URBAN MEDIATIONS AS LAYERED TOPOGRAPHIES

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INTRODUCTION

An essential initial observation regarding the topic of the call is that there seems to be a general questioning of all stable meanings, categories or identities involved in the conference title. If the mediated city is an experience of persons and not some other entities, then the main elements involved are people, the city and media. None of these terms or concepts can be taken to mean something clearly defined anymore: Deleuze and Guattari's notion of 'desiring machines' or 'machinic assemblages' dissolves the rigid boundaries of the self (Deleuze and Guattari 1987); Latour distributes agency in human and other actors alike (Latour 2007); Pickering locates a 'dance of agency' between human goals and material resistance (Pickering 1995); McLuhan understands media as extensions of a person's body or mind (McLuhan 1964); Don Ihde uses the expression 'embodiment relation' to refer to the incorporation of a tool by the body-mind complex, (Ihde 1990); Hansen calls technogenesis the co-evolving of humanity with technology (Hansen 2006); the complexity of the relationship between a medium and the human body and mind using it is appreciated by Donna Haraway who regards media as materio-semiotic systems that partake both of signifying practices and physical instantiation (Haraway 1991).

A second preliminary observation may refer to a degree of redundancy in the use of the epithet 'mediated' next to the noun 'city' since almost all experiences, especially urban, are mediated to one degree or other and in some way or other. In fact the whole setup of the urban, the built environment together with the cultures and languages it hosts, can all be seen as a dense forest of mediums ranging from thick prophylactics such as walls, to medium strength elements such as a slight bent on a walking path, to thin or practically immaterial expressions such as a body gesture, words that travel from one person's mouth to another person's ear, or an unspoken rule or assumption of what is normally expected.

A third observation is that one's relationship with the urban is of course potentially not influenced solely by one medium but by many in the form of conditions which together form the context which makes a relationship or involvement possible. The presence of more than one condition in any urban experience is quite important since it breaks the rather rigid setup which positions the subject on the one side, another entity on the other and a medium in the middle. It thus makes sense to see the setup as a complex set of relationships rather than a tripartite, one way system of cause and effect, flow or influence.

The presence of many elements, with at least one of them human, leads to a fourth realization: any change in any of the entities or conditions involved will cause a change on the whole configuration rendering any such setup dynamic rather than rigid or stable. Whether any of the entities involved can have a fixed identity or role in the context of such a setup is something to be discussed.

A fifth observation is that a medium, be it material, organic or human, may not only allow or convey information but it may also prohibit, protect, expose, reduce, amplify, purify, contaminate, distort or preserve.

A sixth quite basic observation, if extreme situations such as being held hostage or prisoner are ignored, is that most urban experiences do not render the subject passive but involve various degrees and types of control, agency, freedom or choice.

Based on the above first clarifications, what I intend to do in this paper is examine the meaning of the theme of the call, 'the mediated city', by analysing a number of urban experiences which involve specific persons rather than disembodied subjects.

All the three case studies that follow took or keep taking place in the Dasoudi in Lemesos, a seaside public park with a restaurant, a playground and a pedestrian path running through it. Therefore, in a sense, the overall context is the same yet different situations emerge depending on the specific elements or ingredients that come together in each case. As will be seen, some of the ingredients are features intentionally designed by the architect or planned by the commissioning board, but some others are introduced less formally and yet play an equally important role in the emergence of the observed situation.

EXPERIENCE 1: INVOLUNTARY 'NON-PRESENCE'

Before going home, after a long day at work, I went to the restaurant at Dasoudi Park to have dinner. Being rather late the restaurant was empty, yet I sat on the table next to the pedestrian path running along the restaurant's sea side, despite the fact that the only other table occupied was just behind mine. A man and a woman in their mid-forties were sitting there apparently on their first date. Of what I understood they were both divorced, looking for someone and thus anxious to persuade each other that they indeed had things in common. Unfortunately for me the need to find things to agree on ended up using me and the fact that I was having dinner alone. They both found this rather strange, something neither of them would do. I distinctly remember the man saying: "I could never go to dinner alone in Cyprus. A Cypriot has to be quite lonely if he cannot find at least one friend to join him for dinner. I could see myself doing that if I were a tourist in a foreign place that no one knew me though." My initial feeling of awkwardness was turned into one of embarrassment when I made the mistake of answering my phone in Greek, at which time they realised I was not a tourist but a local who was indeed dining alone. Suddenly I was no more invisible.

