

Being @

Introduction

In the past decade, the rapid proliferation of computers and networked communication technologies has opened up a new opportunity that did not exist in the past: the opportunity to experience a new kind of space, a space that is real but immaterial, where the imaginary can be shown without the need or support of concrete matter. We are entering a new era in our everyday interaction with the world, “an era of electronically extended bodies living at intersection points of the physical and virtual worlds” (Mitchell, 1995, p.24). A new kind of space merging with our common sense of reality, the reality of experiencing the computer mediated domain of Cyberspace.

The deployment of network communication technologies has seen access points to the computer mediated space of cyberspace integrated into the built environment. Under the latent paradigm of “ubiquitous computing” (Weiser, 1991) it is proposed that access points of interface technologies, “weave themselves into the fabric of everyday life until they are indistinguishable from it” (Weiser, 1991, p.94). The first signs of living in a ubiquitous computing environment can be recognised within media based cultures, in our everyday interaction with the world. A world that involve operating in a state of parallel spatial flux between digital and corporeal domains. We can be contacted at both physical and digital addresses, our digital shadows are cast into ‘information space’ each and every instance we complete an electronic transaction, pass through foreign countries, or enter digitally primed buildings.

We are “increasingly dependant on such technology to sustain our social and cultural reality. They are part of being human in our time” (Anders, 2001 p59). Beyond individualistic experience, cyberspace also offers a communal mind space, a collaborative environment within which we are perpetually active. We are being entertained ‘there,’ we are educated ‘there’, we meet ‘there’ and we have sex ‘there’. These intangible but real social experiences take place within the virtuality of computer meditated space. We have reached a point within media based societies where we “live between two realms: our physical environment and cyberspace” (Ishii, Ullmer, 1997, p.4).

As we enter this era of parallel spatial realities, everyday experience occurs in environments outside of corporeal space at an increasing rate. Cyberspace has evolved into more than just another means of communication; it has become a destination in and of itself, emerging as an alternative kind of space where everyday economic, cultural, educational and other human activities occur. It is has become destination without physical location.

As we enter the dis-location of cyberspace, we leave our bodies behind, as cyberspace has no inherent concern for the corporeal. Our increasing involvement within this parallel space suggests that we are continuing to rupture out of our bodies as “we are thrown into new spatiotemporal terms compounding an already dualist-schizo condition” (Perella, 1995, p.84).

Within this new form of virtual space, we continue to apply understandings of corporeal world experience. Our use of spatial metaphors in our everyday encounters with the information space of bits and bytes suggests that spatial thought based on established conceptions of space, time and body form the foundation for our understanding of these new digital environments (Lakoff, Johnson, 1980). When operating within a digital environment, we attempt to locate and navigate the spatial and incorporeal qualities of intangible matter using cognitive metaphors to grasp conditions that appear to be similar to corporeal experience but in fact lack matter in the traditional sense. The notion of 'opening' a folder, of personalising our 'desktops', 'closing' a 'window' and 'moving' a file are all metaphors demonstrating this transfer. All be it on the flatness of a two dimensional graphical user interface (GUI), these metaphors attempt to give the virtual experience in the digital realm a substance or a location, if not in concrete space, then at least in the space of the mind. Despite our dual spatial citizenship, the absence of seamless couplings between these parallel existences leaves a great divide between the worlds of bits and atoms. At the present, we are torn between these parallel but disjoint spaces (Ishii, Ullmer 2002).

This thesis operates in an unstable zone that bridges these two realms. The research applies theoretical findings into the production of an experiential system, a system that operates across the corporeality of the physical environment and the metaphysical realm of a cyber-spatial environment. The research proposes that cyberspace can be conceptualised as a representation

of spatial experience figured upon 'being-in-the-world' (a phenomenological paradigm). It aims to locate, define and operate within and across the liminal zone, the threshold between corporeal space experience and computer mediated space. This zone, in terms of spatiality, is framed as the experience of the interface, the dematerialising horizon of human being and place (Perella, 1995). Interface becomes the point of departure from corporeal into the metaphysical dimensions of cyber-spatiality.

The virtuality of the space of computing, and of inscription more generally, is transforming at least in part how we understand what it is to be in space (Grosz, 2001 p.87).

The purpose of this thesis is not to question what is real, nor attempt to answer the age-old question of what defines space, but to explore the spatiality of "Being", that of Heidegger's "Dasein" (Being-there) in light of contemporary digital technology. It aims to blend operations specific to a cyber spatial experience with that of corporeal space experience, in essence, creating a hybrid spatial environment. Framing the potential of a convergent spatial experience of virtuality and actuality, of digital destination and corporeal location.

The issue of cyber-spatiality is emerging as a concern to spatial and environmental designers. Our dual involvement with parallel spaces offers new opportunities to extend our understanding of space. It requires a shift of thinking

and signals an inquiry regarding the substance of experiential understandings of both physical and virtual environments. No longer limited to the traditional building blocks of space, the tangible matter of bricks and mortar, we must now make room for the virtuality of bits and bytes, each struggling to assert its position within the latent deployment of network technologies. The existing and predominant fields of spatial design (interior design and architecture) operate between and across these two realms and in doing so, they expose the potential for a new field of spatial enquiry.

New modes of cyber-spatial exploration are apparent in the works and writings of prominent architectural theorists Peter Anders, Stephen Perella and Michael Benedikt. Anders (1999) theories highlight the latent phenomenon and notion of hybrid spatiality, where actual space is becoming infiltrated by the virtuality of networked communications, creating blended spatial environments. Perella's (2001) theories explore current media technologies potential to transform architectural surface into event, a condition he describes as hypersurface. What is evident in both their theories is a shift of thinking from traditional Cartesian construct of space, a shift towards the construct of spatial environments that allow the leakage of the virtuality cyber-spatiality, both inwards and outwards concurrently. They conceive the convergence of cyberspace and corporeal space, as an entirely new way of, inhabiting and designing space (Perella, 2001, Anders, 1999). This new mode of architectural theory, that suggests the merging of physical and digital spaces is what Benedikt (1993) refers to as "a new study to which we ought to give the name spatiology" He defines this new term as a study that operates across "...the physical space of our streets and

buildings and natural landscapes, and 'cyberspace' defined as the electronic space of data and representations generated, organized, and presented consistently to all viewers connected to a set of globally-networked computers" (Benedikt, 1993, p.16). This thesis can be considered to adopt this new mode of study, to be spatiology in practice, with inquiries into both cyber-spatiality and the corporeal space of actuality. It is an inquiry that examines the relationship between human experience and information technology.

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