

VIRTUAL SPACE AS A PUBLIC SPHERE: RETHINKING THE POLITICAL AND PROFESSIONAL AGENDA OF SPATIAL PLANNING AND DESIGN

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Even we have not been able to recognize its whole transformative effects within ten to fifteen years, relatively a short period of time for human civilization; communication systems (internet, wireless application protocols, teleconference systems etc.) and simulation technologies have radically shifted the conventional understanding of space concept. In the societies that succeeded to integrate technology into everyday life, socio-spatial practices in relational terms are currently defining new platforms to reproduce themselves: next generation of public sphere, which is virtual one. While such a transformation has a potential to construct new socialities and political formations, which could not have a chance to be experimented in 'real' space it also has a challenge to trigger a kind of fragmentation in urban space, with its highly increasing dominance. The current condition about the issue, calls for spatial planners, designers and policy makers to develop a holistic theoretical framework on both inner characteristics of virtual space and its relationship with the real space in urban context. What we need here is not a purely technologically deterministic discourse, but a socio-critical point of view. In this sense, the main aim of the paper is to discuss the syntactic structure of virtual environments that tend to construct new collective meanings and publicness; and the relevancy of public space in emerging context. While doing this, the problem statement ends with the questions of how planners and designers can benefit the means of virtual space within a participatory planning process and for the design of high-performance real urban space.

A CONTEXTUAL AND STRUCTURAL CONCEPTUALIZATION OF CYBERSPACE

Netropolis, cyberspace, e-agora, telepresence are among some terms, which abound in the popular science literature today. The way they are used, however, mostly result in an immature and superficial understanding of the world they represent. This is not because of the naivety of the common

reader at all, but rather of their content which refer to technical as well as disciplinary issues. When scrutinized closely, their relationship with the problematic of space and time is also revealed; leaving those disciplines, the endeavor of which is spatial analysis such as geography, urban planning, architecture etc., in a position where they are forced to take in to account the conceptualizations of the current era, the information age. Among these concepts virtual space appears to be in the foreground.

What is important for environmental planners and designers in this context is to understand how virtual space impinges on their own domain of analysis, particularly on the problematic of public sphere and public place. Any attempt to search for the original structure and effects, albeit indirect, of virtual spaces, calls for the clarification and identification of the terms "public" and "place".

To Tuan (1977, 4), "...Places are centers of felt value, where biological needs are satisfied." Relph (1976, 43), on the other hand, defines places as centers of action and intention, foci where profound human existence can be observed. Other definitions show that a place is the result of an amalgam of psychological and behavioral processes (Porteous, 1977; Pocock and Hudson, 1978), in which neutral physical/spatial formations are, first appropriated upon which values are assigned. One such definition categorizes these under three, such as the processes pertaining to physical/spatial formation, social context and construction of meaning (Adams, 1991, cited in Tanney, 1997a), where, the first involves the description in terms of physical/spatial form, the second referring to the positioning of the society in the first; and, third, describing the emotional structure of the first two in the individual and the collective mind. Thus, a place can be understood as a vital source of individual as well as social identity in terms of socio-spatial orientation.

THE SEARCH FOR A NEW VERSION OF SYNTACTIC STRUCTURE OF VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT

At this point, Graham and Marvin's (1996) comparison of attributes of urban places and electronic spaces, "inside" telematics using computer software, might prove useful to better understand the constituents of virtual space:

Urban Places	Electronic Spaces
Territory	Network
Material	Immaterial
Visible	Invisible
Actual	Virtual/ Abstract
Tangible	Intangible
Embedded	Disembedded
Fixity	Motion/Flux
Euclidian/Social Space	Logical Space

The obvious difference between the two sets of attributes is about the level of materiality of their components, immediately bringing in mind the determination of place as a physical process where, essentially, almost every component can be explained in physical terms. Through physical form, the need to represent, recognize and identify a place is satisfied. These are also indispensable features of behavioral psychology. For instance, the feeling of being inside as against being outside is crucial for experiencing a place. In this sense, doors, walls, gateways and other

1. <http://www.well.com>

2. See <http://www.planet9.com/> and <http://diwww.epfl.ch/~rchavarr/VR/VirtualCities.html>

physical thresholds or passages are basic structural elements in a range of varying physical/spatial schemes of different scales from home to town (Relph, 1976, 49).

While it is normal to expect an abundance of physical features in urban places, whether one should look for similar settings in virtual space is a question, yet to be answered. If the medium of virtual space creates a new spatial language then the answer is no. However, the present structure of virtual space renders such an argument both logical and possible. The extent of technological progress related to virtual space has reached a level and capability where architectural metaphors of the real world can be replicated. With its space simulation as a box, the Sierra Room is an example of virtual meeting platform. Also, one of the virtual communities, WELL provides (1) the sense of place through a building, in which one can walk down its halls and peek at the signs on its doors which open to different rooms of various sizes (Farmer et al., 1997). The same can be followed in simulation of cities. There is nothing innovative in these virtual simulations, in terms of the language used in either two-dimensional land use patterns or three-dimensional architectural elements or metaphors (2).

Thus, one can observe the reproduction of physical world together with the conception of a new kind of spatial experience with the known notions of sense of place. Nevertheless, such a possibility seems to exist. Virtually construed environments can be developed in to structures with different, perhaps peculiar, spatial languages, when the currently lived sensations of place are transformed in to new kinds of understandings and the level of technology, which these structures will be utilizing, reaches a level that enables the use of such languages.

