

# Media and The City



Media and The City:  
Urbanism, Technology and Communication

Edited by

Simone Tosoni, Matteo Tarantino  
and Chiara Giaccardi

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

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P U B L I S H I N G

Media and The City: Urbanism, Technology and Communication,  
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## FOREWORD

# WHATEVER HAPPENED TO *FLÂNERIE*? ON SOME THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE MEDIA/CITY NEXUS

CHIARA GIACCARDI

To establish a focus on media and the city, as the following chapters do, means to cut a space of observation in which crucial processes occur, crossing and co-shaping each other, thus potentially fostering new perspectives on several important theoretical questions, from the social shaping of technology (McKenzie & Wajcman, 1985) to the post-media (or hyper-media) condition (Krauss, 2006), from participatory citizenship (Dahlgren, 1995) to new forms of aestheticisation of everyday life (Jameson, 1991), from the reshaping of mobility to the new regimes of perception and many others.

As a foreword to the first volume collecting the work of the ECREA<sup>1</sup> Temporary Working Group “Media & the City”, which I have the honour to chair until 2014, I will briefly address a couple of those questions, namely the reconfiguration of sensitivity in the digital age and the new socio-aesthetic processes at play in the mixed environment of contemporary cities.

### 1. Reconfigurations

Media studies owe Marshall McLuhan (McLuhan, 1964) the presence of an analytical focus on the reconfigurations facilitated by media, and probably few places display this spectacle better than contemporary cities. In the nexus between media and the city we can spot at least two crucial anthropological aspects: our ability to communicate through shared,

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<sup>1</sup> European Communication Research and Education Association: see [www.ecrea.eu](http://www.ecrea.eu).



complex codes and our ability to build forms of settlement that are both permanent and susceptible to transformation.

Urban remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 1999) fosters new forms of “mixed lives” (Turkle, 2011), continuously renegotiating the boundaries between what is “analogue” and what is “digital”—which in turn gives rise to new poetics of space, involving new languages and, possibly, new contents.

A preliminary observation is needed: perceived space and “acted” space are not entirely distinguishable experiences nowadays (as testified by the popularity of perspectives and concepts such as the sensorimotor paradigm, enactive perception and haptic eye<sup>2</sup>). I am not completely sure they have ever been distinguishable, but the ever-growing penetration of media within the urban fabric certainly fosters new forms of intertwining. Not only because media are more and more explicitly integrated into the urban fabric as screens or other forms of information supply—according to the post-media view that acknowledges the new character of our mixed and convergent era (Krauss, 2006). Maybe there is something even more fundamental at core level: again drawing on McLuhan, the main reason is that media *transform the sensorium*—that is, the paradigm of our sensorial experience, or, as Ong (1967) defined it, “The patterned, patterning, coordinated world of the sense experience; the entire sensory apparatus as an operational complex”. Changes in perceived space, therefore, open up new possibilities for action.

Let me briefly sketch some of the ways ICTs change the sensorium. First of all, they enable a much greater amount of data to impact our senses: “augmented reality” is a product of this “augmented sensitivity”. In turn, this augmented sensitivity appears to be fostering a shift of the sensorium itself. From this perspective, the sensorium is shifting from a paradigm of well-distinct, specialized senses towards an indistinct paradigm of mutually-translating senses dominated by touch (which McLuhan correctly identified as the “interplay of senses”) (McLuhan, 1996). From this crossmodal spatial experience, augmented reality technologies can be read precisely as enabling users to “touch” the surface of things: our eye (extended in our camera, cursor, mobile phone camera etc.) “touches” the space and data comes out of it. The prominence of

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<sup>2</sup> On enactive perception and sensorimotor paradigm, see among the others O’Regan & Noe, 2001; on the haptic eye, see Merleau-Ponty, 2006.

tactility is incarnated even more explicitly as the driving design force of the majority of contemporary user interfaces. We want to touch stuff and see things happen (which is, incidentally, a working definition of “magic”): we touch to see, we touch to listen, we touch to remember.

This paradigmatic change fosters a new sense of reciprocity through the “always-on” status of contemporary media. Being in a state of what James E. Katz calls “perpetual contact” (Katz, 2004) not only enables but somehow *forces* us to be “in touch” with our social graph, and indeed the success of social networking utilities can be interpreted as a response to a growing effective *need* for such tools.

The augmentation of our sensitivity is ripe with consequences. New forms of resistance to the “strategies” of power (as De Certeau called them) are opened by this reconfiguration of the sensorium. Yet along with (and inseparable from) these new possibilities come new possible forms of discipline of urban bodies and discourses. An increased paradigm of choices runs the risk of imploding in hetero-direction and, as such, of fostering conformism.

