

Digital Homelessness and *L'Espace Internet*

A dispatch on the arts, technologies and cultures in the metropolitan community served by the Paris airports.

by Meredith Hoy

In 1960s Paris the Situationist strategy of the *dérive* took as its point of entry the premise that modern urban space (the architectural manifestation of enlightenment rationality) should facilitate clear lines of sight. Haussmann's Paris, with its wide boulevards and uniform buildings, is built on the principle of visibility: the city is organized according to the goal of bringing to light structure and organization in place of darkness, chaos and occlusion. Grids of visibility facilitate hygiene, and central perspective encourages surveillance. Visibility leads to clarity, where clarity is both a contributor to knowledge and an indicator of power. That which is clear is knowable and true (note that "I see" is idiomatically equivalent to "I know").

In Paris, the catalyst for this increased visibility was architecture itself, both at the macro (the placement of buildings on the grid) and micro (the form and aesthetic of the buildings themselves) levels. Low buildings and wide boulevards enable the eye to traverse the cityscape freely, but the

aesthetic and commercial goals behind the construction of the buildings also exerted control over the desires and movements produced by particular (usually consumerist) forms of visual activity encouraged by Haussmann's architecture.

In an apparent contrast, the Internet creates a largely invisible architecture. But despite Internet architecture's invisibility it is necessary to realize that digital space is physical, even if its physicality manifests on an invisible register. On one level, electronic connectivity affects our behavior, communications and metaphors for describing the world and producing lived space. But moreover, early biological science recognized that electricity is a primary conduit of "life." Physical processes have frequencies, which manifest themselves in movement, sound, etc. Digital phenomena are lifelike, or at least physical, insofar as they are electrical. Each zero-one combination refers to a switch that is either "on" or "off." Digital media thus inherently enter into discourses of power, where "power" comes from an electrical switch turned to the "on" position. Power does not merely *affect* materiality; it is in itself fundamentally material. By extension, if cyberspace is a phenomenon based on the electrical configuration of power, it is also physical. Cyberspace cannot be imagined apart from architecture insofar as it creates webs, networks and places out of the building materials of electrical power. Each time a digital traceroute is created, it manifests a new set of electronic signals and thus engenders a new electronic landscape. The importance of digital cartography is that it actually *creates a territory*, or leads, instead of merely following a territory that already exists.

While Haussmann built a city that exemplified the centrality of visibility in modern culture, the Internet represents a more subtle 21st-century Haussmannization that adds to existing territories without demolition or enforced homelessness. This architecture is based on principles of connectivity rather than visibility, of decentralized webs that are not without their own threats of surveillance, but a surveillance based on information transmission rather than retinal vision.

In my recent state of "digital homelessness" on the European new media festival circuit, I had rapidly become accustomed to easy wi-fi access at festival sites, and was dismayed to find that

at my new job at La Parc Vilette in Paris, you do not get supersized wi-fi with your French work permit. Having sent an emergency message to a French hacker friend, I discovered to my disappointment that if one wants free street wi-fi, it is necessary to go to the 20th arrondissement, where there is a massive wi-fi network that is far more powerful, with a greater range, than commercial networks.

The frenzy among the digital homeless new media folks to find wi-fi is the frenzy to find a familiar architecture, a base, a hub, a *place*. It is often remarked by conference speakers that they are well aware that conference attendees constantly multitask during sessions, keeping up contacts, checking references, chatting, e-mailing. To me, this is less about the constant craving for distraction than about our need to have a sense of home-by-proxy, of "placial" relevance. Numerous studies have been conducted on the subject of space and place, where space is often conceived as open, abstract, mathematical and only distantly phenomenological. Place, by contrast, is inhabited—space made home. The experience of being connected is one of finding elements of home in strange surroundings; connectivity forestalls loneliness, while of course the loss of connectivity, once one has been used to having it, can itself provoke psychological near-collapse.