SOCIO-POLITICAL DYNAMICS OF VIRTUALLY CONSTRUED RELATIONS

When social context is considered, the concept of public sphere which preoccupies planners and designers and which, Habermas (1994, 231) describes as "a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed", comes in to the agenda. Inherent in this description is the notion of a guarantee that enables people to assemble and express or publicize their opinions freely. The formation of public opinion is possible only if there is a public that engages in a rational discussion (Habermas, 1994, 232). Although the roots of this concept can be traced back to ancient Greek polis, Habermas identifies it as an eighteenth century bourgeois act where individuals come together to form a public by making use of informative newspapers, journals and press officially regulated against the public power itself (1999, 42). Also, for Habermas, the public sphere is not an area of market relations, but rather one of discursive relations (Fraser, 1992, 111) which stands in between the private realm and the sphere of public authority manifests itself "in the world of letters" (Habermas, 1999, 30).

Within this framework, the question whether virtual environment can provide public spheres comes to mind. If yes, then does it hold the capacity to enrich the current socio-democratic practice through its means of new communication technologies? This makes us recall the informative apparatuses of early liberal model of public sphere. Internet, for instance, with its technological structure involves a series of relations constituting a new electronic social geography. There is no doubt that it has already provided a kind of social space via virtual communities,

electronic cafés, bulletin boards, computer conferencing e-mail, etc.: a new technical substructure enabling new modes of socialization. In this sense, design methodology as regards technical structuring is important. Telephone limited communication to a one-to-one relation/conversation; and television created an audience-producer dichotomy preventing fluidity between the actors with its one-to-many broadcasting technology (Greenhill and Fletcher, 2003). Within the historical process of technological evolution, info-technology represents a peak through its many-to-many relationship scheme (Kitchin, 1998, 12-13). Computer mediated communications generate an interpretive and interactive process through space, enabling social spaces where these communications are developed to overcome the limitations of a linear and broadcast medium. Multi-User Simulated Environments (MUSEs) in which users can become participating actors, are examples of this socio-technical structure (Greenhill and Fletcher, 2003).

The power and capacity of new technologies make us formulate still other questions. Does the decentralized structure of virtual spaces, particularly the Internet, suggest any re-conceptualization of democracy through a change in the social power configuration? This might sound as a desire to search for an even more ideal order, but the quest to find a new way out has always preoccupied the human intellect. The current status of communication technology seems to be helpful in instituting direct democracy at the local level. Such a force can be assessed as the result of the present crisis in the representative democracy. In San Jose, California, the tentative "teledemocracy", based on televoting and electronic town meetings was one of the first cases to refine the direct democracy project (Crown, 1989, 221). A more recent and successful example made the news. In a village near Geneva, Switzerland where a total of 323 people voted through the Internet while 370 submitted their votes through the ordinary mail in an attempt to decide whether local taxes should be used to restore a restaurant (NTV-MSNBC, 2003). Only 48 people used their votes at the ballot. Parallel to the deepening crisis, the willingness to continue with such projects increased. With the widespread availability of the Internet, there was also an increase in the expectations from the communication infrastructure accompanying it; finally encouraging the claimers to participate in this realm. Handerson (1993, 27), who is an advocate of electronic democracy and an American futurist, claims that electronic based democratic system renders possible an auto control mechanism in order to transform the decision making process which is currently in favor of a certain elitist clique.

While many hold an optimistic stance and opinion for an opportunity for a near utopian community, the others criticize them in that they ignore economic inequalities both intra and internationally: still the primary criterion for defining the information rich (Greenhill and Fletcher, 2003). Those who criticize the fictions of direct democracy argue on behalf of the impossibility of providing full participation such as the one attained in the Greek agora. When current social indicators are taken into account, these criticisms seem to be justified, at least for the time being. Two billion people have not even used any telephone. For them, the word computer has no meaning at all (Velibeyoğlu and Gencil, 2001, 6). However, this should not hinder the creative intellectual inquiry, for technological development agglomerates within a logarithmic sequence. A more important problem to solve will be the gap between the technological advances and social development that might end up with unexpected social reactions.

3. See <http://www.imall.com>; <http://www.shop.internet.net>; <http://www.directory.com>

4. See Hamelink (1986, 14-15)

At this point, it becomes evident that a qualitative analysis of communication technology rather than a quantitative one is necessary. The television, for example, is long argued to be a prototype in the discourse of social decline, accused to isolate people from one another, eroding social consciousness through a process of becoming apolitical. Hence, it is normal to hesitate when socio-political functions of new communication technologies, or namely the virtual environment, are the issue.

The present scheme of socialization in the milieu of Internet forces one to have second thoughts. If public sphere is a medium for rational political debate rather than being a mere market relationship, it becomes very difficult to identify and understand where the Internet stands with its differentiated and various aims for different sets of users. It will be impossible to conceptualize the public sphere at the Internet without taking in to account the profiles of its users. These profiles are inevitably the reflection of contemporary urban life based on communication culture. One can immediately sense the influence of this cultural substructure at the Internet, albeit there is no data to prove it. Such social constructions should not be expected to flourish in isolation from existing formations. Electronic space as a post-industrial space primarily contains spaces for consumption-oriented activities. Thus, it is often understood as a space for consumption and provision of services: "...secure credit card transactions across the Internet reflect a conceptualization of the Internet as a virtual shopping mall" (Greenhill and Fletcher, 2003)(3).

