *making* people alienated. We argue that, as Lévy (1999) says, technologies are not 'good' or 'bad', but are rather a reflection of society and the individuals within it. The way the Internet is used only reflects one's attitudes towards place, people, and moments, and we argue that it can be used in both positive and negative ways. It would be naive to ignore the Internet's issues concerning privacy, unequal access, or its shortcomings when compared to the physical environment; however, the pandemic has helped to show how the Internet can also be used in beneficial ways, offering alternatives when physical presence is not an option, and giving place attributes that would not be possible in a solely physical environment. Furthermore, alienation has been discussed as a problem from decades before smartphones or the Internet existed (for example: Heidegger, 1971; Norberg-Schulz, 1985), making the claim that technologies are the *cause* of alienation, a flawed accusation. Both dwelling and its opposite, alienation, refer to one's attitude towards places, and one can even say, towards life. Technology creates new possibilities, but it is one's attitude that will determine whether the Internet will act as an alienating force, being used as a distraction to escape from the present moment, or as a positive resource, being used to develop stronger ties and bringing meaning into life.

Dwelling refers to the way that humans live upon the world, fulfilling "their wandering from birth to death on earth under the sky" (Norberg-Schulz, 1985, p. 18), thus encompassing the nature of human life on earth. Beyond simple existence, dwelling is a *poetic* way of living (Heidegger, 1971; Norberg-Schulz, 1980, 1985) that leads to the feeling of a *meaningful* existence (Norberg-Schulz, 1985). Such an existence occurs at the intersection of staying (or settling) and wandering (Norberg-Schulz, 1985; Casey, 1996), and requires an attitude of being open (Norberg-Schulz, 1985), attentive and responsive to place (Malpas, 2014). This means being open to experiencing *wonder* (Malpas, 2006), *uncanniness* and *nearness* (McHugh, 2007) in one's encounter with places. Nearness lies at the heart of the notion of dwelling, but it does not refer to physical nearness, but to the sense of familiarity, intimacy and care (McHugh, 2007) that can also happen at a distance (Massey, 2005, p. 193). In the situation of this pandemic, for example, *caring* about our loved ones actually included staying physically distant to prevent exposing them to Covid-19, while the Internet has provided alternatives to keep in touch and interact with them.

As mentioned in Section 2, places are processes or events. A dwelling attitude consists of being aware and attuned to these events as they happen, regardless of the medium involved. If the body, avatar or image is 'present', but one's attention is wandering elsewhere and not truly engaged with the event, one can be said to be alienated or distant from it. Likewise, when one *is* fully present in the event – be it virtual, physical or hybrid – dwelling takes place.

Dwelling has been chosen as the approach to understand humans' relationship with places due to its all-encompassing nature and its focus on how place is experienced. In Norberg-Schulz's time the Internet was not a part of daily life and, therefore, did not come into consideration in any of his observations. Nonetheless, analyzing the role he attributes to the physical environment in dwelling helps understand the impact UI has had on our relationship to the physical places, and how the pandemic is affecting the way we conduct life on Earth.

4   Dwelling

Norberg-Schulz (1980, p. 5) says that: "Man dwells when he can orientate himself within and identify himself with an environment, or, in short, when he experiences the environment as meaningful". He argues that 'orientation' is needed to dwell because *wandering* is a part of dwelling, and one needs to feel emotionally secure to wander. He also argues that belonging is needed to dwell, and that it is developed through 'identification with place' (Norberg-Schulz, 1985). While orientation relates to wandering, identification relates to staying, and both of them take part in creating meaning in one's dwelling.

4.1   Orientation in hybrid space

Norberg-Schulz refers to orientation as one's ability to wander, which, before UI, required being familiar enough with the environment to make one feel secure to wander (Norberg-Schulz, 1985, p. 20). The navigation apps that are now available easily inform one's place and how to get to any destination, bringing this sense of security anywhere where there is connection to the Internet.

UI also increased one's ability to wander by enabling several daily tasks and activities to be accomplished remotely, giving freedom of choice on where to perform them (Kellerman, 2012; Mitchell, 1995), and allowing one to physically wander more. Several jobs can be performed remotely, communication with friends and family happens virtually, courses are offered online, information and entertainment from all over the world is available everywhere. While this usually meant one could exercise more mobility in their life, with the pandemic it enabled people to keep up a large range of activities from the inside of their home.

