Towards an Emotional GPS: writing your own city

by Scott Paterson with Marina Zurkow and Julian Bleecker

infrastructures, I am often asked how, if at all, wireless technologies will affect the design of the physical, geographic world. PDPal, a public art project I am currently developing with Marina Zurkow and Julian Bleecker, addresses some of these issues.

PDPal is a public art project for the Palm™ PDA and the Web. It is a mapping application that engages the user through alternative mapping. It is not our goal to visualize wireless, per se, but rather to highlight how technologies that locate and orient are static and non-referential to the lively nature of urban cultural environments. PDPal is inspired by psychogeography and cognitive mapping. It actively encourages emotional geographies instead of the traditional, latitude- and longitude-coordinated Cartesian space.

The idea of psychogeography was playfully employed by the Situationist Movement in mid-20th century France. Inspired by Baudelaire's 19th century notion of the flaneur, the city walker who wandered, soaking up the metropolis, psychogeography was carried out as a series of drifts, or derives, that were based on a set of algorithms -- an instruction set such as "walk 3 blocks, turn left 1 block, turn right." These walks were designed to defamiliarize the city and make it new: getting people out of their ruts of labor, consumption and survival in the city defined by legal ordinances and boundaries. Recording the memories of such meanderings is the very basis of cognitive mapping, a visualization method for describing mental representations. This technique attempts to describe mental images that people use to encode knowledge and information such as the extent of their neighborhood or their daily commute.

One of the most common questions a person receives while on a cell phone is "Where are you?" The area code that has no area -- cell phone numbers provide little indication of the locale to and from which one is calling, unlike landlines where a regional prefix is quite distinct and recognizable. This increasing transparency of technology signals a shift towards our continual loss of orientation, thus deteriorating our sense of influence and power over the development of place.

Even the history of prepositions used when talking about making a phone call bare proof of our evolving relationship to communications technology: We started by talking to the telephone, then talking on the phone, and finally, just talking to somebody. The telephone itself becomes transparent to the experience.

Debord's study on psychogeography allows us to further consider what the effects of a wireless environment are and how we might begin to delimit and experience them. Given that wireless is commonly understood as an invisible medium, how might it offer opportunities to render new geographies?

Trained as an architect, now exploring architecture as networks, systems, and

"Psychogeography could set for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals."
- Guy Debord, from "Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography" 1955

Psychogeography and cognitive mapping offer two suggestions for recording wireless experiences, using a term we've coined, emotional GPS. Whereas traditional GIS (Geographic Information Systems) and GPS (Global Positioning Systems) tend towards an empirical representation of the world, emotional GPS is biased towards the personal, temporary, and imaginary.

In most cases, the prevailing impact of wireless on the definition of a place is not so much on its static form as the potential experiences that this place can afford. The wireless environment provides an alternative use, an augmented interface, or new associative mnemonics. Providing an annotative mapping framework, use of emotional GPS fosters a networked mobility within these environments that undermines the authoritarian bent of traditional GIS and GPS mapping techniques.

We can see the effects of wireless environments at multiple scales, from the negotiation and choreography of networked bodies in space to the negotiation and orchestration of the body of the networked city. This spectrum can be exemplified by Matt Locke's concept of TIZ (temporary intimate zones) and the project FLIRT by Fiona Raby.

TIZ, a spin on Hakim Bey's TAZ (temporary autonomous zones), describes the behavior of an individual creating on-demand short-term semi-private zones in public spaces while using mobile devices. FLIRT explores the cellular construction of wireless networks overlaid on physical space to engender new encounters with location-based characters -- a finicky cat meandering from cell to cell, a herd of reindeer loose in the network or establishing bonds with other users in your cell.

Other examples can be found in Howard Rheingold's book *Smart Mobs*, where he outlines numerous examples of mobs congregating via mobile devices. These projects suggest that networked mobility within wireless environments may yield a new understanding of the geographical and a renewed stewardship of place.

Yet, how do we resist the out-of-sight, out-of-mind phenomenon of big brother, ubiquitous computing and regain our bearings? This is precisely the issue that PDPal hopes to confront: to provide a collective networked space of annotation, a communicity, organized along shared property line, not real estate properties, but emotional properties like social action, critiques and flows.

The PDPal experience consists of numerous mobile or networked components: a PDA application, a database-driven website, posters, notebooks and other paper-based versions of the mapping application. A typical user scenario begins with the UPR (Urban Park Ranger), our in-house provocateur, an animated character on the PDA and website, providing a directive to consider mapping. Some examples include a commuter's weekly diary with distance measured in minutes or a bike messenger's tour of intersections and short cuts.

These provocations give traction to first-time users of the mapping tool and transform the project from being simply about framing an issue to making assertions. For us this has been a critical step in garnering the collective action required to make visible the invisible thresholds, boundaries and proclivities of traditional place making.

In the end, this may all sound like yet another crisis for traditional architects as place makers. However, it is rather a call to resist the transparency of technology and its ensuing empiricism in favor of an extended definition of place making, a mobiltexture, if you will, an obsolescence-resistant architecture of dynamic processes that create self-organizing, mediated environments.

One's city is composed of the places in which one lives, plays, works, and remembers. It is made of the routes and paths through which one makes connections. This personal city is also about the meanings ascribed to these places of inhabitance and transition, even those that are hated. One imagines these places and routes as more than a street address, or directions one may give. These places have vivid, metaphorical meanings and histories that can be visualized and recorded. They effectively write a renewed stewardship of the geographic via mobility, in and through our wireless environments.

Write your own city.

Links:
"Introduction to a Critique of Geography" by Guy Debord
http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/display/2

PDPal
http://www.pdpal.com

"TIZ part 1" by Matt Locke
http://www.test.org.uk/archives/000200.html

Project#26765: Flirt: Mobile Phones, Everyday Narratives and the Cellular City (CRA CRD Projects Series) by Fiona Raby
http://www.crd.rca.ac.uk/dunne-raby/books/flirtorder.html

Smart Mobs by Howard Rheingold
http://www.smartmobs.com/index.html

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