This interpretation does not look for neutrality within the existing socio-political hierarchical order, thereby leaving out the possibility of a "syntactic transformation"(4) - a kind of political conversion manifested directly in the social substructure. In this context, virtual environment is accepted as the reproduction of social precepts, but not considered as a transforming tool for "losers"; reminding of the printing press, which was an effective weapon for the emerging bourgeois against aristocracy.

The situation depicted above reminds us what is identified as the "fall of public man", the root of which is "commodity fetishism" that particularly became effective in the nineteenth century capitalism (Sennett, 1992, 145). Yet, the recently emerging virtual communities at the Internet gradually render electronic spaces the focus of social relationship based on the content of the message as a text, but not on commercial relationships (Tanney, 1997b). In this sense, virtual communities suit the definition of public sphere with their non-commercial context, picturing a different kind of interaction which can be called as "text-based socialization", which leaves out natural forms of perception, apperception and cognition. The WELL, which Mitchell (1996, 108) refers to as an independent city-state, is such a community. Born as a simple conferencing software WELL is one of the most popular virtual communities where people are connected to one another locally to communicate globally through an electronic platform.

What makes WELL and other text based virtual communities interesting is the profile of their users. The motto, "information changes the world" epitomizes such a medium where individuals work for themselves and plug in to the Net to share information, to give technical and emotional support to others and do these with their own initiatives: "...Information-age hunters and gatherers were lone wolves until we found the Net" (Reinghold, 1998)(5).

Perhaps it is too early to interpret such developments as the rebirth of informal publicness via a definition of a new form of collectiveness.

5. The entire version of the book "The Virtual Community" by H Rheingold is available at the Internet as an e-book; <http://www.rheingold.com/vc/book/10.htm>

6. See <http://www.ezln.org>

There must be a balance between commercial act and social interaction for the Internet to become a new version of public sphere. Otherwise, the Net will remain as a simulacrum of shopping malls and theme parks for the Cartesian world, lacking a milieu of social development (Uçkan, 2000, 73). Once again, one is forced to reconsider former philosophical conceptualization of time and space, so that the functions and future of this new kind of socialization process can be clarified.

Before modernity, time and space were understood as parallel components of the same universe. Perception of space was possible through its inner contradictions. A gradual change in such an understanding emerged after modernity when spaces became vulnerable to indirect effects of different geographies. Thus, social relationships fell independent of the local context. In the literature related to post-modernism, space is formulated as a fractal unity and collage of parts. The socio-political discourse of this prevailing philosophy is based on spatial thought and local social opposition, which, in turn, provides us with the theoretical framework to interpret the social structure of the virtual environment.

Within the asymmetrical process of globalization, capital is even more mobilized through globally networked firms whereas the labor tends to be locally fixed to the space despite widespread migrations. This tension has resulted in the emergence of local identities most of which can be considered as marginal conceptions such as fundamentalism, micro-nationalism, regionalism, gender specificity, sexuality and individual identity (Castells, 1998). There is nothing wrong with the spatial discourse of post-modernism. During the last decade, however, with the increasing share of communication technologies in social life, the political context of locality has become a subject of revision, for the present conditions in such technologies make the concept of "distance decay effect" or "friction of distance" in economically developed geographies (Hoşkara, 2000, 78). The spaces of communication spread all over the world resulting in adjoined physical spaces the borders of which are drawn together. In this context, the local socio-political resistance in physical space of different scales continues with increasing pace. Social movements like Zapatistas, or global environmentalism and women's groups become globally influential where they were active at the local level before (Castells, 1998, 6)(6).

The extent of change is so much that a new kind of conceptualization emerged. "Glocalization", a term coined by Soja (2001, 199-201), refers to an alternative approach to the concepts of globalization and localization in order to get rid off the strict polarization between the two (Velibeyoğlu and Gencel, 2001). The recent anti-globalist movement is worth examining closely within this standpoint, because different socio-cultural groups construct a political movement in virtual/electronic medium and then transfer their presence to the physical/urban space. Here, the critical point is that, they perform their acts by attributing a political essence to space both virtual and physical: perhaps the "re-dawn of public man". After identifying the concept of "time and space compression", Harvey (1989, 303) claims that local autonomist movements inevitably face failure for not being able to shoulder the load of huge historical transformations. For him, the motto "think global, act local," still holds true. The last movements of the near past is a proof to Harvey's perspective.

CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING IN/OF VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT

Our final framework for evaluating virtual spaces with respect to the concepts of public sphere and place will be the construction of meaning. Place can be distinguished from space in terms of its identity, which is assigned by its users. In this sense, place is a kind of object upon which values are concentrated (Tuan, 1977, 12). Meaning of a place is construed through a reciprocal and embedded process between the individual being and the collective mind of the user(s) of the place.

The model of personal experience as put forth by Tuan (1977, 8) is again useful to make a better analysis in this context:

EXPERIENCE

Sensation, Perception, Conception



Emotions and thoughts are somehow determined through the experience in and of place. Experience is a result of linear and repeating systems of sensation, perception and conception. For a completed experience, it is essential to have a combination of five senses. The virtual environment, however, can only provide for the use of visual and audio-lingual channels of sensation: a point, which supports those who claim that the virtual environment cannot be a substitute for physical urban space. Nevertheless, the temporality in the level of technological development should be kept in mind in favor of probable developments in the sensational capacity of virtual environment.

