Media Art and the Urban Environment
FUTURE CITY Volume 5

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Future City Description
As of 2008, for the first time in human history, half of the world’s population now live in cities. And with concerns about issues such as climate change, energy supply and environmental health receiving increasing political attention, interest in the sustainable development of our future cities has grown dramatically.

Yet despite a wealth of literature on green architecture, evidence-based design and sustainable planning, only a fraction of the current literature successfully integrates the necessary theory and practice from across the full range of relevant disciplines.

Springer’s Future City series combines expertise from designers, and from natural and social scientists, to discuss the wide range of issues facing the architects, planners, developers and inhabitants of the world’s future cities. Its aim is to encourage the integration of ecological theory into the aesthetic, social and practical realities of contemporary urban development.

More information about this series at http://www.springer.com/series/8178
Media Art and the Urban Environment

Engendering Public Engagement with Urban Ecology

Springer
Preface

More than half the residents of the globe now live in cities, and must strive to flourish in densely crowded urban environments characterized by inequality, social conflict and enormous potential for growth and change. New media artists working in urban settings are stimulating awareness, altering our perceptions of, and relationships with, urban space though their digital inventions and interventions. These innovations can be used in the development of future practices for helping residents, not only cope with the daily challenges created by urban environment, but also flourish despite the inequality, spatial density, social conflict, and disorganization that are symptomatic of cities.

The purpose of this book is to formally appraise the ways new media artists engage urban ecology. It gathers together essays from artists, architects, urban planners, and critical theorists to consider these new modes of seeing, representing, and connecting within the urban setting. What makes this book unique is that it spotlights artists instead of technologists as innovators and agents of technological change. Because these individuals create socially motivated artwork, they possess a clear understanding of the societal issues and values they wish to address. And because these artists know how to exploit state-of-the-art technology, they can create artworks that transcend the technology’s original purpose, thus expanding the language of environmental engagement.

For the purpose of this volume urban ecology may be defined in a two-fold way. From the natural science perspective, urban ecology investigates the biological structures and environmental processes that support them in urban spaces. Here, urban ecology focuses on plant populations, animal communities, and environmental effects, including human, on them. A complementary definition takes an anthropocentric view where humans are at its center. The field of urban

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ecology then expands its emphasis to the improvement of living conditions for
human residents as part of an augmented characterization of an ecosystem that
includes theories from social and planning sciences.

This volume is composed of 14 chapters distributed across three general areas:
urban ecology and its engagement, reimagining and transforming the city, and the
view from the streets.

In the first chapter, “Toward an Ecological Urbanism: Public Engagement in
Contemporary Art Practice,” Maria Michails surveys a diversity of artists working
within the urban environment, considering artworks and projects designed to
inspire community awareness and stewardship of urban ecological systems. In
Chap. 2, “Exploring Environmental Stewardship Through Data-Driven Practices,”
Tega Brain and Jodi Newcombe expand on Michails survey by exploring the
strategies that artists and designers employ to engage urban audiences. In particular,
they assess how data from smart cities may be used to create artworks that can
recast residents’ understanding of urban space. Grisha Colemana and Daragh Byrne
follow with a discussion of how arts-driven processes can be used to bridge artistic
practice and research in “Experiential Ecologies: A Transdisciplinary Framework
for Embodiment and Simulacra,” by considering how varied forms of ecological
information can be combined to create foundations for exhibition, engagement and
performance. These chapters are complemented by two chapters in which artists
discuss their work. In Chap. 4, “Uncultivated: an Evolutionary Drama in the Urban
Environment,” Lynn Cazabon explores how her public art project documenting wild
plants in urban landscapes with geo-referenced photographs and public displays
increases awareness of overlooked plant life. In “Alone Together in the Dark:
Horror Based Artworks and Fan Participation in Urban and Extra-Urban Space,”
Jillian McDonald recounts several projects in which the performances of horror
fans in urban and rural stimulates new awareness of, and conversations about, the
environment and society.

Urban information, its representation, perception, and use are important issues
in the transformation of urban ecology. In Chap. 6, “Mobile Maps of Chameleonic
Cities: Urban Cartographies and Methodological Procedures and Experiences,” by
Pedro Marra and Carmen Aroztegui Massera, explore how temporality and spatiality
are constructed in contemporary cities. By investigating the flow of capital, the
staging of mega urban events such as Brazil’s World Cup, and the use of artistic
interventions, they propose methods for better understanding urban mobility and
enabling greater residential participation in its evolution. Alice Arnold follows
in Chap. 7 with “Electric Signs,” a discussion of the background behind her
documentary film of the same name. At its core, the chapter considers urban space,
the transformation of the ecological dynamics of major international cities though
corporate installation of large LED displays, and the socio-political ramifications of
these transformations. The transformation of urban space is reflected upon as well
in Chap. 8 by Annette Weintraub. “Overload/Absence: The Collapse of Space to
Surface in Representations of Urban Space” considers the rapid diminishment of
urban public space through gentrification and privatization, and its transformation
through mediazation. By comparing hyperactive urban media zones with the
numbingly bland façades of contemporary urban architecture, Weintraub elucidates the perceptual shift from urban space to surface, and explores how surfaces have been utilized to generate new representations of urban space. In “Design as Topology: U-City,” Ulrik Ekman further explores the dynamic transformations of urban space by discussing the design of a busy traffic intersection in the South Korean u-city (ubiquitous city) Songdo as a topological problem. The emergence of u-cities or smart cities creates challenges and opportunities for an emergent, mobile, and globally connected citizenry, and the technological substrate that must be developed to support it. With a focus on the nature of a single traffic intersection, Ekman ferrets out the layers of design issues anticipated to support the dynamic flow of information and flow of people, focusing on a critical comparative discussion of a variety of ontological and epistemological approaches to design as topology, including cultural theory and technical studies. In Chap. 10, “The Emergent City: 2004–2012,” the artist Stanza complements Ekman’s presentation by discussing how his visual artworks are informed by critical analysis of city spaces. As an artist who designs urban experiments and gathers data through networks of sensors and video cameras, he captures the dynamic patterns of urban dwellers and re-imagines them as information visualizations.

The remaining four chapters consider street art and its ability to engage urban residents. Francis Marchese’s chapter, “The Art of Urban Engagement,” reviews how digital media artists have exploited pervasive technologies to explore urban ecology. By their interventions, they challenge a city’s inhabitants to reconsider their daily urban experiences. Vaughn Whitney Garland discusses how new online community collaborations transform urban sites into spaces for new art in Chap. 12, “Our Place on That Wall: Community Online Art Projects.” In particular, he focuses on the nature of online community art projects as works orchestrated by artists exercising the interconnected and participatory nature of the Internet. Brian A. Brown argues in “Digitized Street Art,” that ‘street art’ is an ephemeral means of artistic expression dependent upon the whim of the urban environment for its display, and relies on digital technologies for its documentation and dissemination, thus transforming urban street artists into digital artists. Finally, the artist Malin Abrahamsson considers her temporary public art installation, “Solar Cycle 24: 15 Nightly Projections,” which emphasizes place-making and digital aesthetics in the urban environment. Installed in a storefront, the vibrant, projected visualizations engaged New York City residents through a simulation of the aurora borealis, a phenomenon visible around the North and South Poles.
I am extremely grateful to have had the opportunity to work with the contributors to this volume throughout its preparation. Their insights, energy, and creativity have contributed to the creation of a book which I hope readers will find both stimulating and thoughtful. I would also like to thank the editors at Springer-Verlag, especially Simon Rees and Wayne Wheeler, for their support of this project.
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