The reduction in physical mobility and the confinement to the home imposed by the quarantine brought to evidence another aspect of UI that has impacted how the need for wandering in one's dwelling is fulfilled: by being another environment for exploration and discovery. Norberg-Schulz says that, "Through orientation we attain a spatial image of the place. This image defines our possibility of movement, and hence of discovery and choice" (1985, p. 66), bringing forth the purpose of orientation: enabling discovery and choice. Wandering means to walk around aimlessly, but can also refer to mind-wandering, when the mind wanders off to a different time, place, or topic. Wandering can, thus, be understood as an aimless, unpretentious exploration that entails discovery and often implies a possibility of choice. Scrolling through the web, exploring an area in a virtual game, or navigating from link to link can feel like wandering through different ideas and places, exercising choice, and bringing the sense of exploration and discovery. Certainly wandering in the physical space is different from wandering in the virtual space, in that the physical space provides an immersive environment for an embodied experience (Cresswell, 2006) that involves bodily movement, sounds, textures, smells and even tastes. It is also an environment that is susceptible to changes in weather, lighting, atmosphere, people, events. The virtual environment does not have the constant changes one goes through

within the physical space, does not provide any surprises to the sense of smell, taste, or touch, and the body movements involved in it are quite minimal. Although there are virtual reality technologies that associate bodily movements to one's perception of the virtual environment, and an intense focus can lead to a sense of immersion, the virtual spaces used in daily life are not as immersive as physical spaces. Still, the Internet provides a perpetual stream of novelties, things to discover, posts in social media, endless knowledge, and is an easy and guaranteed source of excitement, discovery, and adventure (Turkle, 2011, p. 219), that few physical places of daily life can provide.

The quarantine has been a lived experience of how physical movement in daily routine goes beyond simply moving from point A to point B, but also responds to needs for bodily movement, the establishment of routines, and changes in environment (Kellerman, 2012). Interview subjects whose activities were maintained but transferred to the virtual environment due to the pandemic reported longing for how the physical movements helped structure their days, and how the change in physical place contributed to the change of mindset required for each activity. They also reported missing the unexpectedness that is part of exercising outdoors, indicating a longing for the discovery associated with physical wandering.

4.2   Identification with place

Identification with place is the second attribute raised by Norberg-Schulz, being necessary to the 'staying' or 'settling' part of dwelling. Identification with place means developing a relationship with places in a way that they are part of one's identity and one feels a sense of belonging within them (Norberg-Schulz, 1985). This relationship can happen to several places throughout one's journey if one – in Norberg-Schulz's words – is open and the environment has a character or *genius loci* (1985, p. 63). One's way of being is dependent on the possibilities offered by the places inhabited, but also on one's openness to that place and on the choices that are made. Having access to a beach does not make one a surfer or the beach a part of their identity; such things depend on one's attitudes and actions over time.

As mentioned previously, UI made possible the emergence of virtual and hybrid places that offer their own set of possible actions, thus constituting places for identification and belonging. The activities enabled by the virtual environment – such as MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing game) – can become part of one's identity, and the virtual place where they happen can become a place of belonging (De Souza e Silva, 2017). The Internet also offers virtual communities around shared interests that constitute virtual places of belonging (Kellerman, 2014, p. 542), and places for exploration and discovery of one's identity, such as social media and role-playing games (Turkle, 2011). Additionally, the Internet enables one to search for information and to be in touch with cultures and realities that are distinct from those that are physically close, which affects the process of identity construction-and sometimes also motivating a physical move to a place with more like-minded people (Thulin and Vilhelmson, 2016). An example of this is queer individuals in small towns and rural areas that, having access to a much broader scope of information, can understand and develop their identity, and have a virtual place to belong as part of a community (Shearing, 2020).

Ubiquitous Internet allows one to communicate at a distance, which can "enhance closeness at a distance" (Wajcman, 2015, p. 149); UI creates a sense of "permanent accessibility" that affords "intimacy at distance", taking part in the development of the sense of belonging (Lasén, 2014, pp. 403-404). Interview subjects reported feeling this 'remote belonging' during quarantine; the transition of in-person activities to the virtual space (such as church services, family gatherings, workout classes) provided, even to those that tend to live locally, the experience of how the virtual space can help in the maintenance of the sense of belonging. They also reported that the experience of being physically present is usually preferred, especially for optional leisure activities (e.g. meeting family and friends, watching live music, etc), because of the perceived subjective benefits, like physical touch and interaction. Although the virtual environment has its shortcomings, and has been a substitute often seen as 'better than nothing', in the transition of groups that traditionally met physically to the virtual environment an interesting side-effect was observed: people that were not able to participate in the gatherings because they were physically away could now be engaged with the group again. Keeping remote ties alive through the Internet can also lead to the development of a 'multi-territorial belonging', where one can keep in touch with the different places that are part of one's identity.

Interview subjects also reported that for activities that are more 'task-oriented' (such as work meetings or online shopping), or that take place in environments that affect them negatively (that are environmentally uncomfortable, or that gather anxious or stressed individuals), the change into the virtual environment was pleasant and welcome and would be gladly maintained in the post-pandemic future.Some subjects even reported not minding the quarantine much; the virtual environment was already where most of their activities were carried out and where they felt the most comfortable; not having to go anywhere in the physical realm was more of a relief. For them, the quarantine only made evident how digital their life had already become.