For many, there is a close relationship between community and place, just because of the collective act, which produces meaning. Through the contact between people and their commitment to such a socio-spatial interaction, identity is built among those sharing the same piece of ground. In this context, places become public through the employment of signs through which symbols that are common to everyone and essential for life are lived. Here, man's involvement in the world results in the manipulation of existing places (Relph 1976, 34,44). It can be said that some virtual environments can be dealt with a similar interpretation such as "virtual cities", the configurations of which provide a sense of locality by strengthening a relationship among local people in an existing city (7). Although many of the visitors of these sites are known to be outsiders, they can still be considered as service providers (Velibeyoğlu and Gencel, 2001, 6). Other kinds of virtual cities are the ones, which are interactively constructed by people of different culture, class and race. Alphaworld, one of the largest has over 200.000 'residents' who can simply 'copy and paste' to replace objects in order to build. In this way, it is allowed to reproduce 'land-use' maps and illustrations of 'virtual urban sprawl' (Smith et al., 1998, 12)(8).

At this point, the stability of place, in relation to this new type of place simulation stands out to be an important issue. By definition, place is a pause rather than a motion and this is different than what space offers. A place allows people to form an "oeuvre" as a collective identity and this is realized within the rhythm of daily life, upon which all political

7. Web sites like Digital Bologna (<http://www.nettuno.it/bologna/MappaWelcome.html>) and Digital Amsterdam (<http://www.dds.nl/>) at the Internet.

8. See <http://www.mapper.activeworlds.com/cgi/bin/map/aw/jpg> for an example of an illusionary mixed-income virtual land-use pattern.

projects impose their own rhythm and practices (Lefebvre, 1996, 49-50). Even though virtual environment may not be thought as a political project, there is no doubt it imposes some new rituals both socio-politically and culturally. Such an interpretation of virtual cities depicts a new rhythm experience in space, which, in turn, is based on an asynchronous state rather than the synchronous social construction of the identified place (Mitchell, 1996, 15-17). The question here is whether this kind of an asynchronously and socially constructed virtual environment can be conceptualized as an oeuvre?

If oeuvre were taken as a work of art reflecting social identification, the answer would be negative (Lefebvre, 1996, 65-67), because to constitute a social identity, individuals involved in the process should reflect their original personal identity. On the other hand, the Internet becomes a medium where people construct their temporal identity to help establish their permanencies in order to build a social identity. On the net, "no one knows you are a dog" (Tanney, 1997b). In addition the relations going on as dialogs are not the acts of pure consciousness. Thus, they are not considered as acts of "free-will" in the liberal-Marxist sense, because their reference is not one of a foundational construction at all (Poster, 1995, 9). The same holds true for virtual cities where residents are in an illusion of virtual freedom where they possess a part of the so-called post-modern oeuvre.

URBAN SPACE IN TRANSFORMATION

If urban space is considered as public space and with a historicist outlook, we should go back to ancient Greece, for in the eyes of many urban historians, it depicts a breakpoint. Public space, "public room with the sky as ceiling" emerged first in the Greek city as a space of assembly, namely the acropolis. The design principle of acropolis was never one of an abstract plan. It was a real experience of people (Brown, 1976). When buildings enclosed a space at the acropolis this was the "agora" (Spreiregen, 1965, 3-4). Agora is a cornerstone in the history of civilization where the human transforms into "animal socialis" (Arendt, 1958, 22-28). On the other hand, the Roman Forum, a public space located at the main intersection in a gridiron urban pattern was a representation of the historical separation of the *common* and *public*. Different from the agora, the forum was the production of the public, which is the political authority. The forum was the space where power was exhibited in the form of spectacular architectural elements. Monumentality and artistic representation of public space was to be significant once more in the Renaissance and Baroque city. There also were important elements in the urban way of life connoting the political centrality unlike the medieval times (Kostof, 1991, 111-113).

The shared future of urban public spaces of different ages was their essence of being nodes of the urban way of life in terms of varying levels of publicness. Once, the publicness of urban society represented itself in ceremonies or in the common rhythms of everyday life, until modern times. Then the essence of public life in urban space gradually lost its original reasons of existence and urban space began to deteriorate within the process of structural transformation. Yet, the transformation was not one of a natural course of events. It was rather an artificial imposition, mostly directed by Modernist surgeons who intervened in the urban fabric. Mono-functional land use decisions resulted in a strict segregation of spaces, consequently ending up with the atrophy of an indispensable condition of public spaces: functions, which give a definite multiplicity and complexity

of experience in space (Sennett, 1992, 297). In this experience, Modernist urban planners are criticized not only for causing spatial segregation, but also for class based social segregation and urban dichotomy (Lozano, 1994, 141). This is what might be called as the loss of public spirit. In terms of functions, the widespread preference to use the term "CBD" (central business district), instead of "downtown" in the planning literature can be taken as an indicator of the undesired transformation of the, once public, historical city centers (Jacobs, 1961, 165). Naturally, the substructure of this transformation is directed by macro-economic preferences. Places produced by the capitalist system are assumed to refer to a sense of "supermodernity", but the outcome is almost always "non-places". They do not have any collective identity nor can be defined as rational or historical (Auge, 1995, 77-79). The so-called public places such as larger retail stores, hotel chains and extraterrestrial spaces of communication result in a lack of meaning in places, augmented by temporality and frequency in space.

