HYBRID CITY 2015

DATA TO THE PEOPLE

PROCEEDINGS OF THE 3RD INTERNATIONAL BIENNIAL CONFERENCE

EDITORS
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UNIVERSITY RESEARCH INSTITUTE OF APPLIED COMMUNICATION

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ATHENS, 17–19 SEPTEMBER 2015
NATIONAL AND KAPODISTRIAN UNIVERSITY OF ATHENS

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UNIVERSITY RESEARCH INSTITUTE OF APPLIED COMMUNICATION
ATHENS 2015

ISBN 978-960-99791-2-2

First published in 2015 by University Research Institute of Applied Communication (URIAC),
National & Kapodistrian University of Athens,
Athens, Greece

ORGANIZED BY

UNIVERSITY RESEARCH INSTITUTE
OF APPLIED COMMUNICATION (URIAC),
UNIVERSITY OF ATHENS
1 Sofokleous str., 3rd fl., 105 59, Athens,
Greece | Tel: 210 3689413
www.media.uoa.gr/institute

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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 em-placement. 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.

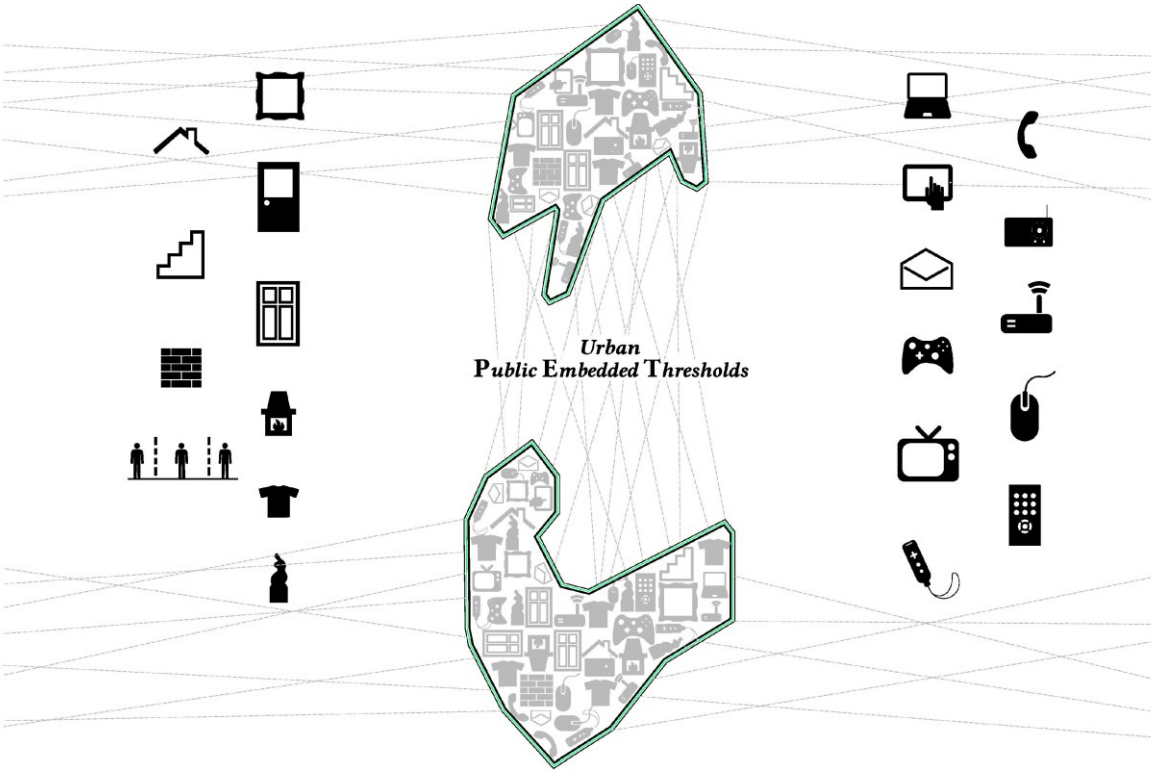
Urban PETs are a condition for encounter and coexistence but more importantly, an autonomous articulation. They are an independent, porous in-between, which operates as a dilated interface, a connectivity medium, and an enfolding, embracing, habitable condition, i.e. a hybrid, new kind of threshold.

