

Chapter 4

The Urban Communication Infrastructure: Global Connection and Local Detachment

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ABSTRACT

Does Wi-Fi, the Internet, the mobile phone, satellite communication, the I-Pod, flat screen television, wireless devices, Skype, Face Book, Twitter, virtual communities, laptops, Kindle, alter a sense of place and attachment? This area of exploration is absent not only in the areas of urban planning and design, but also other types of places such as schools and even the home where communication technologies are especially varied and proliferate. This chapter will propose a taxonomy of the relationship of people to places in a media rich environment suggesting a continuum ranging from place attachment through a sense of a-location. The taxonomy offers a classification system clarifying the need to examine the impact of media technologies on the people/environment relationship. This reflects not only how people's use of space and place have changed as a result of the proliferation of laptops and I-phones, but also what this means in terms of how they connect or disconnect with their physical surroundings.

INTRODUCTION

"The city, the city my Dear Brutus – stick to that and live in its full light. Residence elsewhere, as I made up my mind in early life, is mere eclipse and obscurity to those whose energy is capable of shining in Rome."

Marcus Tullius Cicero

The introduction of innovation is associated with sense of apprehension and uncertainty. In the 15th century uncertainty surrounded the impact of moveable type upon the nature of knowledge and worship. Each new medium is perceived by some as a threat to the more traditional political, religious, economic and media institutions. Simultaneously, each new media invention altered the form and function of cities and communities. Cities function as a medium of communication in so far that messages are carried through communi-

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cation in those spaces. These spaces are arguably among the oldest forms of communication and media. Yet cities have fallen on hard times. The detrimental impact of suburban sprawl can be seen on the economic, environmental and vibrancy of social life in cities. Cities struggle with the rise of privatization of formerly public spaces including streets and parks; increasing surveillance, the demise of public space, decreasing tax base along with aging infrastructure, the loss of the small shop, the rise of the mall, and increasing fear of life on the street. Harold Innis saw a continual process of decentralization and recentralization with small communities trying to outrun metropolitan influences only to be absorbed back into it later (Carey, 1992, p. 155). Digital media arise at a critical time for cities. In 1900, only 10% of the human population lived in cities, while today it's 50%. Added to that the expectation that it will reach 75% by 2050, and there's just cause for a thorough reevaluation of our urban environments.

URBAN COMMUNICATION

The city as an economic, social, and iconic symbol of national prosperity has been and continues to be under scrutiny by economists, geographers, sociologists, urbanists, planners and environmental psychologists. Traditionally, cities have been viewed as financial, commercial, and industrial entities. There is, however, a growing body of scholarship examining urban, suburban, and rural communication. This work reflects both an emergent and interdisciplinary field. The advantage of this perspective is that it provides a fresh perspective from which to view the city and its transformation. The communication perspective provides a parallax or different way of observing and analyzing the urban environment. Foregrounding communication in the study of urban landscapes is not revolutionary given that the essence of the city is community, a relationship

to communication underscored by the etymology of the words.

Communication studies offer valuable perspectives and methodologies for the examination of the urban and suburban life conceptualizing the city as a combinative environment of interpersonal interaction, media landscape of spaces, places and communication texts. Communication scholars have addressed how the understanding of urban and suburban life are reflected in and shaped by media coverage or representations in factual or fictional contexts. Some have turned to the close analysis of media texts to learn about urban and suburban life.

Two volumes, in particular, *The Urban Communication Reader* (Burd et al, 2007) and *Urban Communication: Production, Text, Context* (Gibson & Lowes, 2006) typify the direction of the communication perspective. *The Urban Communication Reader* represents research in rhetoric, media studies, political communication, health communication, organizational communication, legal communication, visual communication, conflict resolution, and cultural studies. The driving force of this volume is a tacit agreement for the increasing need “for balance between the traditional geographic community and the newer virtual multimedia-constructed communities, and the unintended and dysfunctional consequences of the new communication technologies and digital environments” (Burd et. al, p. 2).

Gibson and Lowes show how urban communication grows from interdisciplinary specialties of communication and urban studies. This volume seeks to bridge the research of two very specific areas of scholarship, (Gibson & Lowes, 2006, p 5). The city as text is featured, as are the rhetorical dimensions of city. The relationship between urban growth and consumerism of “fantasy cities” is a contrasted with urban growth rooted in cultural institutions or vibrant “no-bohemian” art-filled neighborhoods.

Andrew Wood, Professor of Communication at San José State University explores iconic signage

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