Which leads us to our second observation: the city has *always* been a medium. Hyper-mediality (the condition in which the boundaries between media and environment become blurred) is only the latest development of a long-running process. This has been discussed at length, of course, but is particularly evident to me as an Italian. European cities have grown historically around their churches. Entire cosmologies, built around the duality of the sacred and the profane, have been vehiculated through spatial relationships. Not only the church itself is a space featuring the utmost density of codes, but consider its relationship with its square and bell tower; or, again, the geometrical—and symbolic—relationship between the bell tower and the other buildings. Or the inclusive audiospace described by the bells, with their ability to organise bodies and goods in the urban space, and to signal the cyclic ceremonial coincidence between sacred time *and* sacred space which was (and to some extent still is) the central axis of city life (Corbin, 1994; Illich, 2010).

Examples could go on indefinitely; yet the main point here is that cities have always communicated—and have done so by means of *immersion*, that is by establishing common, shared and symbolically dense spaces of experience to be embedded in through the sensorium. The implications of this space were of utmost importance: for instance, in defining and

identifying the boundaries of identity, while emarginating “the stranger” as the individual showing a lack of adjustment to its specific affordances.

There is certainly nothing new in the ability of the city to communicate. However, what changes is the *remediation* of the urban space, which entails a *transformation of the forms of immersion* offered by the city, and therefore of the possible contents being communicated. Augmented Reality technologies effectively cover urban space with layers of information whose configurations change according to each user. While the individual dimension of the sensorium has always impacted the experience of immersion (for example, by separating “strangers” from “non-strangers”), the technology owned by the individual now impacts and diversifies the experience of immersion. Does the “shared space of experience” remain a shared, common space when the access to its significance is increasingly related to the possession of specific hardware/software combinations?

Conversely, on the “democratization” side, the possibility of accessing and decoding specific meanings today can generally bypass the requirement of specific codified knowledge (of “knowing about” the city) and can be enacted by anyone. The layers of history, architecture and language that have been part of urban space have been peeled back, remediated, digitised and piled back on, for anyone to access. By waving my smartphone around with an app such as Layar, or any other augmented reality application, I am accessing an (arbitrarily) translated, edited but otherwise *functional* version of those layers of knowledge that make up immersion. My technological gear (which is a function of my capital, positioning and social graph) potentially renders much of my knowledge about the city irrelevant, at the same time supplying me with copious amounts of the same knowledge.

In this sense the city becomes (or pretends to become, or is perceived as becoming, or is marketed as becoming) *transparent*, exposed. The decoding of its layers of meaning becomes semi-automatic. Yet is a poetry of space possible in such a transparent space? Stripped of its opacity, the city bares all of its stories for everyone to see: what remains is a naked city with a superimposed (though hyper-dense and ever-growing) informational layer. In other words: can a “naked city” be inspirational? As far as the poetic of space is concerned, one of the transformations at stake is related to the remediation of *flânerie*.

## **2. *Flânerie* and sociability: from inclusive aesthetics to participation**

It was Georg Simmel who saw existential detachment as a product of the city; and detachment is a precondition for *flânerie*. *Flânerie* could only develop in the city. “Look but don’t touch” is the *flâneur’s* motto. And losing oneself within the urban space, effectively becoming *driven by urban space*, experiencing visual immersion at its foremost, has often been defined (first by Benjamin, of course) as one of the quintessential “modern” spatial practices. Walking around the city as a *flâneur*, Benjamin, Baudelaire and the Situationists would argue, is the best way to let urban space tell its stories—that is, to unveil its layer of information to our sensitivity. And by moving in a deliberately purposeless way, one can escape the functional logics of spatial arrangement (that is, for most of this thinkers, the logics of capital) as much as possible. Of course the logic of capital soon appropriated *flânerie* by replacing the arcade with the department store first and the shopping mall later—where an empty (yet perfectly functional) proxy of *flânerie* has since been offered at the price of consumption, as Bauman, among the others, poignantly noticed (Bauman & Lyon, 2012).

*Flânerie* is one of the fascinating paradoxes of modernity: one of the paramount acts of urban freedom (a subtraction from the capitalist logics regulating the city) is letting the metropolis itself (the paradigmatic structure of modernity) appropriate the body and the senses, and by doing so, in a thrilling reversal, effectively (if momentarily) re-appropriate city space.

Yet—what happens to remediated *flânerie* in the kind of urban space I just described, which is at the same time intensively shared and highly personal? I don’t mean to discuss “new” forms of *flânerie*—that has been done ad nauseam: moviegoing, Disneyland, hypertext, TV zapping, all those have been described as new forms of *flânerie* at some point. Instead, what I am interested in is: what happens to the experience of “letting urban space drive our body”—and to the immersive communication—when our sensitivity is augmented?

