

THE MEDIATED CITY CONFERENCE

Architecture_MPS; Ravensbourne; Woodbury University

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THINKING MEDIATION THROUGH THE SPACES OF LOS ANGELES

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INTRODUCTION:

McLuhan and others have suggested our realities are mediated. However the spaces of this mediation have not been very clearly articulated. Our aim here is to look beyond language to urban media and the ways urban realities are historically constructed. McLuhan has alerted us to the way mediation defines the scales, paces, shapes and patterns in human affairs (McLuhan 7), and elaborates its psychic and social consequences (McLuhan 8). Our default understanding of this mediation is of network 'spaces of flows', imagined across a global abstract objective space. But for McLuhan media work from the subject perspective, as extensions of ourselves. How are we to imagine this working and what is the nature and form of this space? A research on the historical formation of the urban space of Los Angeles suggests a resolution to this methodological quandary in relation to urban space. The scales, paces, shapes and patterns of the affairs of Angelinos has developed through a number of technological and spatial phases of technological modernity, new phases and spaces building on phases and spaces which came before, which then exist in mutually supportive and transformative relations with one another. We will describe this process making use of a series of explanatory maps and conclude by suggesting that technology and the spaces of the urban are not the extensions of man in an abstract extensive space but a series of historically formed technological spaces in which technology itself has no teleological agency but is contingent on practical spaces formed to and mediating everyday reality and agency for modern people. Our conclusions build on and adjust those of McLuhan.

MEDIATING REALITIES

McLuhan and others have suggested our realities are mediated. At the same time the spaces of this mediation, and of the realities mediated, have not been very clearly articulated. One reason for this is that we live, partly at least, in language and language, particularly written language, allows us to disengage from space and place. But mediation, and meaning, go beyond language and into the world; there are multiple technologies of mediation, of which language is just one. The 'curtain of objects' (Leroi Gourhan) we surround ourselves with is one manifestation of more situated mediation; another is physical urbanisation – historical processes of definition of territory and city – which mediate our place in the world. This expansion also begins to help us understand the nature of mediating technologies, what their spaces might be and how they might be formed.

According to McLuhan mediation defines the scales, paces, shapes and patterns in human affairs (McLuhan 7) with psychic and social consequences (McLuhan 8). Our senses are extended in media but these are not simply physiological and neurological capacities but also go out in the world by defining phenomena of place, scale, identity and much more besides. For McLuhan media extend ourselves but we tend to imagine this mediation against the background of an absolute extensive space. These extensive spaces are instead both subject-centred and products of historical processes of definition and construction. We see this in

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relation to urbanised territory which we propose is a technology (or technologies) of human delocalisation and extension into the world. We report here on a research on the historical formation of the urban space of Los Angeles to show how the scales, paces, shapes and patterns of the affairs of Angelinos has developed through a number of technological and spatial phases of modernity; new phases and spaces building on phases and spaces which came before in imbrications in which they exist in mutually interactive relations with each other. These spaces exist as relational topologies which embody place knowledge (of politics like neighbourhood, city, region etc. along with their normative interrelations and scales) in the physical structures of urban fabrics.

We sense the world – and ourselves – through technologies and the spaces they form. We define and identify places and things depending the ways our relations to them and their relations to each other are mediated and configured. The technologies we describe are not simply those of the motor apparatus of mobility, not just the automobiles, planes, trains, trams and busses of the modern city, but are the networked means through which the world in its delocalised forms (at various scales of neighbourhood, city, region, state, globe and so on) appears to us. As technologically mediated people we are no longer tied to locality but use network forms embedded equally in the world and in our knowledge of the world to both think and find our way through the world. In the modern era the grip of these media has if anything tightened as cities have been formed to accommodate the logistics of first industrial and then post-industrial production and social reproduction, and as nation states have been formed as the territorial dimensions of national societies and economies, and as players in global relations of power.

We live nonetheless in a world which is not a ‘technological totalisation’. Instead technology is enrolled contingently to incorporate the world in different ways and at different scales. These technological incorporations are social in that they are affordances that can be used and appropriated within and across social groups that have access to them. They also begin to define the spatialisation of particular forms of urban social – industrial for example, or suburban – life.

We will describe this process making use of a series of explanatory maps and conclude by suggesting that technology and the spaces of the urban are not so much the extensions of man in an extensive space as a series of historically formed topological spaces in which technology has no autonomous categorical status or teleological role but whose role is contingent on the constructed spaces that mediate everyday realities for modern people.

TECHNIQUE AND MILIEU

Medium is also *milieu* – the in-between but also the environment. We are *enviromed* in media and it is a character of environment that it does not appear to us, what appears are the objects *milieu* mediates to us, the subject. McLuhan was not the first to see this. We first review a series of classic studies to expand the idea of medium and introduce the idea of environment.