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 irrelevanti. 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



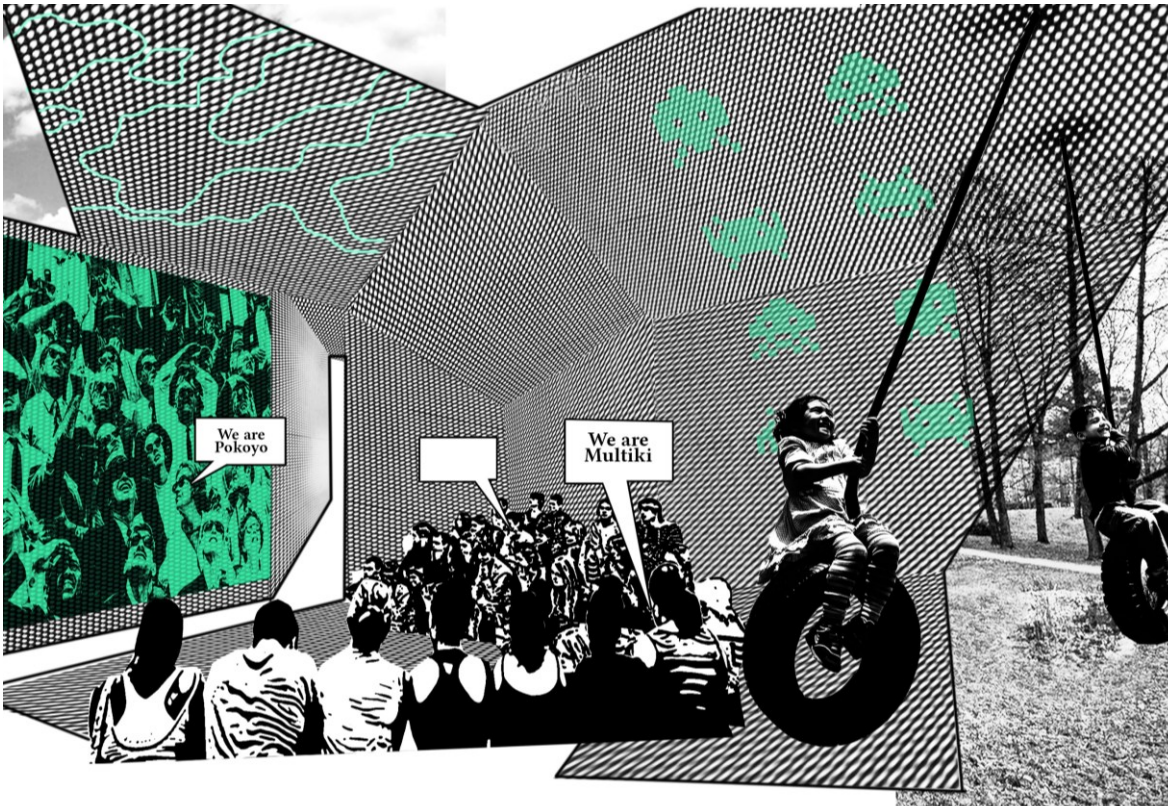
environment by other means; digital interfaces are seductive and immersive and offer a possibility for connection beyond spatiotemporal limitations. The role of architecture as the principle mediator in the subject's relation to the world is questioned as the notion of the world is expanded. On the other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

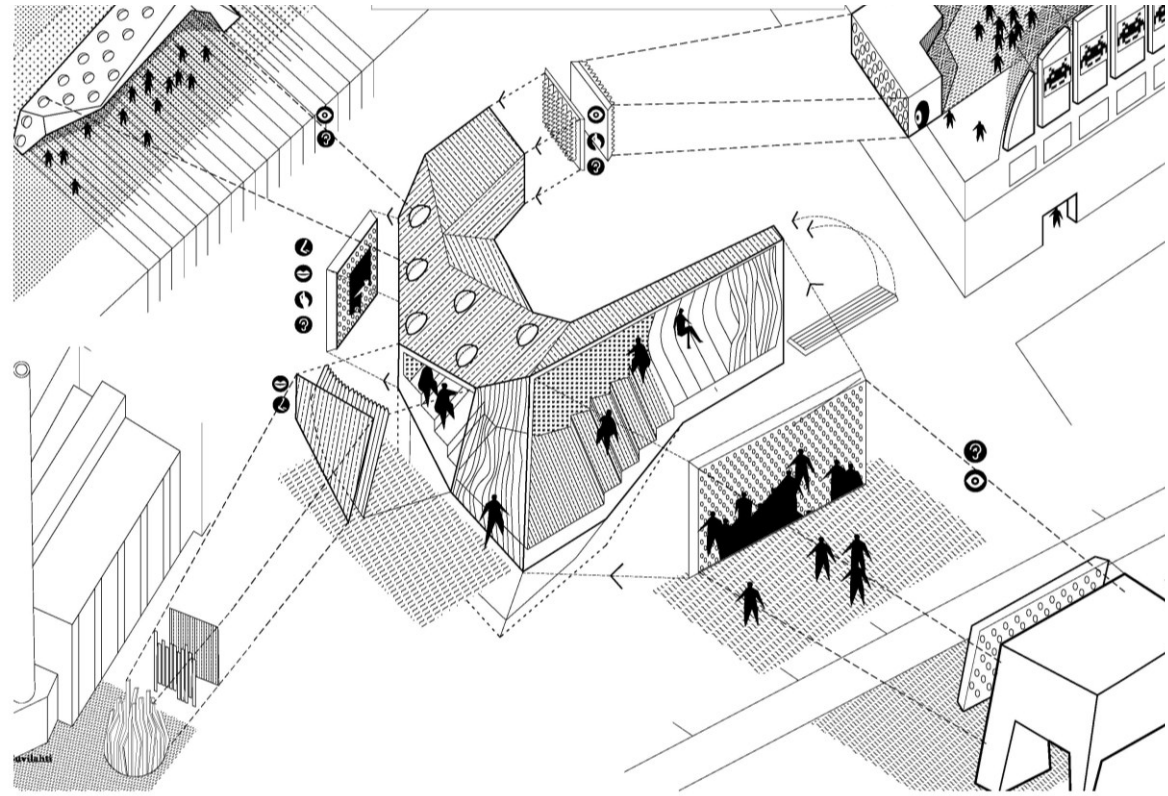
In this line of thought, architecture and architectural interfaces could also be understood as beds for placing embedded software in order to achieve a higher adaptivity, an improved performance, an augmented possibility for interaction and even an enhanced connectivity beyond, but not without, the traditional 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.

