V!RUS
Revista do Nomads.usp
Nomads.usp Journal
ISSN 2175- 974X
desenhando coexistencia | designing coexistence | sem 2-10

How to quote this text: Firmino, R. J., 2010. An augmented urban life as an appreciation of coexistence. Translated from Portuguese by Anja Pratschke, *V!RUS,* 04, [online] Available at: <http://www.nomads.usp.br/virus/virus04/?sec=5> [Accessed day month year].

An augmented urban life as an appreciation of coexistence

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When I received the invitation to write this text, I had already in mind that it would only be possible to speak about the proposed theme from a reflection of my own career in architecture and urbanism, as I've been thinking about the organization of contemporary urban space.

Therefore, treating coexistence under the filter of another theme as digital cities means a huge convergence of academic and scientific concerns that has permeated my work for several years. This occurs for three main reasons. First, I must say that the understanding of space and its dynamics have always been and will be the great engine of my scientific curiosity, always motivating my searches, my studies and my professional concerns. When I started this trajectory of studies about space, I found another interest: the relationship between space, society and technological advances. With an academic background formed in the 1990s (when things like the Internet and cell phones have become tangible realities in Brazil), this interest has focused on the overwhelming hybridization of our contemporary relations and daily activities with the so-called information and communication technologies (ICT), which finally led me to study issues concerning the development of digital cities.

Secondly, there is no city (material or immaterial) without coexistence, even if it is translated into greater or lesser moments of conflict or social, cultural, economic and political clashes between the various realities that form urban space. Thus, there is no possibility to understand the city without regard to coexistence.

Finally, in seeking a more mature understanding about digital cities or what I prefer to call the augmented city, and considering the coexistence of differences as a principle of the organization of urban life in cities, I was led to approach a set of studies known as social

studies of science and technology, with a specific interest on a theory called Social Construction of Technologies or SCOT (Bijker, 1987). The important thing in this theory to the context of coexistence is the recognition that technology (and, later, the authors widened the spectrum of recognition for facts and artifacts) is the result, in a constant review, of complex historical and socially constructed processes. By promoting such recognition, the authors organized a series of concepts and methodological strategies for studying a particular technical and scientific development under the social constructivist filter. One of these concepts, called interpretative flexibility, explains exactly the complex network of interests, conflicts, alliances and relevant social groups - in other words, the coexistence of similarities and differences - as determinants in an analytical reconstruction of the historical account in the development of a particular fact or artifact.

I want to concentrate on two important aspects of this convergence between coexistences and digital cities: firstly, the formation of a significantly augmented urban life (material and immaterial) by digital technologies and by processes and relationships derived from the miniaturization and dispersion of these technologies; and, secondly, the need to value the coexistence of differences as the core of the reproduction of urban space, and the quest for visibility of the differences as a possibility to prevent that this augmented urban life of the city of the twenty-first century also reproduces an expansion of the inequalities [social and spatial] characteristics of the city of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

So on the first point, I must say that after many years dedicated to the discussions on space, cities, and digital technologies, I think, perhaps oddly, that it no longer makes sense to distinguish the so-called "digital culture" as a separate or special phenomenon of everyday life. What I am saying is that all phenomena (communicational, spatial, cultural, social, economic, and so on) stimulated by the advance of digital technologies, or ICTs, are already an inherent part of their own contemporary culture, and perhaps it is not anymore interesting to differentiate the idea of the tangible city (more traditional) and its digital counterparts, when they are all, in fact, part of one phenomenon of historical and social construction and transformation of the urban milieu and all its manifestations. The notion of augmented space and city is directly related to these arguments.

I believe that relations between the intangible elements of contemporary space (real and digital), and what Lev Manovich (2002) calls a dataspace – or, even, Manuel Castells (1996) would call the space of flows –, are contributing to an unprecedented expansion of our communication skills, of our experience in space. This expansion is supported directly by the increasingly invisible presence of ICT in many (if not all) elements and aspects of everyday life, of urban life. However, it is important to emphasize that this expansion is not only based on the volume or quantity of devices and technologies that surrounds us, but the addition of new collective and qualitative dimensions to space. Our experience in space became more intense, more independent of their characteristics and physical limitations, of their scales, and more

determined by the actions and communications (in form and content) that occur in the reproduction of space itself.