For Aristotle the middle term in the syllogism:

Every human is mortal
Socrates is a human
Therefore Socrates is mortal

mediates between ‘Socrates’ and ‘mortal’. The middle term mediates but then disappears having fulfilled its mediating function. Frederick Jameson spoke of the ‘vanishing mediator’ (Jameson). The ‘vanishing’ is a product of the fact we tend not to see media but through

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media: we don't see the telescope, we see the stars, and we don't see the particle detector, we see the particles. And the more 'environmental' media are, the more complete the 'vanishing' they effect.

Aristotle's example is dialogical, and there is a sense in which we live in language and language is our environment. But in a more original phenomenological sense we live in the world and our world is mediated by way of world forming and mediating technologies, language being just one of these. What is mediated is the object in a <subject–mediating technology–object> relation. What is 'technology' in this relation? Phenomenologically oriented thinkers like Ian Hacking, Peter Galison, Don Ihde, Andrew Feenberg, and others have focussed on technologies of seeing. Microscopes, telescopes and other optical devices need to be seen as equipment *plus* observer and observed. The observer must be included because an object is only an object to the subject and in the life and practice of that subject. Don Ihde argues that our scientific practice is just as much a part of our lifeworld as any other kind of practice and that Galileo *needed a telescope* rather than any scientific 'method' or 'attitude' to make his discoveries (Ihde). There is no loss of 'objectivity' in this practice: both subject and object are perfectly *real*, while what they *mean* is mediated in the relation (Read 2012).

Taking it another step towards *environment*, Foucault's Panopticon is the exemplary case. The guard observes the prisoner through the mediating technology of the Panopticon – a technological space in the form of an architectural construction and design for structuring *seeing* by intermediating subject-object relations. Media may be technical extensions of our senses but they are more profoundly also the spaces through which we see, know and do things.

TECHNOLOGICAL SPACES

Have we got to the bottom of medium and environment yet? The last classic case is the oak tree of the ecologist Jakob von Uexküll, inhabited in different ways by a bark beetle, an owl, a squirrel, an ant, a bird and a fox (Uexküll). The oak tree supports not just various animals but also many of the objects and places (acorns, branches, bark, trunk, roots and fissures and openings in them) that feature centrally in the lives of these creatures. In fact the tree is not even a tree to them: the tree (and some of its neighbours) is again medium and milieu – 'technical support' for the intermediation of subjects and objects. For these creatures there is a space or *infrastructure* of subjects and their significant objects and places within reach. Apparently we should not be too strict about what we call a technological space – a better word may be infrastructure – and should rather consider the character of the *space* produced.

It is this space that archaeologists map when they excavate an ancient dwelling. It is a differently scaled but analogous space they map when they excavate an ancient town. These spaces locate significant objects and places, not on an already produced map in orthographic projection, but in the projected everyday shared lives and practices of a household in the first case and an urban community in the second. Cartographic space is produced in order to mediate a modern, scientific and analytical view on the world. This has nothing to do with this map which enables and represents life and knowledge as it is lived. Our common understanding of this other map and space as cognitive or subjective (and therefore prone to error) is a misunderstanding. This map is about point of view certainly but has nothing to do with any mental interiority; instead it is about how subject positions relate to objects through media in the world.

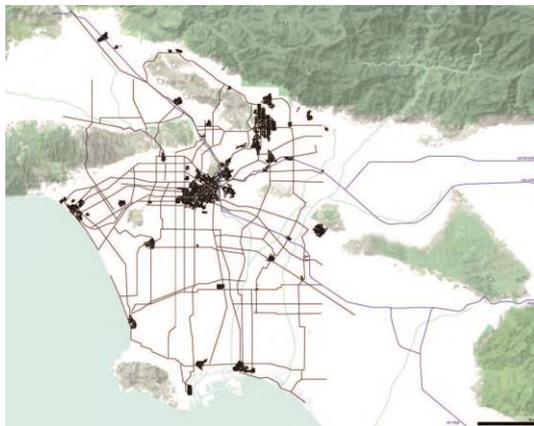
The meaning space of Los Angeles in 1890 was not much different in principle to the ancient town the archaeologists excavated. Significant places like homes, workplaces, shops and civic

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buildings are dispersed over a generally walkable area and the medium by which one knew where things were and moved from the one to the other was a very ancient urban technology – the street grid scaled to the pedestrian.

What about more modern cities? Cities acquired modern movement technologies when they grew beyond the reach of pedestrian movement in the industrial era. Again we should think less much about the specific technologies than about the mediating spaces produced. In LA the streetcar network had by 1940 established a new grid, at a new urban scale, laid over the old pedestrian grid. The objects and places it related were the streetcar suburbs that had been developed oriented to this space, along with an expanded downtown intensified by its incorporation in this new space. The lives and practices of Angelinos had appropriated and accommodated themselves to a new space and scale.



