

HYBRID CITY 2015



DATA TO THE PEOPLE

PROCEEDINGS OF THE 3RD INTERNATIONAL BIENNIAL CONFERENCE

EDITORS

I. THEONA
D. CHARITOS

UNIVERSITY RESEARCH INSTITUTE OF APPLIED COMMUNICATION

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE	11
HYBRID CITY 2015 COMMITTEES	14
KEYNOTE PRESENTATION	
Citizen Centered Design for Humane and Sociable Hybrid Cities <i>Norbert Streitz</i>	17
CHAPTER 1 – URBAN COMMONS AND SMART CITIZENSHIP	
From online communities to applied intervention - The case of the “Dome Project” and “Solidarity networks”: Grassroots solidarity practices within and beyond borders <i>Martha Bouziouri</i>	22
Data and the City: Moving from surveillance and control to the Ubiquitous Commons <i>Salvatore Iaconesi, Oriana Persico</i>	26
From (Not)Doing-It-Yourself to Doing-It-(Cheaper)-With-Others: The rise of a Workshop Culture in the Greek Economic Dystopia <i>Marinos Koutsomichalis, Nikolaos Rodousakis</i>	40
The New Cross Triangle, the Founding of an Urban Myth: DIY Place-Making as Auto-Valorization <i>The New Cross Triangle Psychogeographical Association</i>	49
An Environmentalism for Environmental Media: Ambient Commoning as Cultural Technique in the Sentient Semiosphere <i>Soenke Zehle</i>	57
CHAPTER 2 – HYBRID SPACE AND DATA / NETWORK OWNERSHIP	
DIY networking as a facilitator for interdisciplinary research on the hybrid city <i>Panayotis Antoniadis, Ileana Apostol, Mark Gaved, Michael Smyth, Andreas Unteidig</i>	65
From Community Networks to Off-the-cloud toolkits: Art and DIY networking <i>Daphne Dragona</i>	73
Life at the Local Scale: An alternative perspective on the urban <i>Michael Smyth, Ingi Helgason</i>	82
The Hybrid Meeting Point: An urban infrastructure for interacting across boundaries of difference <i>Andreas Unteidig, Bianca Herlo, Lutz Reiter</i>	87
CHAPTER 3 – OPEN URBAN ENVIRONMENTAL DATA	
Absence in Context: Recontextualizing civic data, critical cartographies, and gentrification in New York City <i>Justin Blinder</i>	96
Cloud Computing in the Kampung <i>Marc Böhlen, Ilya Maharika</i>	103
Data and the City: Accessibility and Openness. A Cybersalon paper on open data <i>Sophia Drakopoulou, Eva Pascoe, Benjamin Greenaway, James Moulding, Wendy Grossman, Ilze Black</i>	111
particleBox: Visualizing Particulate Matter. Air Quality Sensors, Democratizing Data and Public Health <i>Joann Hoffman, Carl McKinney</i>	117
Discussing the scope and potential of open urban data from broader perspectives: open government, open data, policy-making, smart cities <i>Evika Karamagioli, Dimitris Gouscos</i>	121
Technology mediation and visualizing urban energy data <i>Kristian Kloeckl</i>	125
Mapping Vacancy: The collective inventory of abandoned urban properties <i>Daniela Patti, Levente Polyak</i>	133