I would argue that the layers of information about urban space accessed by augmented sensitivity effectively exasperate the *functionalisation* of the same spaces. Data has meaning only when queried: and queries are formulated according to functional requirements. The layers of information

are often experienced as part of consumption practices of various kinds, including cultural consumption, tourism and entertainment.

One last note on *flânerie*. For Baudelaire, Benjamin and Debord, the point may not have been the “authenticity” of the experience of *flânerie*, on which most commentators have been focusing. The point may have been “immersion as key to inspiration”: the city as the engine of further processes of signification and ποιέω (*poiesis*). In this sense, augmented reality, precisely because it is entangled in a layer of (more or less forced) sociability, offers great and yet under-explored possibilities: Foursquare check-ins, Facebook statuses, Tweets, may—*when seen from above*—be the verses of a kind of urban poetry far beyond anything produced so far. Immense amounts of information, stories and tales on, about and around urban space are produced every day by each and every one of us (bar those who are offline).

Of course, new aesthetics are needed to interpret such works, but the point here is that *flânerie* in itself may have changed beyond recognition, yet its purpose (to draw inspiration from the layers of information offered by the urban space) may have remained vital. The “naked city” might be a trick of the light for those of us who grew up in spaces to some extent closer to Baudelaire’s than that of Foursquare creator Naveen Selvadurai.

Moreover, our contemporary, touch-intensive sensorium is by and large incompatible with Baudelaire’s and Benjamin’s sight-dominated paradigm: our experience of space is more and more dominated by a requirement of “touch”. According to McLuhan, in fact, “it begins to be evident that ‘touch’ is not skin, but the interplay of senses, and ‘keeping in touch’ or ‘getting in touch’ is a matter of fruitful meeting of the senses, of sight translated into sound and sound into movement, and taste, and smell” (McLuhan, 1996, p. 60)

And what about sociability, in the era of social networks, flash mobs, geolocalization? As audio-tactile perception becomes dominant (along with its imperative of “being together”<sup>3</sup>), urban space reconfigures itself to accommodate for it, extending itself as a haptic, audiotactile environment. Yet what is gained in terms of complexification and stratification of space is lost in the effective possibility of withdrawing oneself from consumption

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<sup>3</sup> According to McLuhan, “acoustic space has no centre and no margins”, while tactility is favoured by the simultaneity of mixed stimuli. Audio-tactile involving and inclusive environments harkens back to the tribal era, overcoming detachment, fragmentation, individualism of modernity (McLuhan, 1969).

and other solicitations. We are inside this space whether we like it or not, and withdrawal is becoming ever more expensive (to the point of being impossible for most of us). Among such solicitations is a sociability that becomes imperative: do things together, see things together, join, share, are the verbs of the day. *Flânerie* was a solitary experience, yet now deliberate solitude has become a luxury for many of us.

Social participation is a topical issue today, and is rather ambivalent. On one hand, any technological determinism should be rejected, be it in its enthusiastic or pessimistic version, as technology cannot “produce” participation *per se*: therefore, one issue to be addressed is certainly how we can render our cities more social rather than simply more high-tech.

Another important issue may be how to exceed the narrow but, up to this moment, dominant commercial scope of geolocation apps; in other words, whether mobile and location-based apps can be used behind personalized consumption and sharing preferences with an in-group of like-minded people; how new networked publics can be activated thanks to digital media, beyond top-down or bottom-up, but peer-to-peer; how to design interventions where individual use does not deplete the commons but instead adds value to the whole, moving towards a condition of “augmented deliberation”; how digital media can help to strengthen the sense of belonging and commitment to locality, that is, citizen engagement with collective urban issues and the power to act on them. The crucial words here are inclusiveness, access and agency: conceptual shifts in the notion of dwelling from “possession” to the right to act, collectively, for common goals. Participation can certainly take a step beyond crowdsourcing existing issues, where people only have a signalling role and/or a role as generators of ideas, but their right or capacity to act remains limited.

Moreover, another important issue is related to how ICTs function in the management of the struggle over the meaning of space (when contested among different groups), through participation, citizen journalism, coordination and so on. Then contiguity, transitivity and the mutual shaping of digital and material environment certainly set up new conditions for agency.

### 3. Building analytical frameworks for the media/city nexus

In any case, a new, interdisciplinary analytical framework is much needed in order to understand the city as a permanent workshop of innovative processes and as a magnifier to observe contemporary life. This approach should attempt to bring together aesthetic, sociological, anthropological, technological, historical and geographical sensibilities.

This realisation was the starting point of the “Media & the City” Temporary Working Group, established in mid-2011 within ECREA. The group’s key priority is to foster a productive and empirically grounded dialogue among different perspectives, frames, competences, experiences and projects; moreover it has been establishing connections with other research and institutional bodies with similar interests.