So, the medium in this case was an assumption on the part of a group of subjects regarding the identity of another subject in close spatial proximity with them.

EXPERIENCE 2: CLAIMING 'PRESENCE'

Disputes that arise between a lady who sits on one of the benches next to the path running through the Dasoudi Park with her dog on a leash next to her and other walkers who may or may not find this appropriate, demonstrate the inability of architecture, however minimal, to demand one exclusive use, even with the support of signs. (Hadjichristos 2010).

The people who disapprove of her bringing the dog there, point to the fact that, as the sign at the beginning of the path says, dogs are not allowed in the area. She responds by arguing that this is not right especially since this is the only wooded part in the city where dogs can be in a more natural environment.

The lady seems to enjoy this recurring situation as it allows her to point out that having lived abroad for many years she is not a typical Cypriot and finds the way Cypriots treat dogs appalling. By entering into these arguments with other users of the path she seems to be able to kill three birds with one stone: argue for the rights of dog-owners, enter into a conversation with people thus breaking up her loneliness, and letting others know that she is not a typical Cypriot since she has lived abroad.

The fact that the sign forbidding dogs is placed on the side of the path does allow for more than one interpretation: a) dogs are not allowed to enter the area, or, b) dogs are not allowed on the path but may be in the forested area through which the path passes. The fact that the other sign on the same post is forbidding the use of bicycles does not help the first interpretation offered above since bicycles could never be used in the forested area due to the fact that the ground is covered with sand. A dog owner could thus argue that no law is broken if he or she walks on the path while the dog is walking along but off the path, an arrangement frequently seen happening.

What is of interest here is the contrast between the apparent clarity of both the architectural element and the sign on the one hand, and the way the path ends up being used on the other. The strategies used by the designer to produce the path together with the sign seem unable to prevent the emergence of tactics which generate uses that deviate from the ones intended. As De Certeau points out, 'space is a practiced place' where 'the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers' (De Certeau 1984, 117).

EXPERIENCE 3: NOT SUCH A STRAIGHT PATH

The slightly bending path running through the Sadoudi Park and the few benches along it, with the small forest on the one side and the beach on the other host yet another activity which was surely not in the brief given to the designer by the municipality: it seems to be acting like a medium through which different kinds of encounters between strangers are made possible.

As in the previous cases, here too, the characteristics and syntax of the space plays an important role in allowing for such situations to occur. The 1.2 km long path is basically made up of about four practically straight long segments each at a slight angle from the segment before and the one after it. Perhaps the only reason behind such a strategy was to avoid cutting trees as much as possible.

Another element contributing to the creation of the above mentioned opportunity is the fact that, since the beach is only a few meters away, one can sit on the bench half naked, wearing only a swimming suit. The fact that there are not many benches near each other makes it natural rather than suspicious to share a bench with a stranger. It is never too crowded while the length of each segment allows for a person sitting on a bench located in the middle of the distance to be able to observe both ends and have enough time to react accordingly if someone is seen coming. Yet perhaps the most important

ingredient in the making of the phenomenon observed is the fact that the path is used by many groups of people both tourists and locals, young and old.

What all these elements combined allow is for someone such as a 'happily married' Cypriot man to proceed, through taking a very small step each time, towards having a quick intercourse with a tourist or a stranger on a weekday, in a place he may actually be coming with his family in the weekends. He is not the 'kind of person' who would take the big decision to go to a night club, straight or gay, depending on his already acknowledged or not yet, preferences, but even if he has come to terms with his desires whatever those may be, he may not afford the risk of being seen at a space which is clearly labelled and recognized by all for what it is. On the other hand, one could hardly find unethical the decision to go for a swim, take a break from sunbathing under the strong Cypriot sun and sit on a bench a few meters away. Being the only bench on sight, sharing it with a stranger can hardly seem suspicious. It is then only a few meters walk into the bushes for more privacy and a few meters back to the sea where all is literally cleansed and absolved with a swim. Normality is hence restored.

The rather unique characteristic of this setup is that it offers the chance to take decisions and steps incrementally. There is no strong threshold, physical, temporal or other to be crossed, allowing a person to voluntarily assume a role of reduced agency. Potentially related to this is Latour's idea that 'action' should not be understood as a fully conscious 'act' but as a node, a knot or a conglomerate of many unexpected sets of agencies that have to slowly be disentangled (Latour 2007).

CONCLUSION

This paper begun by acknowledging a general questioning of the meaning of the terms found in the call for the conference. Where does the material presented since leave us regarding architecture or the urban, the nature of media, or the formation of contemporary subjectivity?