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

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



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 beneficent 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.

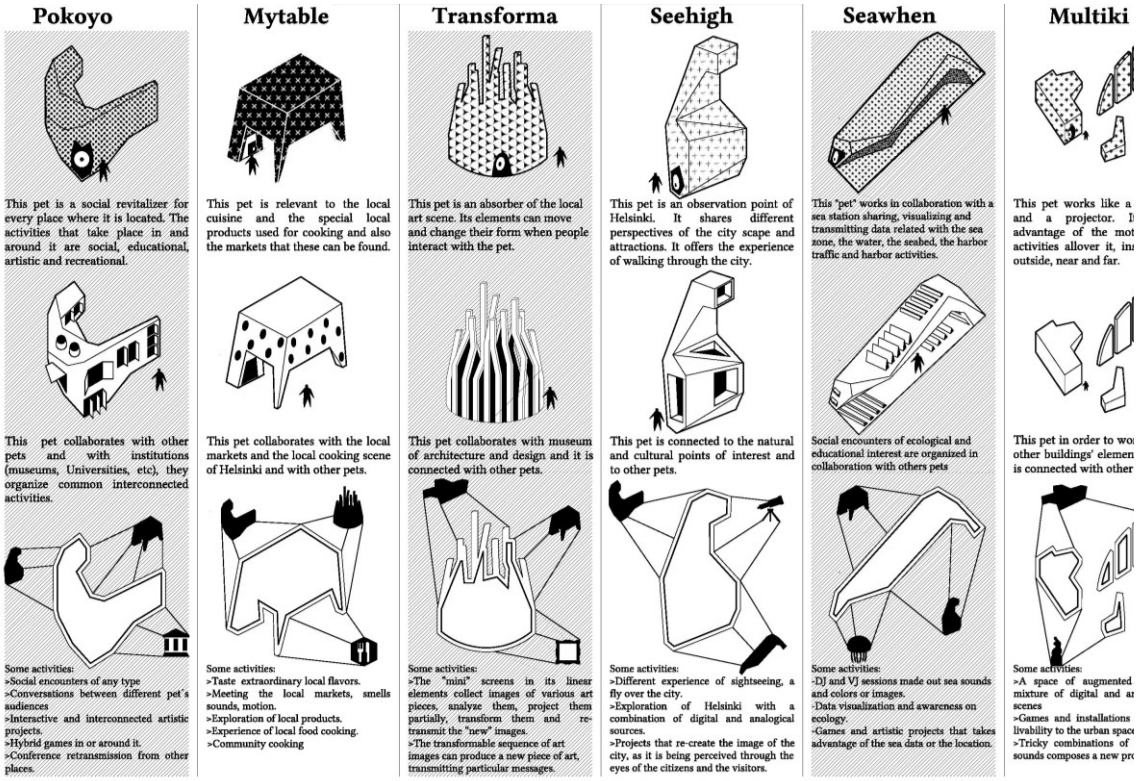
Urban life is changing rapidly due to the proliferation of digital social media, e-commerce, digital entertainment, digital archives, teleworking, distance learning.[6] Almost each and every one of the typologies that used to define the city, have gradually been moving from the physical urban space to 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 aliment 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 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.

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]

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- All images have been produced for the Next Helsinki competition by Christina Charistou, Angeliki Matami, Polyxeni Mantzou, Katerina Psegiannaki, Francisco García Triviño, 2015.