The reason why we briefly look into the history of urban space is to see whether virtual environments can really be radical alternatives to physical urban space. The point here is to avoid making a mistake where the virtual environment is taken as independent from the current urban condition. Otherwise, it would be like constructing a futurist fiction, which is indifferent to present socio-economical and political components. For this end, environmental planners and designers should prefer a political approach instead of a pragmatic one. This will force the critical review of the historical process through which today's urban space is formed, before conceptualizing on how the virtual environment impinge on urban space. History of urbanization provides a set of clues about the reasons why public spaces, such as agoras, have turned in to non-places, like shopping malls. We should once again turn to an analysis of the observable impacts of information technology on urban fabric and space.

During the last quarter of the twentieth century, the international capital underwent the process of globalization. In this period, most of the developed countries of the North decentralized their production functions to underdeveloped peripheral countries, the outcome of which is a series of socio-cultural, political and ideological formations around the world. To Hamelink (1986) the information society, a mythical term in the discourse of this new formation, was created to serve the global industrial capital, which, in fact, rules the information revolution. In the early stages of this period, the developed North was ready for such an economic regeneration. A new kind of labor force, the "white-collards", emerged in the service sector. In 1970s the ratio of employees in the information sector was already 45 percent, in the American economy (Kumar, 1995, 25).

This process is indeed not a virtual one, but has many physical attributes. Urban space in the metropolitan regions becomes subject to reformulation when globally mobilized finance capital restitutes itself to new spatial dynamics. A new information technology, called the soft infrastructure becomes the key factor in the shaping of urban form. For instance, the first criterion in the location decisions of new industries, which intensively make use of telecommunication technologies, is the accessibility / availability to fiber-systems. Just like the industries of previous times that were established along motorways, railroads, and later highways, new digital industries concentrate around the fiber optic infrastructure of communication network today (Cotton and Oliver, 1994, 58).

The conventional definition of the world city is long gone. Presently, to become a world city requires the availability of a physical infrastructure that supports data-intensive communication such as lots of band-width, a large pool of tech-friendly workers, research and development facilities like universities, research labs, etc. and places which attract entrepreneurs and their families (Goldstein and Kirschbraun, 2000, 79). Large work force, good harbors or low taxes are now insufficient for regional economies to establish and sustain themselves. Instead, a direct and easy access to broadband communications, strong air travel service and human resources gains importance (Moss, 2000, 26-27). In that sense, at the national and supranational level, certain metropolises, which have these structural components come to foreground, for instance, San Diego, Ca., is considered as "... The first great city of the 21st century... with many PhDs., personal computers and miles of fiber-optic cable per head" compared to other large American cities (Horan et al., 1996).

This new trend of concentration scheme has also altered the course of economics. When information technology reduced the importance of some economies of agglomeration, there were immediate transformations in the spatial formation both at the micro and macro levels. The most obvious change being the increasing tendency in decentralization, which in turn triggers the coming of metropolitanization. Organizational scheme of business has also changed during the last two decades. There is now a demand for good computing facilities and relatively smaller office spaces instead of large permanent home offices. Companies combine various specialist groups for particular projects as temporary, virtual organizations. The extent of this trend is such that businesses of information which were traditionally found in the city centers tend to move out to network connected, computer equipped suburban or even, rural homes. Sears Tower in Chicago Loop is one of the significant examples, since its thirty seven of forty floors were deserted and sent to Chicago's suburban fringe by the owner company (Mitchell, 1996, 96-97). The indicators related to this issue about New York show the magnitude of the trend. Between 1976 and 1986, 123.000 jobs relocated out of Manhattan and New Jersey, and the rest moving outside the metro area. While in 1970, 75 percent of office space was located in the city center, two decades later this has dropped to 43 percent (Horan et al., 1996).

Thus, city centers started to home vacant areas. In the emerging patterns new dual urban structures come in to being. While, on the one hand, we have nodal building complexes connected to one another by high-tech communications infrastructure, on the other hand, there are deteriorating urban sub-regions such as ex-city centers. This kind of a fractal unity does not only develop in the existing socio-economic urban geography, but also strengthen it. Such kinds of fragmentation can be observed in the cities of developed countries and the cities of early stage of metropolitanization in the developing countries. In Istanbul, for example, there are recent intelligent building complexes portraying ghetto type structural urban transformation. Again, in the case of Turkey, like in many developing countries, the process of urbanization in those cities having strong relations with international capital, created a spatial segregation during the past two decades. Atomized modern urban communities and fundamentally traditional closed community formations took their place in the same urban space.

The competition between cities at the national as well as supranational level is now eminent. In this context the local image holds an important

place in the global market economy, thus, turning local governments in to a kind of image-maker (Hall, 1998, 117-132). Local governments try to provide communication infrastructure as well as ending the fragmented structure, which gives a bad image to their settlements. Regeneration and redevelopment projects in the city centers are carried out within this perspective. The objective can be seen as a twofold attempt: increase the cultural level at the local context and establish a new medium of interaction with the global system. Now that major business and commercial functions are decentralized to the periphery, the new roles assigned to city centers are those of leisure activities and provision of facilities of art (O'Connor and Lovatt, 1995). This kind of a transformation appears to be the reformulation of urbanity and new form of urban way of life. As against the pessimistic outlook, the new face of city centers as public spaces, are indeed promising in the sense of increasing publicness.