Katherine Hayles and Todd Gannon find that 'architecture in the present and near-future…incorporates the individual…as a node in a global network of interconnectivity that promiscuously mingles human with non-human agency, local embodiments with global communication flows, virtual overlays with actual buildings and media.(Hayles and Gannon 2013, 495). They propose that 'architecture…is not building, nor is it some privileged subset of building. Rather they 'posit architecture as an emergent property of a range of media, buildings among them (Hayles and Gannon 2013, 484).

Potentially related to these observations is Urry's notion of the 'collage effect' which refers to the juxtaposition of stories as more important than the location of such an event.(Urry, 2000)

Juxtapositions, collages, entanglements, all point to a complexity which can no longer be understood using the system model. Referring to the new world of interfaces offered by the computer, Antoine Picon writes:

> Nothing was more admirable than the systemic arrangement of elements that characterized a Gothic cathedral or a bicycle. Computers and more generally electronic equipment are no longer designed according to these principles. They present themselves as layered assemblages of hardware and software

> somewhat comparable to sandwiches. Even more than the inner organization of the layers, it is often their interfacing that matters today, and this interfacing is more akin to problems of code writing and translation than to structural design (Picon 2013, 502)

What everyday experience shows is that not only interfaces made possible by the new computer technology but even the simplest of setups involve the complexity of 'layered assemblages' where 'code writing and translation' are indeed crucial in the way unique possibilities are created. The specifics of the actualization of such virtualities or potentialities may even depend on fuzzy code writing and bad translations. One of the points this paper makes is that an assumption of normality, especially if it is false, could be seen as an important ingredient in the making of the 'medium' through which different rather unexpected kinds of interaction between the user and the urban environment are rendered possible.

A common element in all three case studies is the path which runs through the park. In each of the stories a different aspect of this quite simple architectural feature is called out to play a role which does not necessarily coincide with that intended by the designer. Such a shift in roles cannot be performed in isolation but always in relation to the roles of the other elements involved. This does not hold only for elements of the built or natural environment but for humans as well. Rather than being seen as observers or the recipients of an experience made possible by a material medium, humans lose their privileged position and become layered ingredients in the making of the medium.

Initially a concept which occurred through my critical approach on the way I painted, 'layering' has even given me options in the way I compose a scientific article: rather than have a text divided in a few sections, I create many more seemingly 'independent' texts which assume a different meaning, depending on the sequence in which they are arranged or read. These can travel not only within a paper but between papers as well. Such is the Layer presented below which talks about some initial observations regarding layering itself:

L116: What if layers can…

The examination of different works from a variety of fields allows for a still far from comprehensive outline of the characteristics of Layering:

- layers are separated by an in-between space which allows for their co-presence;
- each layer may be a pattern, or a composition made up of discrete entities;
- each layer potentially extends indefinitely in its plane;
- the sequence between layers is not fixed. The observer/creator of the setup can bring forth one layer and make others recede;
- no one layer is privileged in any absolute fashion by the setup. The observer/creator may use any hierarchical ordering system he/she desires at any specific moment;
- layers can be opaque, translucent or transparent, or they may be rendered so as desired;
- the observer is not situated outside the setup but is immersed in it and is part of it. It could be said that the observer is part of the in-between space which partly defines spatially the foremost layer;
- time is part of the setup, not in any linear sense but in the sense that change is inherent in the
      setup. Travelling from one layer to another, or shifting positions while staying within the boundaries of the same layer cannot take place while fixed at the same point on the dimension
      of time;
- elements from one layer can "contaminate" the other;
- new layers can be created at will;

- layering can be a physical arrangement available to vision, but is predominantly a conceptual frame of mind, an attitude. This explains why a literally two-dimensional entity may be perceived as layered while a clearly layered three dimensional entity may be perceived as not-layered. The key player in both scenarios is the perceiving/creating subject.

(Hadjichristos, C., *'Layering is not'*. A chapter in '*Textual Layering: Contact, Historicity, Critique*' (A publication of selected papers presented at the IAPL Conference in 2007, forthcoming 2014). Editors: Maria Margaroni, Apostolos Lambropoulos, Christos Hadjichristos.)

In light of the material presented here, a medium, rather than a go-between transmitter, technological or other, can be seen as involving 'topographies' or 'landscapes' or simply threads from different layers which intersect in different ways with each other (at points, lines, or areas) creating the possibility of different emergences each time.

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