Implications of open urban data on the social production of space and urban land policies: The real-estate applications effect <i>Constantina Theodorou</i>	142
CHAPTER 4 – URBAN MEDIA FOR EMPOWERING CITIZENS	
Measuring Amsterdam: A participatory mapping tool for citizen empowerment <i>Maarten Groen, Wouter Meys</i>	147
Participatory Design and the Hybrid City: The Living Lab Mehringplatz, Berlin, and the Project “Community Now? Conflicts, Interventions, New Publics” <i>Bianca Herlo, Florian Sametingier, Jennifer Schubert, Andreas Unteidig</i>	151
Empowering science parks for disabled persons using Boxes <i>Lucas H. M. Lazaro, Enlai L. Cheng, Lucas N. Couceiro, Lucia V. L. Filgueiras, James Ohene-Djan</i>	161
Empowering Citizens and their Input on Civic Issues through Urban Media <i>Ian McArthur, Martin Tomitsch, Luke Hespanhol</i>	167
Dynamic Street Light Management: Towards a citizen centred approach <i>Nabil Ouerhani, Nuria Pazos, Marco Aeberli, Julien Senn, Stéphane Gobron</i>	175
Transforming a City into a Sociable Smart City <i>Dimitrios Ringas, Eleni Christopoulou</i>	179
CHAPTER 5 – DESIGNING THE HYBRID CITY	
The Image of The City in The Information Era: Analyzing the effect of digital mobile devices on city imaging process <i>Negar Ahmadpoormobarakeh, Tim Heath</i>	185
Lessons from Game Design: Understanding Participatory Processes through Game Mechanics <i>Cristina Ampatzidou, Katharina Gugerell, Jeremiah Diephuis</i>	189
The urban myths of open data <i>Christian Ulrik Andersen</i>	196
Asger Jorn’s Bean Machine: An artistic critique of Functionalism and its implications for today’s Smart Cities <i>Christopher Collier</i>	203
Understanding Discursive Design and Social Data in Architectural Processes <i>Kjeld S. Hansen, Tor-Morten Grønli, Synne Skjulstad, Vesma Kontere McQuillan</i>	207
The Space of Engagement: Participatory design through serious urban gaming – the case of euREKA digital simulation game <i>Milena Ivković, Milica Anđelković</i>	211
Street-level City Analytics: Mapping the Amsterdam Knowledge Mile <i>Sabine Niederer, Gabriele Colombo, Michele Mauri, Matteo Azzi</i>	215
CHAPTER 6 – ENVIRONMENTAL SENSING AND HYBRID OBJECTS	
The Hybrid Object: augmenting objects and transforming their relationship with humans <i>Dimitris Charitos, Maria Kerasia Andrikaki</i>	222
HexSpace: Technological Layering of Domestic Environments <i>Stavros Didakis</i>	226
Sensing the Workspace: An Innovative Way to Improve Eco-Awareness at Work <i>Anna Karagianni, Panagiotis Parthenios</i>	231
Identification of Things in a Smart City <i>Stella Simitropoulou, George Charamis, Achilles Kameas</i>	234
CHAPTER 7 – URBAN DATA VISUALIZATION AND MAPPING	
Mapito.org: Open Geographic Platform for Locative Media Apps <i>Konstantinos Chorianopoulos, Konstantinos Pardalis</i>	243

Business Intelligence for Primary Healthcare Management: The case of PEDY Network in Athens Metro Area <i>Dimitris Drakopoulos, Dr Annie Tubadji, Amalia Maria Koutsogianni, Stelios Dontas</i>	247
Exploring Urban Mobility and Accessibility through Transport Data: A study of London Oyster card data and disability <i>Gareth Simons, Andrew Hudson Smith, Martin Zaltz Austwick, Katerina Skroumpelou, Stylianos Tsaparas, Gianfranco Gliozzo</i>	252
The role of Electroencephalography (EEG) in Understanding the Differences in Urban-Environmental Perceptions <i>Katerina Skroumpelou, Panagiotis Mavros, Dr. Andrew Hudson Smith</i>	260
CHAPTER 8 – AUGMENTED [URBAN] SPATIAL EXPERIENCES	
“Ghost - Athens”: A mobile application about the unknown buildings and street art of Athens <i>Stavroula Bampatzia, Angela Antoniou, George Lepouras, Violeta Bampatzia, Athena Lountzi</i>	268
The Lure of CyberPark: Synergistic Outdoor Interactions between Public Spaces, Users and Locative Technologies <i>Konstantinos Ioannidis, Carlos Smaniotto Costa, Ina Suklje-Erjavec, Marluci Menezes, Alfonso BahilloMartínez</i>	272
The Palimpsest Project: postalphabetical augmented museum of participatory storytelling <i>Polyxeni Mantzou, Angeliki Matami, Georgios Kapraras, Christina Charistou</i>	282
Enriching the city environment with mobile Augmented Reality edutainment applications for residents and tourists: The case of “Roads of Rhodes” game <i>Dimitrios Markouzis, Georgios Fessakis</i>	290
Designing for Mixed Embodied Presence in a Virtual Setting <i>Chrissa Papasarantou, Charalampos Rizopoulos</i>	298
Hackable Urban Experiences <i>Marinela Telo, Konstantinos-Alketas Oungrinis</i>	306
CHAPTER 9 – AUDIOVISUAL NARRATIVES IN THE CITYSCAPE	
Readable City Soundscapes: reading visual noise in the hybrid city <i>Katerina Antonaki, Eleni Glinou, Irene Mavrommati, George Birbilis</i>	313
Media Walks: Culture, Media and Design <i>Nikos Bubaris</i>	317
Two Worlds: A Hybrid Local-Remote Interactive Sound Installation <i>Yiannis Colakides, Iannis Zannos, Yiannis Christides</i>	324
Hello Citizen! Registering the sound of the smart city <i>Teresa Dillon</i>	327
Locative media soundwalks: A rhizomatic approach to urban public space sound art <i>Dana Papachristou</i>	334
ICTs and Contemporary Art: a platform for the urban well-being <i>Anastasia Zoi Souliotou</i>	339
Walking-with-Sound: wellbeing, citizen empowerment and agency through mobile sound art <i>Katerina Talianni</i>	345
CHAPTER 10 – PLACEMAKING IN THE HYBRID URBAN CONTEXT	
Dourgouti Island Hotel: An “UrbanDig for Neighborhoods” Case Study <i>Christos Ananiadis, Dikaia Chatziefstathiou, George Sachinis</i>	350
The ‘street’, the ‘body’ and the ‘move’: A hybrid space design for knowledge urban circulation <i>Anna Chronaki</i>	353
Placemaking and place identity in social media: Snapshots from Facebook <i>Mariza Georgalou</i>	361