The Working Group has grown around a core interest particularly suitable for this cooperative and interdisciplinary effort. This core is composed of three main focuses, namely:

- a) *Media representations of urban space* and of related social processes;
- b) *Cities as spaces for media usage and social practices*, and the influence of media in the experience of cities (including: geo-location, geo-annotation, new public and private spaces);
- c) *The presence of media in the urban contexts* (including: new forms of architecture, the impact of security technologies, new forms of interaction with city spaces...).

While enthusiastic views on the possibilities of buildings to be “transformed from enclosed shelters into open environment” abound (as Paola Antonelli, senior curator in the Department of Architecture and Design at Moma NY once said<sup>4</sup>), on the other side there is a growing awareness that technological progress always brings formal innovation, which starts as creative flair, but may soon lapse into routine. Moreover, that exhibition has a dark side called surveillance (Bauman & Lyon, 2012).

The enthusiastic view of cities as “setting up a path that is transforming them into information parkour and enriching our lives with emotions, motion, direction, depth, and freedom”<sup>5</sup> is balanced by the new concern with tracking, exposition, transparency and new vulnerabilities (one of the

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<sup>4</sup> In *Talk to me. Design and the communication between people and objects*, Exhibition Catalogue, MOMA, New York, 2011, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

last issues being the uses of drones for urban surveillance). The ways in which attitudes and practices are changing under conditions of intensifying surveillance, and the way in which people comply with, negotiate or resist surveillance today are certainly among the emerging topics in the study of the media/city nexus.

It seems to me that one of the main goals of projects such as *Media & the City* is precisely that of engaging and disarming techno-utopian views of the relationship between ICTs and the city, fostering a critical and empirically grounded approach to what is actually happening instead.

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## INTRODUCTION

### TOWARDS A NEW COMPLEXITY: REASONS FOR MEDIA AND THE CITY

SIMONE TOSONI AND MATTEO TARANTINO

As two inherently “human” products—ambiguously *in-between* structure and agency, *langue* and *parole*—both cities and communication have been an endless source of fascination for human beings, including social science scholars. What’s more, modernity has been pushing cities and communications (or more specifically, media) closer and closer to the centre of our lives, thus increasing the interest for an analysis of their intersection.

Walter Benjamin and George Simmel could be considered among the forefathers of this interest in how the modern metropolis communicates and is communicated (McQuire, 2008). Although their approach to communication was obviously not systematic, it is impossible not to be fascinated by the precognitive reflections of Benjamin on how everyday life became common knowledge in the new urban space (the “glass house” which he addressed quite enthusiastically) or by Simmel’s analyses on how the city restructures perception.

Both authors were concerned with epochal transformations. This view of cities restructuring communication and sociality, or, conversely, of media transforming the very nature of urban space (often by making it null and void, or unnecessary) has been a strong current in social sciences for many years. Be it blissful transcendence or apocalypse, this view of the media/city relationship as macro-transformation has produced a wealth of works in the last decades. This is especially true since the transformations brought forward by post-fordism and neoliberalism have become manifest in the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, the spatio-temporal changes related to what has come to be known as “globalization” were too large, urgent and exciting not to attract and orient scholarly reflection. Some generalizations

and abstractions were an acceptable price to pay to come to grips with such large-scale phenomena. So cities became nodes, (e.g. Sassen, 1994; Castells, 1996; Borja & Castells, 1997), disappeared, became digital (Mitchell, 1996; Graham, 2004), atomized, diffused.

Yet, since the 2000s, demand has been growing for another research direction, more focused on what people actually do with media and cities; how cities actually negotiate ICTs affordances; how media languages and sociotechnical systems remediate urban space. An important step has been Stephen Graham's research manifesto (2004) which criticised new media studies as "city-blind" and called for empirically-grounded research on the media/city nexus: a challenge that has since been accepted by many scholars. Yet this has proven to be an equally, if not more difficult undertaking than macro-analyses. In-depth work on cities always reveals a wealth of interconnected phenomena that require multi-disciplinary efforts to be properly addressed; focusing on communications makes no exception. Actually, it could be argued that most, if not all, contemporary urban processes feature a media component. As media become diffused, practices enacted by city users are increasingly intertwined and dependent on communication technologies. Thus media content becomes active in processes of socio-spatial production beyond the traditional (and well-studied) impact on legitimation and perception. This calls for media studies to rethink methods and theories to address this new object. This need is also shared by urban studies, since materiality, social actors, representations and practices are tied into a knot in which the elements can be addressed alone (or even in pairs), escaping the grip of critical theory to some extent.