In this sense, the expansion of our immediate contemporary reality - and so, for me, something broader than the idea of the digital city - unlike past experiences (as cults and personal relationships related to religions, to magic and processes of introspective experience such as meditation or hallucinations also provide means for expanding our more immediate material reality), does not depend on a deliberate attitude of the individual or of personal and collective beliefs. The conditions for the expansion of space from the everyday use of ICT are given and are now part of the constitution of the built environment, it is an increasingly reality, present in all places and territories. So, this new form of amplification is given by the very constitution of the contemporary space in its material and immaterial forms, permeated by technological devices increasingly smaller and intangible, which are recombined with forms of traditional materials of the built environment (Mitchell, 1995). This expansion through the connection, through the expansion of our communication skills, implies in the possibility of greater inclusion, greater access, more opportunities for the consideration of differences in space and in the city. Thus, since the technical environment that promotes this expansion of space is not deliberately limited (as several telecom companies are already trying to do by limiting the speed of reproducing content according to different economic or social profiles, that is, an attempt to break the so-called "Net neutrality", which is still different from that already imposed limitation of bandwidth connection), the coexistence of differences is exponentially valued and expands in the augmented space, in the augmented city.

About the second important aspect, the valuing of coexistence of differences, I believe the concept of interpretative flexibility (SCOT) takes into account the diversity of interests and groups involved in any reality or dispute present in the cities. This diversity normally forwards alliances and conflicts, complex relationships of social and spatial networks and should be recognized. The recognition of differences and their coexistence (in the form of conflicts and alliances) gives us the possibility of enhancing the voice of different groups, both economically and politically. Participatory processes and collective organization - which definitely can be enlarged through the very "digital" augmentation of space - is the key to this possibility, because they allow the mapping of voices, their interests, their social, economic and political power, and how they are articulated. I have no intention here to discuss procedures and specific tools or instruments for that to occur, but to understand how the expansion of urban life offers risks and opportunities for the development of co-existence of differences in the city.

When speaking of expansion - of our communication skills, of access, of possibility for spatial experiences - we also see the possibility of consideration of differences as a fundamental principle of coexistence, which definitely has always had and will continue to mark cities and urban life. On the other hand, it is increasingly evident aspects of segmentation in the city[1],

[1] See Graham and Marvin (2001).

and social and spatial segregation in the forms of occupation and exploitation of the urban territory, with special interest in preserving forms of coexistence of similarities, the coexistence of "equals". The ever-present gated communities model clearly demonstrates how these issues reproduce spaces in the city and reflect social and market interests in the construction and transformation of the urban fabric. There is no consideration, in the core idea of gated communities, to differences, to outsiders (other than as a provider of needs and services), to multiplicity and heterogeneity. The gated community is the concentration of similarities: of class, income, habits, culture, ethnicity, and so on. In this scenario, the notion of coexistence that I have advocated (of differences, of diversities) is shown to be profoundly impaired. For Caldeira (2000), throughout history, the city lost the walls and opened its public spaces for all citizens, creating the idea of "open cities", where the differences, heterogeneities coexist openly. The concept of gated community eliminates the different and homogenizes the living in community.

From this, it is also very difficult to think of any tool or project tied to the idea of a digital city (or digital city projects) able, alone, to bring the issue of coexistence between differences back to the main agenda of planners and municipal decision makers, or in other words, of making coexistence a central issue for the defense of urbanity in the contemporary city.

We live in a complex time of possibilities, on the one hand, and trends on the other. The prognosis is not the best for creating such urbanity, considering the manner in which individualism and appreciation of similarities have been reproduced in the way how urban and regional spaces are organized (intra- and inter-urban, intra- and international). The possibilities, however, are open to us and in my opinion, derive from the possibilities of augmentation (and inclusion) of space and spatial relationships supported by the intensive and widespread use of digital technologies or the result of hybridization between space and these technologies (which many prefer to call "digital city"). We can only hope and fight for this augmentation not to expand proportionately the differences of conditions and possibilities, usually shrinked by the controlling and vigilant uses that these technologies also offer; but to increase tolerance to heterogeneity and to make us more able to accept and deal with the coexistence of differences in urban life, real or digital, material or immaterial. Thinking so is to agree with Milton Santos, when he says that "politics should propose the rules of coexistence, not the rules of division." (Santos, 1998)

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