Mapping the urban narratives: the works of Larissa Fassler <i>Zacharias Ouranos</i>	371
The Secret School: An installation on Migration involving the public through text and media contributions in a closed network <i>Ioannis Zannos, Loukas Basoukos, Evan Light</i>	375
CHAPTER 11 — ARCHITECTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON HYBRID SPACE	
D-D_D-P_H-S: data-driven de-professionalized hybrid-subjectivities <i>Christos Chondros</i>	379
Content Architectures and Digital Modernity: ‘E-scapes’ into urbanities of data, or the information architect as an architect ‘in formation’ <i>Aristotelis Dimitrakopoulos</i>	386
A Strategy for the Reactivation of Residual Urban Voids: Multidimensional Comparative Analysis and Classification <i>Anna Laskari</i>	394
Urban P.E.T.s.: Urban Public Embedded Thresholds <i>Polyxeni Mantzou, Francisco García Triviño, Katerina Psegiannaki</i>	401
Parallel Structures. The Electronic Urbanism of Takis Ch. Zenetos: 1962-1974 <i>Maria D. Papadimitriou</i>	407
The unknown city: Rethinking the role of the ‘akalyptos’ in the historic center of Thessaloniki <i>Anastasia Papadopoulou, Venetia Tsakalidou, Ioannis A. Tsalikidis</i>	415
CHAPTER 12 — WORKSHOP PRESENTATIONS	
The Hackable City	424
Wave Your Open Data Magic Wand. Cybersalon Hackathon	425
CONTACT: Facilitating information sharing between strangers with DIY networking	426
Metaxication Inc.	427
noTours: recording-editing-audiowalking	428

Urban P.E.T.s.

Urban Public Embedded Thresholds

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Abstract. Urban PETs is a proposal centered in the way architecture as a mediator can find its place in our contemporary world, hugely defined and configured by interfaces. Within this concept PETs are a new kind of hybrid, digitalized, spatial, urban interface. They are, to be exact, urban Public Embedded Thresholds.

Common digital interfaces connect human subjects to the digital code and allow us to interact with the distant and the asynchronous. But they are not habitable; they are surfaces or objects, not surroundings, not spaces that enfold the subjects.

Common architectural interfaces are spaces that enclose subjects and permit them to control, relate and connect to their immediate surroundings, a wall, a door, a window, a roof, a threshold, etc. But their range of connectivity is restricted; they don't allow distant, far-off nor asynchronous connections.

Urban PETs are hybrids of digital and architectural interfaces, or better still, in-betweens, porous thresholds. PETs are articulations of digital and physical experiences in a new merged condition, where there is no need for alternation, where there is fusion and expansion, where the environment is augmented and interconnected and where the corporeity is reconciled with the virtual.

Urban PETs provide embedment; they host specific, tailor-made software applied in concordance with their physical characteristics. These new thresholds are embedded, in other words they operate like beds for placing specialized software which augments their connectivity and dilate their limits, in the way dreams expand our reach, but, at the same time, without transgressing the physical limitations of the proper bed or denying the accommodated body's comfort.

Urban PETs are public; embedding digital public space to the physical public space can prove to be beneficent for both. Limits and thresholds between public and private can remain operative but at the same time open source strategies can apply beyond spatiotemporal limitations. The attributes of the digital public space, instantaneity, and ubiquity can, in the case of hybrid public spaces, be combined with emplacement. Physical public space's borders and

thresholds can be active and can lead to rich, diversified experiences without inhibiting and reducing the connectivity and openness.

Urban PETs are urban; they refer to the city and acknowledge the needs of the contemporary citizen. They shape hybrid urbanities that can offer physical proximity, sense of belonging and community and, simultaneously, allow connections among communities and collectivities, widen the horizons and dilate the restrictions. They aim to revive urban, city spaces and at the same time to transform villagers of the globe to citizens of the world, i.e. cosmopolites.