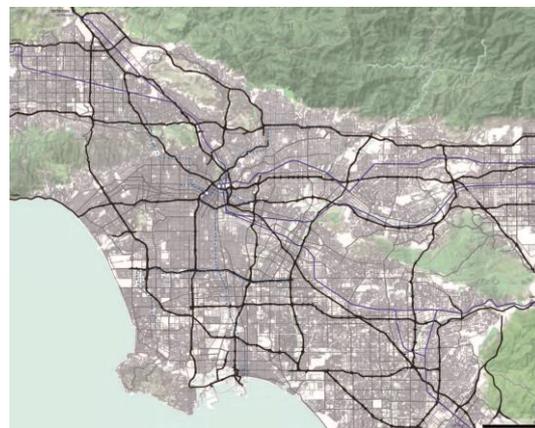
1890: a pedestrian space



1940: a streetcar space



1970: an automobile space



2010: an automobile space

Lives and practices appropriated and accommodated themselves to an even larger automobile space with the building of the freeway network after the second world war. Urban development responded and automobile suburbs were built oriented on this space. What Reyner Banham called Autopia was a coherent space – “a single comprehensible place, a coherent state of mind, a complete way of life” (Banham 1978:213) and a different space again to a streetcar centred space. Modern technology is a part of our lifeworlds. In their modern forms, the new urban spaces have extended the capabilities of the city, in terms of size, speed and organisational potentials and have allowed us to live beyond the local in spaces that allow us to act in and know that beyond in the local.

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INTENSIFYING PLACES

Each of these spaces is new, state of the art when it is built, and is inscribed over the one that came before. Each of them is whole and coherent and mediates a hegemonic orientation on and view of its own world. Each extends our capacities and those of the city itself by making the non-local available and known to us. The extended city is known and available to us through streetcar or automobile spaces. Beyond that and present already in trading, pilgrimage and other routes the world is available and known through yet larger technological spaces. Today airline and a multitude of other global technological spaces allow us to know the world and act in it in faster and even more efficient ways. But previous spaces are not eliminated. They may be themselves transformed and intensified by new spaces, especially when these are dominant and establish new urban ways of life and culture. New spaces and ways of life may appropriate and transform old ones as significant places in their own orbits.

We can see the pedestrian oriented downtown of LA going through a number of intensification and culture related changes as the streetcar and then the automobile are incorporated as new spaces for everyday urban lives and cultures. The pedestrian downtown becomes a node in first streetcar and then automobile spaces, becoming part of these spaces and taking on their character while remaining pedestrian spaces in their own right. The history of these successive incorporations in wider non-local spaces can be read in local functional and material transformations as well as in transformations in the intensity of use of the downtown.



1888: a pedestrian centre

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1929: an intensified pedestrian centre in a streetcar space



1970: an intensified pedestrian centre in an automobile space



2011: an intensified pedestrian centre in automobile and global financial spaces

Of course we should also consider inter-urban relations which have also affected and made a node of LA downtown, like other downtowns worldwide, with the expansion of the global

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financial sector since the 1980s. Communication, global production logistics, financial exchange and increases in air traffic have all played roles.

A TECHNOLOGY OF LOCATION?

What senses do we extend with the sense technologies of the city? The first mistake we make in thinking about this is to conflate the question directly with the technology in question. Our senses of speed and orientation may be affected of course, but what is being constructed here first of all is something we were already constructing with trade and pilgrimage routes. This is our sense of our place in the world and a sense of the world as an availability of places towards which and to which we can act. Concomitant to this sense is a practical sense of the scales of the world. We may wish to find our way to Santa Monica, or to Beijing. Each of these places becomes available to us through spaces we have constructed and consolidated historically and technically. The point about scale is instructive. Scale is normally understood to be a highly abstract concept. Some (Marston et al) doubt that scale exists at all outside of this abstraction and in the world. What we have suggested here is that scale is embedded in the constructions we have made technically and historically and that these constructions, besides embedding scale, embed places themselves in their conceptual, representative forms. Places are after all thoroughly embedded in the technics of these spaces as stops on a streetcar network or destinations in an airline network. We need of course to understand our constructions as real, but once we do this we may begin to suspect that there is no abstraction or concept in language that is not also to be found back somewhere in the world.

This place-structure is not the same as the cartographic map and the world is not the map we use to analyse it. Conversely people who cannot read maps have no trouble understanding where Beijing is or how to get there. The structure is a set of normative concepts with their interrelationships, and with their embodiment, as concepts and relations, in the historically and technically constructed world. The apparent subtlety of this point points to a momentous misunderstanding about location and about how we construct, know and engage both practically and scientifically with our geographical world. It points also to the vast constructed background 'beyond language', a world that is incorporated into language without revealing its sources because language is transportable. Peter Taylor contrasted the view of Jean Gottmann, who suggested that if the world was simply a smooth sphere there would be no need for the discipline of geography, with that of William Bunge who argued that with all the ephemeral detail out of the way the spatial laws of geography could operate transparently. The contrast is of a complex, organised material world on the one hand and a rather simple celestial or cerebral world on the other. The main point here is that Bunge's 'theory' operates in an already formed ideal and 'absolute' space (and time) whereas Gottmann's human and urban geography is an historical accretion of worldly spaces.

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