The picture is brighter when efficient work hours and decreasing travel times through home-based employment is taken into account. An entire pattern of behavior has changed. People who extensively use computer technology are likely to find more spare time for leisure activities (Cotton and Oliver, 1994, 58). In the long run, the transformation will be in favor of public spaces and city centers if people can be attracted to the re-programmed functions. Here, the main problem for the urban planner/designer becomes the reformulation of physical urban space considering the increasing leisure time activities.

EMERGING MISSION OF URBAN PLANNING AND DESIGN IN THE TRANSFORMING PUBLIC REALM

The problematic of participation has always been in the agenda of urban policy planning. Current macro-political issues, which concentrate on the crisis of representative democracy, see it as a serious problem to be solved. It is, thus, a must to seek for new instruments that will enhance the position of planning and make it an integral part of democratic life of contemporary societies. In this sense, without separating the substantial essence from the procedural, some clues to what might be done should be found as regards environmental planning and design professions.

At this point, we might benefit from what Habermas defined as "communicative action". Although, his arguments on the primacy of communicative action are not detailed, he nevertheless identifies it as an important sphere of human action involving participatory democracy. It is basically a kind of an act, actively constituted by the members of an intercommunicating community. In his words, it is the "island in the sea in human praxis" (Outhwaite, 1994, 112-113). Habermas's standpoint is harshly criticized on the basis that it holds a consensual position; that is, it disregards conflicting forces such as class, race, gender and culture, which according to the orthodox Marxists will clash for resolution in the power struggle (Healey, 1998, 243). To Healey, planning is a way of acting that we can choose after debate; and its process should be enriched through the discussion of moral dilemmas. Aesthetic experience in such an interaction involves respectful discussion between discursive communities. This critical capacity should be kept alive by using the Habermasian claims of comprehensibility, integrity, legitimacy and truth (1998, 243-248).

Traditional planning can be considered as a specialized scientific practice. In 1960s the criticisms that were pointed to its practicing planners were in the form of accusations: planners were imposing their vision on a resistant

society. Since then, a shift from top-down technocratic planning to that of democratic bottom-up approach has been the issue when participatory process is considered. The planners' role has changed to one, which shapes alternatives for different social groups (Fainstein and Fainstein, 1998, 268-270). A series of demands set forth by many non-governmental social pressure groups were sufficiently fruitful to force the legislators to embody the notion of public participation in the 1968 Town and Country Planning Act, in the UK. Here, the aim was more of an attempt to understand the implications of strategic policies at the local level (Fudge, 1976, 172). In this sense public participation in strategic planning is a significant feature of the approach. Local problems were identified by means of public meetings, questionnaires and study groups. Yet, this admirable endeavor can also be criticized in that it does not include participation in the decision making phase, but only makes use of it in the stage of problem definition.

Participation is a subtle and complicated issue to deal within a political framework of analysis. However, the reason why the emphasis here is on public participation is because of the need to understand the attributes of the information age and its tools, particularly virtual environments, with respect to environmental planning and design.

A review of the socio-cultural and political formation of cities of new age, help us reveal the political content of planning and design easily. Where, on the one hand, the Internet based communication technology makes local identities more political and global; on the other hand, it inversely creates new fragmented localities (losers) in the urban space. Then, planning and urban space design requires a new professional re-conceptualization politically. The problematic of crisis in terms of publicness forces us to think about social issues in a spatial context more then ever; turning urban planning and design in to predominantly policy making processes.

It is widely assumed that the virtual environment cannot be a substitute for physical urban space and face-to-face relations. On the contrary, almost all technological advances with respect to social and economic relations in the milieu of virtual environments impinge on physical spaces. Indeed, virtual environments construct a new interpretation of the public sphere as a response to the fact of the "fall of public man". This new sphere is waiting to be mobilized to combine social equality and cultural diversity in the urban context. Actually, this seems to be the prominent mission of planners in the presence of strict social fragmentation in urban duality. For many, the main actors of city building are not planners any more, but the "spaceless" logic of networks (Uçkan, 2000, 71). The latter could be accepted only in conditions where market economies are the sole determinants. However, even in those countries where "the invisible hands of markets" is the main actor, the public policy does not leave urbanization to the hands of the market rationale. Hence, planners and designers of information age will once again be active in the process of urbanization like they were in Modern times. Just at this point "for and with whom urban planners and designers will plan and design" stands out to be a question that is yet to be answered.

This problematic should be dealt not only in a political framework of analysis, but also with practical point of view, because the professional realm of urban planners and designers is in a state of transformation, triggered by new urban dynamics. Basically, the crisis of public space is not the result of formal, spatial issues, but rather because of activity oriented issues. Consequently urban planners will have to take in to account

electronic technologies to reformulate activity patterns in urban space. It is evident that the present time forces us to think physical and virtual spaces in the same pot. "How should virtual and physical public space relate to one another?" then, becomes one of the most crucial questions for the twenty-first century planners and designers (Mitchell, 1996, 127).