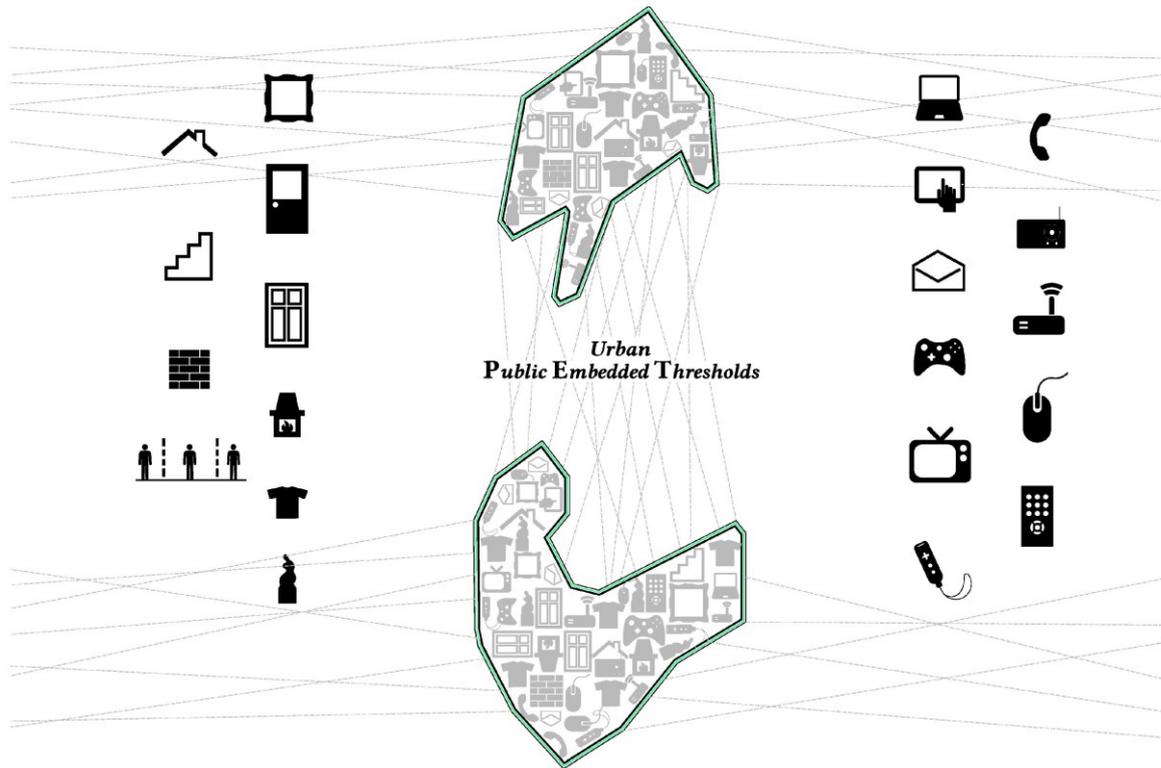
Urban PETs are a condition for encounter and coexistence but more importantly, an autonomous articulation. They are an independent, porous in-between, which operates as a dilated interface, a connectivity medium, and an enfolding, embracing, habitable condition, i.e. a hybrid, new kind of threshold.

Keywords: hybrids, architecture interface, urban, augmented

I. THRESHOLDS

Architecture has always been an interface; a threshold, separating and connecting different systems, providing relation and control, union and separation. Traditionally, it was mainly through this interface that the subject was associated and related to its analogue environment. As our world is becoming more and more digital, the architectural interfaces are becoming less important and even obsolete. In his book, *The Lost Dimension*, dated back in 1991, Paul Virilio analyzes the evolution of the architectural interface par excellence, that is, the window. He sees in the passing from the door, to the window, a preference for the visual, which is culminated in the third window, i.e. the screen, with a preference for the placeless and the immaterial, where proximity and adjacency become irrelevant. The subject is related to its digital

ⁱ “To this end, consider the history of architectonic elements, such as walls, doors, windows chimneys, the first windows is the door, the door-window necessary for access to and thus conceptualize a house without some meals access. In the first dwellings, the illuminating



environment by other means; digital interfaces are seductive and immersive and offer a possibility for connection beyond spatiotemporal limitations. The role of architecture as the principle mediator in the subject's relation to the world is questioned as the notion of the world is expanded. On the other hand, the digital sphere is one that has no real, actual place for the sensuous body. Spectacular digital experiences lack the profundity of corporeal, analogue, deep involvement.