When two complex objects like media and urban space come to interact, narrow analytical lenses must be discarded. In our view, this problem has haunted urban studies for some years now. By definition a cross-disciplinary field, Urban Studies has nonetheless shown a certain disdain to take up the analytical paradigms of media studies. In the 2010 world congress of RC21—a large urban studies international network—less than ten papers out of several hundreds were explicitly concerned with media. Yet if we are to understand how media and cities go together at the micro level we need to go beyond disciplinary borders: a by no means conclusive list of paradigms to mobilise would comprise semiotics, sociology, science and technology studies, urban studies, specialized media studies, audience studies, architecture and so on. We can perhaps summarise the core concerns of this line of research (which produced

edited works including Eckart, 2008 and McQuire, Martin & Nederer, 2009) within three distinct areas: how people perceive and represent urban space; what they do with media in urban space; and what role is played by media in the social production of urban space itself. This tripartite structure also informs this volume, although each part shares concerns and perspectives with the other two.

Part one is dedicated to “Media and the Social Shaping of Urban Space”—that is, it examines the feedback processes between media and urban space. In Chapter I, Matteo Tarantino and Simone Tosoni illustrate a possible analytical model of spatial production processes and apply it to a conflict over a neighbourhood in Milan, Italy. While the conflict opposes migrants and Italian residents, the analysis allows to overcome simplistic readings of the conflict as an “ethnic” one (as a “culture clash”) and brings to the fore the wealth of complex negotiations entailed by the conflict at the symbolic, physical and pragmatic levels. In Chapter II, Seija Ridell articulates in a McLuhanian framework the notion of the contemporary city as a “medium of media”, able to re-mediate existing communication technologies and paradigms. Sami Kolamo’s work (Chapter III) deals with how urban space is impacted by large-scale football events. Kolamo’s analysis examines from a critical standpoint the negotiations of the needs of sport spectacle and media apparatuses and the specificities of the urban contexts in which such processes take place. In Chapter IV, Christian Oggolder mobilizes graph theory to uphold the argument of a loss of centrality of the city due to the increased density of ICT infrastructure. In Chapter V, Federica Timeto deals with a form of gamification of civic engagement, transformed in a series of missions through which users can gain points by improving city space (a topic which returns in Chapter IX). Finally, in Chapter VI, Moira Sweeney analyses how the representations of the Dublin docklands influence and reflect the actual renovation processes undergoing in the area.

Part two deals with “Media practices in urban context”, or with how urban spaces interact with ICT-related practices enacted by subjects. Barbara Scifo’s work (Chapter VII) draws from research on Italian youth to tell us how GIS-enabled camera-phones are used in the practices of Italian teenagers dealing with their position in space. Chapter VIII continues the reflection on mobile phones, as Satomi Sugiyama examines how the structure of Japanese public spaces and social norms constrains the practices of use of this technology in urban settings. In Chapter IX, Gabriele Ferri and Patrick Coppock discuss “urban games”, or ludic

practices enacted in and with urban space, and their potential for civic engagement. In Chapter X, Caruso, Fassone, Ferri and Salvador propose a taxonomy of ludic applications of geo-localisation in urban spaces: a framework that will be useful to future empirical studies of these practices. The concluding chapter of Part two (Chapter XI) deals with ICTs and urban catastrophe, as Emiliano Trerè and Manuela Farinosi examine how citizen journalism acted as a resource mobilized by the citizens of the Italian city of L'Aquila after a disastrous earthquake.

The third and final part of the volume deals with “City representations, media imageries and urban experience”—i.e. with the strategies through which social actors (individual or collective) represent urban space. In Chapter XII, Miriam De Rosa uses the case of an interactive film by Antoine Viviani composed by an assemblage of geo-localized “chapters” by different users, as an example of a renegotiation of urban imagery through database logics. Katalin Fehér (Chapter XIII) assumes as the lynchpin of her analysis the social construct of “city identity” and discusses how the “digital” part of this identity (i.e. the one emerging from the interaction of data flows) is produced. Gabriella Sandstig (Chapter XIV) focuses on a specific brand of urban perception: that of personal security. Sandstig’s work draws from the perspective of cultivation theory applied to quantitative data to show how media representations of urban space security impact the mobility practices of the individuals. Chapter XV deals with communication and monumentality, as Gonca Noyan discusses how the symbolic value of an historical bridge in Mostar (Bosnia and Herzegovina) has been shaped by competing discourses throughout history. Walter Mattana and Marianna Ciancia (Chapter XVI) discuss *Imagine Milan*, a project for the collection of multimedia materials dealing with place identity in the capital of Lombardy. Their work shows the strong connection between place identity and the individual stories of inhabitants, thus stressing the connection between individual practices and shared representations of spaces. Finally, Amedeo D’Adamo (chapter XVII) specifically focuses on cinematic representations of urban space, discussing in particular the influence of Dantean architectural conceptions on the representation of cities in modern cinema.