In that context, activity design becomes an important practice for urban designers who are to revitalize urban space. Whereas the design of the urban architectural form requires professional specialization and can be performed individually, an efficient activity design practice calls for public participation. Varying behavioral patterns and preferences of different users of space is a difficult task if not impossible. Especially in today's conjuncture the extent of cultural diversities accentuates this difficulty. Therefore, a new type of urban design process, which is locally sensitive and which takes in to account different user profiles and demands should be configured. On the other hand, urban design might also fall in to a trap such as that of promoting single-type artificial exotics and eclectic styles for urban spaces in consumption culture, in order to exist in global markets in the name of competitiveness (Akcan, 1994, 48). Hence, the sense of locality should be kept apart from such global trends when dealing with fractal unity at the local level.

Urban design projects will lose their validity as real time projects if the actors who are involved in urban life are disregarded. Planners and designers should ensure a positive feedback through public participation in all stages of the process. Within this new political and practical mission, urban planner and designer appears in a new professional identity, as a negotiator. Urban space design should also promote negotiation among different user groups of urban space, because social diversity is still an essential ingredient of urbanity (Butina, 1993, 88). Here, the interdisciplinary structure of urban design with its numerous disciplinary languages stands out to be an advantage in establishing the very needed contact between various social groups.

Another advantage of urban design with respect to a successful process of participation is its professional content and the domain of its endeavor. According to Tekeli (1991, 75) people should be expected to lay interest on the issue that affects their everyday lives, and thus, short term planning decisions. So it will be a misguided strategy to attempt for participation of masses in the long-term macro planning decisions. Being closer to everyday life than any other planning activity, urban design appears to hold an edge as the proper domain of endeavor to help establish public participation.

The potential of using web sites in a democratic process enables community participation in urban design at the local level. Today, this can be a regular feature of Internet services, through which large volumes of information about the city and its design process can be delivered. RUDI (Resource for Urban Design Information)⁹, in the UK, for instance, is a successful example as an experimental service at the Internet (Tranmer, 1997, 14-15).

In this respect, flexibility in urban space becomes an important aspect of design. Sennett identifies this flexibility as a "narrative sense of place", a complexity of diverse activities and possibility of surprise and discovery in space. To him in order to create a character in urban space, a radical change has to occur in the framework of urban design. In such a change the urbanist will have to design weak borders between different urban uses and lift the burden of strict zoning rules from the cities as much as possible.

9. See: <http://www.rudi.herts.ac.uk>

10. See <http://www.spacesyntax.com>

11. See <http://www.casa.ucl.ac.uk/venue/venue.html>; <http://www.gis.mit.edu/projects>

Through this, “spaces also come to life in the present tense” (Sennett, 1990, 196). The roots of this new kind of design process can be found in programmatic design, which enables a variety of programmed activities to be experienced synchronically through which space is understood as a gap. A well known programmatic design approach with respect to urban spaces is that of “space syntax”(10) developed by Bill Hillier at the University College, London. The group has been working on a series of models of urban structure in which the efficiency of space is explored between buildings rather than within them. The main objective of their analysis is to interpret how space is formed, by examining the external functions and ways that have a bearing on its configuration with respect to different users (Batty, 1995; Oksay, 2000, 14).

An analysis of existing urban transformation reveals that the discourse of ‘computers for planning’ has shifted to that of ‘planning for computers’ (Batty, 1995). During the previous decade, computer technology enabled planners and designers understand and analyze urban structure in more effective and complex ways, in a sense allowing urban space to become computable. In other words, numerous social/spatial variables and their relational structures can be taken in to consideration by layering urban space via computer-based methods of analysis. By reading urban fabric as a “datascape” and “infoscape” it is now possible to avoid the deterministic and static paradigms of urban planning/design and start configuring realistic and dynamic urban strategies. If this database and its design schemes become available to wider public and enable them to digitally and remotely manipulate design, then the participation process would be completed in the decision making stage. Recent studies on the issue are indeed promising (11). They stand out to be the products of a search for new ways to spread participation by making available urban design data and project proposals in the digital media (Batty et al., 1998). From these experimental studies, one simple conclusion might be derived. The more digital the planning/design process in terms of its availability on the www the more democratic the process in terms of participation.

New information technology also provides the practicing designers of programmatic design with technical support enabling them to come up with a set of alternative activity patterns in a participatory process. For instance, VRML (virtual reality modeling language) one of the websites featuring a CAD (computer aided design) browser, invite and pull people in to a virtual environment, giving a sense of place where they can browse, scan and search information in three dimensions, at the Human Interface Technology Laboratory (HIT Lab), Seattle, USA. There, researchers use a VRML as a model of the Seattle Commons to aid urban planners in the decision making process (Tanney, 1997b).

By means of 3D virtual city simulations, city scale real life (life-like) models can be used in various planning and design scenarios. In Virtual Worlds, it is allowed to move in the model created as well as enabling involvement in the design problematic within a sense of place. In online planning process it can also be a chance for planning communities which interact in a common (shared) digital space on any planning or design alternative.

There are two prominent missions of contemporary environmental planners and designers. The first is to combine the tools of virtual environments (soft-infra-structural elements) and physical urban space in order to attain a non-fragmented urban unity complete with living public spaces (places). The second is to make an amalgam of communication

and simulation technologies with the planning and design process within emerging practical and political requirements. If these objectives are reached in the near future, "the dawn of public man in information age" will turn in to a reality from a mere rhetoric.