The most common digital interfaces nowadays are conditioned by the human-computer interaction, being the computer, a network connected, often portable and tending to disappear, machine, designed to interact with single individualities. In this direction, although we feel every time more connected with each other, when the machine switches off this sense of hyper-connectivity is lost and we find ourselves deprived and isolated, in real space and time. The web 2.0, and the IoT denote a

second stage of the world wide web evolution, offering every time more and more new ways of relating, new forms of discourse, new ways of interacting, new kinds of groups, and new ways of sharing, trading, and collaborating [2] that gradually become part of our everyday life. This new reality inspires a spirit of interconnectivity, participation and collaboration [2] provided by new technologies in which most people have access in western societies. Digital interfaces tend to transparency and embedment, in order to relate to physical space and involve the human body; architectural interfaces though, remain indifferent to this change although they could opt for hybridization in order to absorb digital technologies in physical space and thus augment the possibilities of space interaction.

II. EMBEDDED

The digital revolution is one that we have been living in for the last decades and consequently its groundbreaking effects are often greatly assimilated and not always apparent to us but rather taken for granted. Still, there are certain inherent characteristics of the binary code that cause significant consequences in the way it codifies and thus interprets and reconfigures all that is digitalized. Of great importance is its aspect of placelessness, the fact that its nature is abstract and therefore cannot be emplaced or rooted, which results in its great capacity for manipulation, multiplicity and mutation. As a counter-effect this placelessness places serious issues in relation to our bodily nature, which is mostly ignored or even treated as an obstacle, as is the case of those who assume that in the coming decades our mind will be directly linked to the web [3], eliminating all need for interfaces, that is mediators that intervene, being the body one of them.

opening did not exist. There was an entrance and sometimes a chimney of some sort. The window as such -the second window- appeared fairly late, in the sites of monastic cults, before becoming popular among the rural homes and only then, and especially, in the palace and the homes of the bourgeoisie. The third window is a recent invention: the television screen, a removable and portable window that opens onto the face day of the speed of light emissions. The television screen is an introverted window, one which no longer opens on the adjoining space but instead faces beyond the perceptible horizon. Thus, if the door-window constitutes an opening- a threshold for the immediate and undifferentiated access of people, things, daylight and direct vision, as well as a form of ground-level ventilation that works with the more elevated ventilation of chimney- then the specialized windows is more selective, because it interrupts the passage of bodies. The specialized window is a puncture, a mediated opening for solar light and nearby perspectives. In this context the TV screen becomes a selector of electronic images, an audiovisual medium for the indirect light of the cathode tube." [1]



To embed, to lay in a bed, is a geological, originally, term, in reference to fossils in rock, that is, placed in a bed of surrounding matter.ⁱⁱ Placement and embedment are almost synonyms and the term embedded software, is used to designate software that is placed in artifacts that typically are not understood as computers, i.e. machines and devices that use specialized software to augment their possibility for actions and interactions, as are cars, phones, toys. Software placed in these uncommon hardware receptors is embedded and adapted to the specific needs and to the specific characteristics and also limitations of these beds. Because these beds are not solely destined to bear the software but are also designed to have important analogue and corporeal qualities, this software has to respond to the specific needs and to be designed taking under consideration the overall performance and the produced end-result.

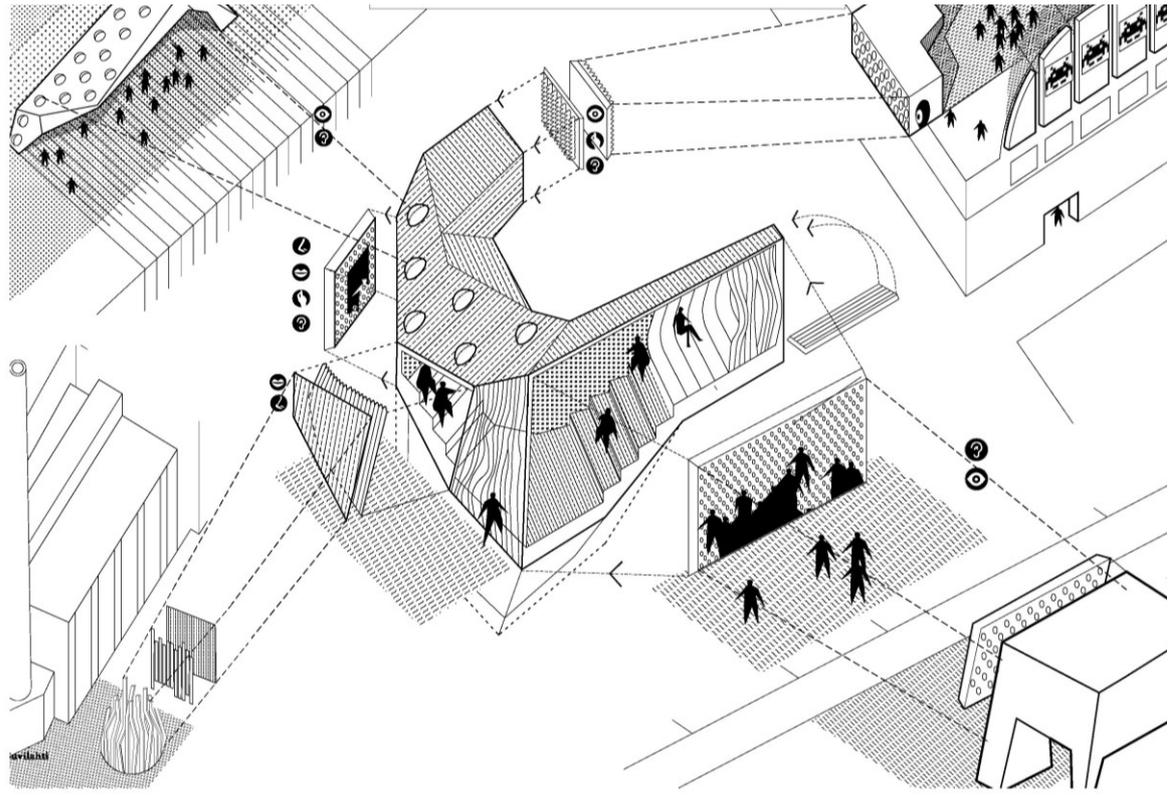
In this line of thought, architecture and architectural interfaces could also be understood as beds for placing embedded software in order to achieve a higher adaptivity, an improved performance, an augmented possibility for interaction and even an enhanced connectivity beyond, but not without, the traditional limitations of place. These beds, with their specialized software, augment their connectivity and dilate their limits, in the way dreams expand our reach, but, at the same time, without transgressing the physical limitations of the proper bed or denying the accommodated body's comfort.