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**PART I.**

**MEDIA AND THE SOCIAL SHAPING  
OF URBAN SPACE**

# CHAPTER I

## MEDIA AND THE SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF URBAN SPACE: TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO THE CONTROVERSIAL NATURE OF URBAN SPACE

MATTEO TARANTINO AND SIMONE TOSONI<sup>1</sup>

This chapter articulates an approach to sociospatial production drawing on social geography (first section), STS and media studies (second section), in order to address the complexity of urban space in contexts of pervasive ICTs. The third section will apply the model to an ongoing sociospatial controversy regarding the Paolo Sarpi area in Milan.

### **1. Space as a social product**

Henri Lefebvre (1991) and his subsequent re-readings (e.g. Soja 1989, 1996; Mitchell 1996, 1998; Harvey, 1989) pushed the social sciences to overcome *a priori* conceptualizations of space in favour of its interpretation as a social product. Lefebvre's *trialectics* among *spatial practice*, *representations of space* (conceived, planned space) and *representational space* (space as lived and appropriated by social actors, also through imagination)<sup>2</sup>, which can also be read from another

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank Trevor Pinch for its precious commentary on the chapter.

<sup>2</sup> Unwin (2009, p. 18) remarks that many of Lefebvre's applications often simplify and reinterpret his concepts (see also Soja, 1996, p. 8). Interpretations of "representational space" are particularly numerous (Dimendberg, 1998). Our paper leans towards Harvey's reading of them as "mental inventions (codes, signs, 'spatial discourses', utopian plans, imaginary landscapes, and even material constructs such as symbolic spaces, particularly built environments, paintings,



perspective as the interplay of practices, perceptions and physicality (the social, mental and physical spaces of Lefebvre–1991, p. 11)<sup>3</sup>, produces *human space*, “simultaneously material object or product, the medium of social relations, and the reproducer of material objects and social relations” (Gottdiener, 1985, p. 129). As Adams (2009, p. 175) remarks, with respect to other similarly tripartite distinctions (such as Sacks’ nature/meaning/social relations, or Gould and White’s environment/behaviour/information), Lefebvre’s scheme “covers the same terrain without using mutually exclusive terms” – thus maintaining “unity”.

While not the first to stress the social *nature* of space (Unwin 2000, p. 12, points to the “long tradition” within geography “with the claim that space can be shaped from the social meanings”, dating back at least to Kirk, 1952), Lefebvre’s crucial contribution was to bring *imagined space* into the dynamic of spatial production as the cornerstone to a unified approach to spatial theory. Lefebvre’s effort drew from Castoriadis’ (1975) concept of “imaginary” and, arguably, Kevin Lynch’s seminal work on the “image of the city” (Lynch, 1960) wherein the author illustrates the cognitive role played by “mental images” in the orienting practices of urban dwellers. “Imaginariness” is hereby intended as the ensemble of “representations” through which members of a social group “imagine their social existence” and that of their surrounding world and relationships (Taylor, 2004, p. 23). As such, they vary along cultural and ethnic axes (see for example Hayden, 1997; Arefi & Meyers, 2003): indeed, one of Lefebvre’s main points is that “each society produces its own space” (1991, p. 29). For example, McCann (1999) uses Lefebvre’s triad to understand the racial tensions underpinning a riot in Lexington by showing how imaginary urban geographies correlate strongly with representations of racial identities.

As a social product, space is a potential object of controversy among actors competing to establish a specific “space” as dominant. This is especially true for urban space, where governance models are plural and fragmented and transformation processes are constant. Such conflicts vary in scope. From his Marxist perspective, Lefebvre theorized a macro-conflict with the logic of capitalism trying to establish its own

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museums and the like) that imagine new meanings or possibilities for spatial practices” (Harvey, 1989, p. 218).

<sup>3</sup> For a critique of this notion of “social production” see Unwin, 2009. For a distinction between “space” and “place” where social construction applies to the second but not the first, see Gieryn, 2000; also Harvey, 1996.

“representation of space” (vehiculated by the maps, projects and discourses of architects, planners and other specialists) as dominant: a functional, homogeneous, formalized “abstract space”, to be superimposed upon the vital and differentiated space of “authentic” human life. This superimposition requires the erasure of the “history” of lived space, and of the very nature of this conflict. In this sense, being sites of authentic living (and not of formal abstraction), representational spaces open the potential for “thinking differently” about space, engaging in a dynamic of spatial resistance (1991, p. 39).