4.3   Meaning

The third aspect of dwelling that will be discussed is how dwelling entails a meaningful relationship with the environment, where meaning is appropriated from the surrounding things and concretized in works of art (Norberg-Schulz, 1985). With UI, meaning is not only derived from the physical environment and from the events happening in one's surroundings, but also from the virtual layers that are part of hybrid space. All sorts of information can be gathered through the network, changing one's experience of a place or situation, and what is the meaning derived from it. Checking out the history of a place or building may change the way one looks at it, the details noticed, and the feelings aroused, bringing more meaning to the experience and affecting it positively. Interruptions caused by notifications may pull one out of the immersion, be a distraction, and affect negatively one's experience and development of meaning. Once again, how the Internet impacts one's experience depends on one's attitude – is one using the Internet intentionally to bring more meaning to the moment, or as a distraction? Constant contact with distant people may reduce one's immersion, or bring more meaning to an event because it is then shared with loved ones – such as experienced in virtual parties during quarantine (Shearing, 2020), where celebrations were held and made sense only because it was possible to virtually gather people for it.

Concretizing – or making visible – the gathered meanings through works of art is another aspect Norberg-Schulz (1980) considers important for dwelling. Although Norberg-Schulz focuses on architecture, we argue that the Internet is another environment for making meanings visible, as it provides space for several kinds of artistic expression, making easy the production and sharing of text, music, videos, images, and so on. When Norberg-Schulz says that "[o]nly poetry in all its forms (also as the "art of living") makes human existence meaningful" (1980, p. 23), he acknowledges that architecture is only one of the poetic expressions that can express these meanings, and that even one's way of living can act as a poetic creation that concretizes one's meanings.

The infinite possibilities of virtual space open up a whole new realm for expression and creation that can be used in one's development of meaning. The Internet creates an environment that makes visible aspects that are usually intangible, such as one's experiences, social connections, ideas, opinions, and thoughts (Frith, 2012), and where these tend to be more prominent than one's material possessions. It is also an environment for registering ephemeral things, giving them a sense of permanence. Understanding the 'art of living' as a poetic creation that expresses one's perception of meaning, social media can be seen as an environment for making these meanings visible (i.e., Pink and Hjorth, 2014). The way social media's timeline structure lines up posts with one's experiences (events, comments, thoughts, ideas, photos, etc) makes the ephemeral seem permanent and one's journey in life seem tangible (Dicjk, 2013). Looking back on one's timeline and working on its creation can bring an increased awareness of how life is made of one's journey, and how experiences are its valuable building blocks, that, in turn, leads to an appreciation of physical places as environments for embodied experiences.

5   Conclusion

The Internet has been changing the way life is conducted on earth. Virtual and hybrid places were gradually being incorporated in our routine, with a drastic shift when a quarantine became necessary to contain the spread of Covid-19. The framework of dwelling supports the understanding that the Internet creates new conditions and possibilities, but that it is one's attitude – engaging or not in the moment happening, being aware of one's surroundings, being intentional in one's actions, being fully present in the moment – that will determine if the Internet will act as a tool to further alienate, or as a tool to improve one's dwelling.

Looking at the perspective of Norberg-Schulz with the support of more recent authors, we have presented how dwelling requires one to be able to wander, to develop the sense of belonging, and to gather and concretize meanings of their existence. UI is changing dwelling on several fronts. It is changing the shape of orientation and wandering: orientation has the assistance of additional information not grasped by our senses; and access to virtual layers allow for a hybrid exploration of places, where both virtual and physical places are associated in discovery and exploration. Settling and belonging are also changing in shape: one can belong in more places because they can be adapted to more lifestyles due to the access to the Internet; there are virtual places of belonging, such as LGBTQ+ forums and online multiplayer games; and one can belong remotely to the places that are part of their journey, associating them in one's daily dwelling, and experiencing belonging in multi-territoriality. The gathering and concretization of meaning in one's dwelling now also counts on virtual layers: one can 'summon' a friend virtually for company; discover specific information about a certain place that will change the meanings associated with it; or share a poetic moment in their social media. These are just examples of how UI can take place in one's dwelling; what brings meaning to each person's dwelling is particular, and how UI is used will reflect that.

Dwelling brings a useful approach to understanding places in the context of UI because, instead of addressing virtual and physical places in opposition or competing against each other, it places the focus on what role each place can perform in dwelling, and how they are associated in creating a meaningful existence. The Covid-19

quarantine made us more digital than ever, showcasing that much of the practical side of human lives can take place virtually, and that several physical places that exist for practical use may become obsolete when their activities are transferred to virtual places. On the other hand, it also emphasized that physical places are important due to the embodied experiences they provide, which cannot take place virtually. This points in the direction of what will be relevant in the design of physical places in the future: creating places that, beyond fulfilling practical needs, focus on providing positive embodied experiences and fulfilling the subjective desires of the people that inhabit them.

Acknowledgment

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1 The quarantine was widely spread, each city having its own requirements making the extent of confinement vary across places, but the halt in physical movement and the amount of time and activities done from inside the home was felt by a large number of individuals across the globe.