III. PUBLIC

The main notion of the public space bears within it, the notion of the private. Architecture has not only mediated for this preeminent dipole, but has also been the principle common denominator that configured and defined where the ending of one becomes the starting point of the other and where one is inserted into the other, shaping encounters that constitute thresholds. These thresholds have typically been analyzed and studied by architects and their deepness or their shallowness, which in cases can get even to superficiality, is a distinctive and an illustrative characteristic of different cultures and societies. To relate public space to private space is to reflect upon the relation of collective to personal, publicity to intimacy, social to individual. This is a relation that constitutes and defines each society and is manifested in its architectural expression.

In the digital age, public space is expanding. It is becoming more and more obvious that public space is not merely perceived by contemporary subjects as the physical space, in many cases defined by architectural elements, but also as the immaterial space of the web [4]. This poses new and unforeseen questions related to the definition of the public and its relation to the private. The web's development has been up to now driven by the commercial profit it engenders and there are all sort of unsolved issues concerning royalties, privacy and security matters. Unrestricted access, for all, is without doubt a main objective for public digital space, especially as this can create an open resource for knowledge, art, and culture. But also, IP and privacy has

ⁱⁱ From Online Etymology Dictionary, embed
<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=embed>



to be safeguarded and protected in the anonymity of the unrooted digital public space.

Embedding digital public space to the physical public space can prove to be beneficial for both. Actual and virtual encounters can be combined, merged and therefore enriched; limits and thresholds between public and private can remain operative but at the same time open source strategies can apply beyond spatiotemporal limitations. The instantaneity, the immediacy and the ubiquity of digital public space can, in the case of hybrid public spaces, come without losing all sense of em-placement. [5] At the same time, borders and thresholds can be enacted and can provide diversified and enriching experiences without limiting and reducing the sphere of possibilities allowed.

IV. URBAN

According to United Nations, “by the middle of 2009, the number of people living in urban areas (3.42 billion) had surpassed the number living in rural areas (3.41 billion) and since then the world has become more urban than rural.”ⁱⁱⁱ Urban, from city, urbs, is closely linked to civil and civilization. The passing from the tribal phase to the civil stage, that is to the construction of urbs and thus, the urban phase has been of extreme importance for mankind. Nomadic structures led to sedentary ones, when cultivation was made possible and as a result, culture was originated. Urbanity is not only about conglomeration, it is about community, about sharing a common ground and belonging somewhere,

forming part of a collectivity. It is through this organizational process that societies achieve an advanced stage of development.