Particularly intense conflicts erupt over *public urban space*, the alleged “decline” of which represents a key preoccupation of Lefebvre himself and others (e.g. Lefebvre, 1991, 1996, p. XIV; Jacobs, 1968; Sorkin, 1992). Neal defines public space as “all areas that are open and accessible to all members of the public in a society, in principle though not necessarily in practice” (2010, pp. 1-2). Mitchell (1996, p. 2) identifies two main and competing definitions of public space (see also Mitchell, 1999, p. 128): as “a space marked by free interaction and the absence of coercion by powerful institutions [...], an unconstrained space within which political movements can organise and expand into wider arenas”, and as a regulated retreat where a “properly behaved public might experience the spectacle of the city”. Mitchell then applies Lefebvre to a controversy about the legitimate uses of a park in Berkeley, and argues that the first definition (unconstrained space) is akin to “representational spaces”, whereas the second coincides with “representations of space”.

Like Mitchell, McCann reads riots as practices of resistance against power-backed inscriptions of representations of space: i.e. riots are practices bridging representations of space and representational spaces, as they work “within the bounds of the conceived abstract spaces of planners and architects while simultaneously being shaped by individuals’ perceptions and uses of space” (McCann, 1999, p. 151). Both McCann and Mitchell (along with others, e.g. Castells, 1983; Soja 2000; contrast with Pickvance, 1985) sympathise with the “unlawful” practices of their subjects and tend to consider them as legitimate acts of resistance, echoing Michel De Certeau’s (1984) distinction between the “strategies” enacted by institutions and the “tactics” enacted by subjects. These authors tend to appreciate the “progressive” value of traditionally dysfunctional places such as “slums, *barrios* and *favellas* [sic] [...] as localised ‘reappropriations’ of space that may furnish examples of such ‘representational spaces’ or ‘spaces of representations’ by which certain sites are removed or severed

from the governing spatialisation and returned to the realm of ‘communitas’” (Shields, 1998, p. 165).

The Gramscian hegemony-resistance frame also informs studies regarding the role of media in processes of spatial production, which mostly assume mass media representations of actors and spaces involved in spatial conflicts as their foremost (and thus *isolated*) object. Through critical discourse analysis, these studies examine either how media representations strengthen institutional representations of space (e.g. Sundberg & Kaserman, 2007) or how local practices of discourse production and/or media usage enacted by marginalized communities (within mediated spaces of representations) act as means of resistance against institutional narratives. However, as suggested by Thrift (2004, p. 44) precisely in relation to De Certeau, the “humanistic romanticism” of this dichotomic reading of urban conflict (which ultimately sets physical space and architecture against immaterial resistance practices—see also Farias, 2011) clouds an appreciation of the hybrid and intertwined nature of spatial practices—if we accept that “representational spaces”, “spatial practices” and “representations of space” are into an actual relationship of co-construction (or, in Lefebvre’s terms, *co-determination*).

The dualistic option is further weakened by the transformations brought about by (a) the increased presence of media in contemporary societies due to an increased portability of ICTs and (b) the “convergence” of media platforms towards a common digital codification, which has an impact on the temporal and spatial coordinates of practices of discourse circulation. This “ubiquity” produces continually evolving “mediascapes” (Appadurai, 1996) of artefacts, circuits and practices which, as Graham (2004, p. 4) remarks, were at one time studied as *substitutive* of urban space (e.g. Webber, 1968; Pascal, 1987), but are now increasingly understood in their interactive relationship with it. Indeed, mediascapes continuously supplement, extend, curb or otherwise negotiate all three of Lefebvre’s “spaces”—and therefore profoundly impact the production of urban space.

We will return on these issues below: for now, let us simply state our starting point. We argue that the analysis of contemporary urban spatial conflicts requires an integrated approach that (a) maintains the dynamic nature of social space as a social product; that is, the notion that social space *exists* as the interrelation among physicality, representations and

practices<sup>4</sup> (b) avoids the pitfalls of social and technological determinisms and (c) takes the role of the communication technologies into due consideration. We will outline such a model in the following sections.

## 2. Towards a unified approach

The socio-spatial approach frames urban space as a social product defining different sets of perceived affordances and constraints<sup>5</sup> for social action. This product undergoes continuous processes of co-shaping on three interrelated levels:

(a) Its *material* and *morphological* (i.e. pertaining to form and structure) dimensions, shaped for example by planning and construction processes.

(b) The *practices* it hosts, since each social practice contributes to shape and reshape the perceived affordances and constraints for any other social actor. Both the formal and informal rules of urban space usage participate to its social shaping, and the relationship among practices and space must be addressed as a relationship of co-construction.

(c) Its *social representations*, which influence the perceived character of affordances and constraints. These representations include descriptions of the morphology, definitions of legitimate practices, and depictions of all the social actors enacting these practices.

This approach to the social production of urban space involves two critical points:

(a) The vast array of social actors, with varying levels of power, who contribute to the shaping process at each level. The relationship of each actor's contribution with all the others' can range from mutual

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<sup>4</sup> While we analytically separate "practices" and "representations", we are well aware that both perceptions and representations can be addressed not only in their content but also in their pragmatic aspect; that is, as "practices".