In this instance in Paris, my (suspiciously goal-directed) *flânerie* finally brought me to the edge of the 20th arrondissement. But in my quest for the holy wi-fi grail of Paris, I had failed to take into account the invisibility of wireless infrastructure. In the 19th century, which can seem occasionally all too recent in social memory, unchaperoned female streetwalkers were, well, just what the name implies. And moreover, I already have been warned several times by locals to keep an extra-strict eye, and hand, on my personal belongings. Thus, had I been less vulnerable, I could have more easily trolled the streets for errant wireless signals. Beyond the fear of mugging, however, I also have been made aware that police in Paris will not hesitate to arrest and fine network squatters in legitimately paid-for wireless neighborhoods.

Searching for wi-fi hot spots is something akin to searching for the elusive Benjaminian *passage*, a much older architectural form that nevertheless resonates with the invisible architecture

of electronic grids and wireless hot spots. For Benjamin, the *passages* are a kind of inverted architectural space. They are both inside and outside, closed and spectacular in themselves. Whereas they once offered splendid views of goods to desire, many of them are now rundown, occasionally remembered, pungent with the leftover smells that are bound to occur in any enclosed yet still-public space. Both the *passages* and wi-fi hot spots are pathways to other architectures and architectural (and thus spatial or “placial”) structures in themselves. They are difficult to find and become the object of fascination for very particular groups of people—mythologists, philosophy junkies, poetic cartographers of past and future.

In the back of a storefront on the outskirts of Paris there is a door to a small room over which a simple black-and-white sign in a nondescript font reads “*Espace Internet*.” Is this tiny dark room the real space of cybertopia? Many, if not most, Internet cafes are cramped, aesthetically displeasing, without a shred of attention paid to ambience or energy. Is it so automatically assumed that users of cyberspace abandon their corporeal selves to zone out (into) Internet fantasy-land? These Internet ghettos deliver a blunt retort to Haussmann’s broad vistas, the equivalent of sociopolitical power lines.

L’espace internet, here, is definitively a space, but a hidden space, a *passage* that is not merely a tunnel from one space to another, but a place one enters and in which one lingers. We see in these *espaces* that the Internet is neither a utopian savior of individual freedoms or alternate identities, nor an insidious perpetrator of centralized power structures or panoptic surveillance. *L’espace internet* is a bluntly lettered sign over a small, nondescript room in a sidestreet storefront. *L’espace internet* is also the invisible hot spot, the promise of electronic *frisson*, the new telos of psycho-geography.

Finally, a problem arises; for the digital homeless, searching for place, is it truly possible to enact a digital *flanerie*, a simultaneous *dérive* and a search for connection? Is it possible ever to follow the example of the *fla-*

neur when searching for *L’espace internet*? Toting an open laptop is a distinctly undandy-ish behavior, and only can be interpreted as desperate, ostentatious or merely far too pointedly interested. However, I also can say that setting up new rules of the game—pointing a bloodhound’s nose to the 20th arrondissement, which is off my usual beaten track in the city of Paris—also shifted my experience of the city’s urban architecture, topology and topography. The quality and subject matter of my personal encounters shifted: When a kindly soul spied me furtively opening my laptop in front of a store advertising its wi-fi hot spot, I was invited into a metallurgists’ co-op to use their wi-fi; I found myself in the midst of a wedding party in a quiet corner of a park near the Père-Lachaise cemetery where it seemed safe enough to open a laptop; and so forth. If the game was to find the free network in the 20th arrondissement, I did not succeed, but I found myself coming upon emotional architectures: bubbles of nostalgia for well-known or newly remembered stomping grounds in Paris—psycho-geographical hot spots, as it were—excitement at the discovery of new squares; flashes of insight as I stumbled upon a passage and other

architectural live links between Haussmann’s Paris and the invisible architectures of electronic urban space. Finally, the search for digital placement and *L’espace internet* is less about the technology itself than about the device as a procurer or a catalyst of experience. My technologically motivated *dérive* proved to be an instance of cartopoiesis—of using existing elements of Parisian concrete and electrical architecture and recombining them into a new embodied cartography of Paris. *L’espace wi-fi*: an informatic and cartographic landscape based not on unilateral social control, but on sensation, emotional magnetism, the social histories of space, place, visuality, architecture . . .

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If you are interested in writing an “After Midnight” column on your virtual or physical city, send a 100-word summary of the basic idea to Greg Niemeyer at <leo@mitpress.mit.edu>.

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