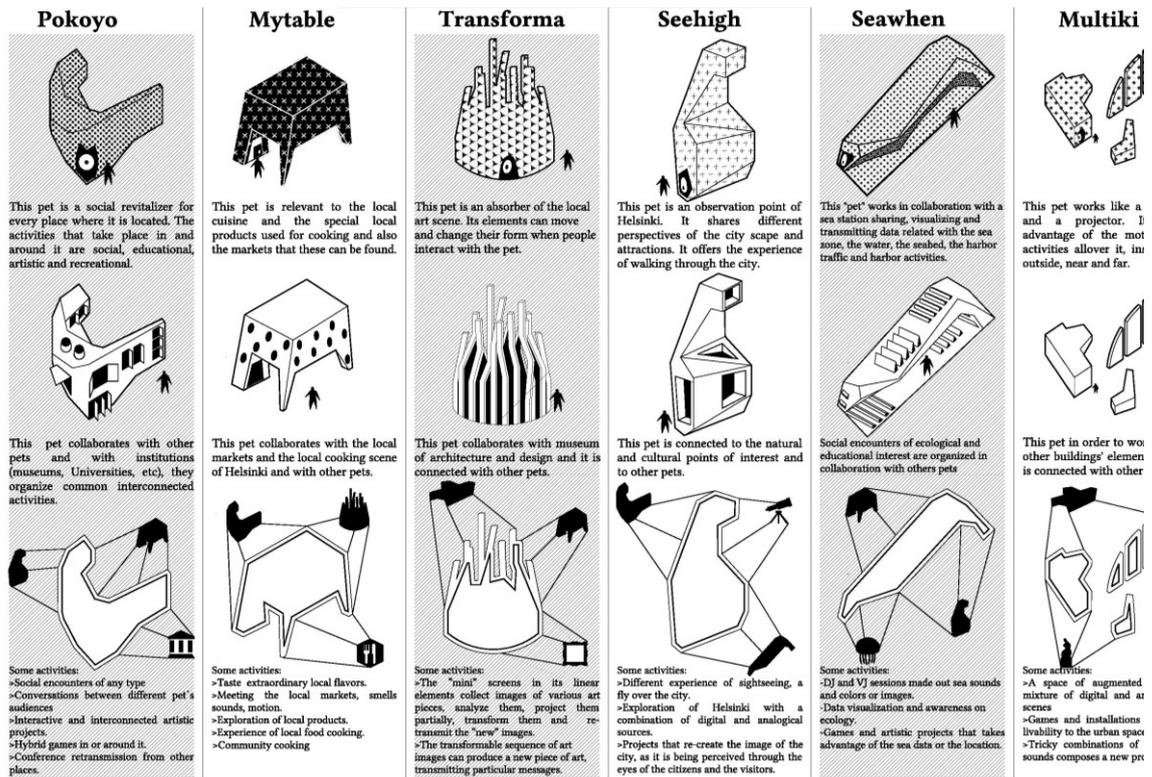
Urban life is changing rapidly due to the proliferation of digital social media, e-commerce, digital entertainment, digital archives, teleworking, distance learning.[6] Almost each and every one of the typologies that used to define the city, have gradually been moving from the physical urban space to an ubiquitous, unrooted and dispersed non-locative medium, leaving urban space unjustified and desolate. On the other hand, the sense of belonging, the community that the physical urban space has engendered cannot be found in its profoundness in the digital realm, where dispersed encounters occur without leaving trace, where memory is an objectified and detached archive.

If urban population is increasing it isn't because McLuhan's global village [7] was a false prediction, but rather because, apart from online communities, commerce, work, education, entertainment; there is always an overwhelming desire for physical encounters, for rooted activities, for common ground. Hybrid urbanities can offer physical proximity, sense of belonging and community and at the same time connect communities and collectivities, widen the horizons and dilate the restrictions. Urban processes that combine physical and digital presence can revive urban, city spaces and at the same time can assist villagers of the globe to become citizens of the world, cosmopolites.

V. THE URBAN PETS' MANIFEST

PETs are a new kind of hybrid, digitalized, spatial, urban interface. They are, to be exact, urban Public Embedded Thresholds. Common digital interfaces

ⁱⁱⁱ Urban and rural areas, 2009. <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/urbanization/urban-rural.shtml>



connect human subjects to the digital code and allow us to interact with the distant and the asynchronous. But they are not habitable; they are surfaces or objects, not surroundings, not spaces that enfold the subjects. Common architectural interfaces are spaces that enclose subjects or elements that define their emplacement and permit them to connect to their immediate surroundings, a wall, a door, a window, a roof, a threshold, etc. They don't allow distant, nor asynchronous connections.

PETs are hybrids of digital and architectural interfaces. They are fluid and transformable, they permit all sorts of connections without space or time delimitations and at the same time they allow the subjects to be enfolded in a common ground, a common place that is referred to its immediacy, to its space and time restrictions, to the collectivity and the social coexistence.

PETs are used as a system that can inhabit the public spaces, mostly open, but also enclosed, mostly grounded but also maritime and they can be used in order to host events related to the cultural, the social, the recreational and the political. They can be moved, combined, eliminated and they can be used in a specific relation to preexisting buildings, urban spaces, or landscapes, or as autonomous entities. They can be attached and related to the near and interconnected and expanded to the distant and they aim to host a multiplicity of actions and interactions that aren't predefined.