<sup>5</sup> While the original formulations of the concepts of "affordance" (Gibson 1977, 1979) and "constraint" refer to an objective quality of an object, irrespective of their perceptions or interpretations, subsequent readings (e.g. Norman 1987, 1990) switched the attention to "perceived" affordances and constraints, as actually structuring social actors' practices.

reinforcement to incompatibility and social conflict. Therefore, urban space can be addressed as a *controversial social object*.

(b) The intricate relationships among all the heterogeneous elements involved (morphology, practices, symbolic level, social actors), each of which shapes and is shaped by the others.

We argue that these points can be addressed by an approach borrowing concepts from both Science and Technology and Media studies.

## **2.1 Dealing with complexity I (with a little help from STS): Urban Space as a Controversial Object**

The conceptualisation of urban space as socially produced enables a methodological dialogue with STS and their attempt to account for the processes of social shaping of technological artefacts, conceived as material objects and as sets of affordances and constraints for their users.

Attempts to bridge STS and Urban Studies have increased in number, with Actor-Network Theory (Callon, 1986, 1987, 1991; Latour, 1987, 1988, 1999) playing a lead role (culminating in Farias & Bender, 2009; Farias, 2011). For Aibar and Bijker (1997) this bridging has its origins in the mid-1980s along with a new attention towards “the role of politics and cultural norms and values in the shaping of urban technological systems. Urban technology is now put into the broader context of urban culture, politics, and socioeconomic activities (...). Technology is considered to be socially shaped, at least partially; it is no longer treated as a given, unyielding, and exogenous factor framing other dimensions of life in the city” (1997, pp. 5-6). Among these new STS approaches to the city (for a review, see Johnson-McGrath, 1997), Aibar and Bijker’s worked on the Cerdà Plan for the Extension of Barcelona, conceiving town planning as a technology and the city as an artefact.

On those heels, Graham and Marvin attempted to integrate the leading approaches in STS (Social Construction of Technology, Large Technical System and ANT) with their studies on urban telecommunication infrastructure (1996) and on the phenomenon of splintering urbanism (2001). On the other hand Coutard and Guy (2007) criticised the “splintering” hypothesis, suggesting that thanks to a systematic dialogue with STS, Urban Studies could overcome their dystopian attitude and their “intellectually and politically disabling technological pessimism” (p. 713).

Gieryn (2002) borrowed from STS the theoretical tools of heterogeneous design, black boxing, and interpretative flexibility as “middle range” concepts to make “the abstractions of ‘structuration’ and ‘reproduction’ (...) more friendly for empirical analysis” (p. 45) and used them on the social construction of buildings (a laboratory at Cornell University), conceived as an attempt to stabilise the connection between agency and structure. Hommels (2005; see also 2005b), addressed urban obduracy through SCOT, ANT and LTS, clarifying the implications, focuses and potentialities of each approach, while also renewing the call to a dialogue with STS, judging the work done so far episodic and discontinuous at best.

The works we mentioned share a common focus on the material production of urban space (the first point of our model) or on the shaping of urban technological infrastructures. However, this narrow focus appears to be more related to STS’s traditional disciplinary interests than to a true theoretical option. We argue that STS can provide powerful analytical tools to approach urban space as a multi-layered (physical, pragmatic and symbolic) social artefact. Our attempt will rely on an eclectic borrowing and re-adaptation of theoretical and sensitising concepts (Blumer, 1954) derived from different approaches, and in particular from ANT and SCOT.

Symbolic representations of space have a pivotal role for us; we define space as always potentially controversial; and we acknowledge the plurality of relevant social actors that concur to the social production of space. These three options echo the framework of the SCOT approach, originally proposed by Pinch and Bijker (Pinch & Bijker, 1984; Bijker, 1987, 1995; Pinch, 1996, 2003, 2009; Pinch & Kline, 1996). Bearing in mind that SCOT constitutes more of a flexible interpretative strategy than a formulaic and standardized methodology, the approach can be summarized in four main points. “First, the notion of a relevant social group is introduced. Such a group is defined as a group which shares a particular meaning of the technology. (...) The second part of SCOT is the idea of ‘interpretative flexibility’ which (...) is a notion developed in the study of science. This idea points to the radically different meanings which technologies can acquire for different social groups (...). The third key element of SCOT is the process of closure or stabilisation whereby the interpretative flexibility of an artifact vanishes. Particular closure mechanisms can be identified which lead to some meanings vanishing” (Pinch, 1998, pp. 9-10). The last point relates “the content of a technological artifact to the wider socio-political milieu. (...) Obviously, the sociocultural and political situation of a social group shapes its norms