PETs are multi-purpose and although they serve as an infrastructure for a disseminated, interconnected museum, they can do so much more. They aim to activate the public space of the town, augment its

repercussion and spread around the city art projects, educational and recreational events, participatory and collective activities, social and political interactions. Their nature is hybrid- they are equally obsessed with the analogue and the digital- they are also systemic, nomadic, expansive, transformable, adjustable, dispersed, multiplied, combined, eliminable.

PETs are autonomous entities in their uniqueness and a part of a whole, of a system that allows different sites of the city to interconnect with this network of physical, accessible and yet amplifying and augmenting structures. The PET network is a unique structure that converts the city and the experience of its urban public spaces in a vivid, collective, participatory, culturally-centered and leisure-oriented, animated, hybrid reality. It is a decentralized, dispersed system that distributes activities and events throughout the city instead of converging it all to a single megastructure. The Helsinki 's specific characteristics can benefit from the urban PETs sprawl as they can shelter public acts in semi-open spaces offering shelter from weather impediments. On the other hand, Helsinki can foster the urban PETs and alimnet them with its diverse and interesting environment, institutional and participatory activities and the emphasis on art and education matters, as well as to those of social interaction. Helsinki can provide PETs with multiples connections, not just the ones among them, but also with cultural and educational institutions and events, allowing information to flow and proliferate, converting the city to a hybrid, augmented but strenuously physical network of experiences, of situations, where all can participate and get involved. The Helsinki's urban PETs are loyal to the city's welfare and at the same time offer a unique

prototype which adjusts hybrid realities to the urban public space.

PETs are autonomous entities and also they are a part of a whole, of a system that allows different sites of the city to interconnect with this network of physical, accessible and yet amplifying and augmenting structures. The PET network is a unique structure that converts the city and the experience of its urban public spaces in a vivid, collective, participatory, culturally-centered and leisure-oriented, animated, hybrid reality. It is a decentralized, dispersed system that distributes activities and events throughout the city instead of converging it all to a single megastructure.

PETs can improve the quality of the urban sprawl as they can activate its use and shelter public acts in semi-open spaces offering shelter from weather impediments. The cities can foster the urban PETs and aliment them with their diverse and interesting environment, institutional and participatory activities and the emphasis on art and education matters, as well as to those of social interaction. PETs can be provided with multiples connections, not just the ones among them, but also with cultural and educational institutions and events, allowing information to flow and proliferate, converting the city to a hybrid, augmented but strenuously physical network of experiences, of situations, where all can participate and get involved. Urban PETs are loyal to the cities' welfare and at the same time offer a unique prototype, which adjusts hybrid realities to the urban public space.

VI. PET_FOOD (FOR THOUGHT)

Urban PETs are equally fed by the digital and the physical and to be more exact, they are fed by their coexistence. They are bred by hybridization. They inhabit the urban space of the traditional city but they take their PET_walk in a ubiquitous and universal sprawl. They adapt to their masters' needs, they follow them and move if needed, they are playful, joyful, and sociableiv.

Urban PETs merge digital intensity with physical profoundness in a way that the subject is content in both aspects, as a spectacle-educated person of the digital age and as the corporeal human. They engender collectivity, community and the sense of belonging and at the same time they are characterized by openness, extroversion and unreservedness toward the distant, the unknown, the remote. They are multifaceted, all-embracing and wide-ranging and they adapt to their environment, being very well prepared for change and even mutation.

Urban PETs is an architectural project for the digital age. It is a transcription of the necessity to understand

iv As Sennett and others have emphasized, public sociability is not natural; it needs to be learned, nurtured and practised. In an era in which public space is dominated by spectacular 'brandscapes' and pacified by the distributed technology of surveillance, new forms of public interaction facilitating qualities such as collective participation and unpredictable collaboration hold increasing social importance. In this context, the role of artists using new media to construct experimental interfaces in public space can assume strategic value. [8]

public urban space in a different way, under the pressure of the proliferation of digital media and technologies, but still, without dismantling it, but rather by reinforcing it. Architecture is understood in this context, where our environment is irremediably defined by both the physical and the digital, and because our human nature is difficult to please with less, as a common denominator and a merger for the physical and the digital, as a generator of new mediations that intervene and reconcile traditional excisions, providing augmented, responsive, all-engaging new realms. In this sense, Urban PETs provide not only the condition for encounter and coexistence but more importantly, an autonomous articulation, the creation of an independent, porous in-between [9], which operates as a dilated interface, a connectivity medium, and an enfolding, embracing, habitable condition, i.e. a hybrid, new kind of threshold.

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