CONCLUSION

In order to define the politico-professional mission of spatial planning and design in the context of communication / simulation technologies and virtual environment, as an end-product, it is necessary to have an answer to such questions: "Does virtual space provides a kind of public sphere? Does it present the notions of collectively constructed place conception and politically defined aura of publicness?" If the answers are "no", then all technological bases of modern society has just a technical essence, and no socio-political connotations for future. If the answers are definitely "yes", then it is quite possible to have a mood of technological determinism based on an absolute optimism with a faith on development. Away from two extreme positioning towards the issue, we tend to construct a critical outlook rather than an over-optimistic one, and an affirmative approach instead of over-pessimistic view-angle pointing out the end of 'real' public space at all.

In the light of the discussions of the paper, what can be stated is that there are not any clear-cut answers about the current tendencies of technological development and its socio-political reflections in near future. On the other hand, in the context of communication and simulation technologies, it seems that we have a right to make optimistic projections about '*new public man*' with reference to the political and spatial characteristics of virtual environment and the clues it is serving today. Such a perspective enables us to re-assess the electronic/virtual aura in a positive manner regarding the democratic vitality of public way of life in real urban space as well. Even though the syntactic structure of virtual environment remains as a replica of the conventional space conception and the spatial metaphors in real term today, it is not unrealistic to expect a new spatial language from rapidly transforming simulation technologies for future. Apart from its 'physical' characteristics, the phenomenon of virtual space has something to do with its activity pattern that is dominantly based on commercial and entertainment facilities. In order to construct an ideal publicness in virtual space, it is essential to achieve a balance between 'political' one and 'popular' one in the e-network of human relations. Considering planning and design as socio-political acts, integrating virtual space to the process of planning and design would inevitably support such a social transformation by empowering public sphere within both real and virtual environments. When activating the instruments of cyberspace in planning and design process enlarges the impact area of planning, it also gives a responsive character to planning and design, which would able to include the citizen (*new public man*) to all phases of the feed-back mechanisms, dynamically. It means not only the integration of virtual and real space in technical terms, but also the integration of the fragmented localities in urban space, which have a democratic voice in the decentralized virtual environment, in political terms. Then the present challenge would turn in to an opportunity for the prevailing death of public space in our cities.

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Anahtar Sözcükler: sanal çevre; sanal mekan; siberuzam; kamusal alan; mekansal planlama ve tasarım.

MEKANSAL TASARIM VE PLANLAMANIN POLİTİK VE MESLEKİ GÜNDEMİNİ YENİDEN DÜŞÜNMEK: KAMUSAL MEKAN OLARAK SANAL MEKAN

Neden olduğu etkiyi bütünüyle algılayamamış olsak da uygarlık için görece kısa bir zaman aralığı olan son çeyrek yüzyıllık süre içerisinde bilgi sistemleri olarak adlandırdığımız iletişim -internet, uydu teknolojileri, telekonferans sistemleri vb.- ve benzetim (simülasyon) / modelleme teknolojileri, geleneksel mekan kavrayışını büyük ölçüde dönüştürmüş durumda. Bu durum, teknolojiyi gündelik yaşam pratiklerinin önemli bir parçası haline getirmiş toplumlarda daha da belirginlik kazanmakta. İnsanların coğrafi konumlarına bağlı olmaksızın aynı ortamda 'bulunmalarını' sağlayan *siberuzam (cyberspace)*; ve ses, görüntü ve hareketle etkileşime olanak tanıyan *çokluortam (multimedia)* yeni mekansal deneyim biçimlerini de beraberinde getirmekte. Türkçe'de 'sanal mekan' ya da 'sanal çevre' olarak kavramsallaştırdığımız bu ortam, üzerine inşa edildiği kitle iletişim ağı sayesinde yeni bir tür kamusal alan düzlemi haline gelmekte ve mekandan (*space*) öte; anlamlı yer (*place*) imgeleri barındırma aşamasına gelmiş durumdadır. Sahip olduğu teknolojik altyapı dolayısıyla sunduğu araçsallıklar her geçen gün çeşitlilik kazanırken; ortaya çıkan yeni sanal mekan örüntüsünün sentaktik ve anlamsal bakımdan ne derece 'yeni' olduğu çok da fazla sorgulanmamakta; alanın yeniden üretimi, yaygınlığını her geçen gün artırır biçimde kendini hızla sürdürmektedir. Kentsel kamusal mekana alternatif yaratma noktasında elektronik ya da sanal mekana yönelik kavramsal-politik bakış geliştirme, asıl olarak kamusal alan üreten mekansal planlama ve tasarım disiplinlerinin kayıtsız kalamayacağı bir konu olarak karşımıza çıkmaktadır.

Son yirmi yılda ivme kazanan söz konusu dönüşüm, yine salt bu dönemin içsel dinamikleri ile açıklanamayacak kadar uzun bir tarihselliğe sahiptir. Köklerini yazının, matbaanın ve telgrafın icadında bulan bu süreç; yeni üretim rejimleri ve toplumsal/sınıfsal ilişki biçimleri içerisinde evrilerek -genel kabul görür biçimiyle- adına 'bilgi toplumu' denilen olguyu ortaya çıkarmıştır. Bu anlamda, toplumsal sermayenin bir ürünü olan bilgi teknolojileri kuşkusuz bir geniş kapsamlı sosyo-politik çözümlemeyi gerekli kılmaktadır. Bu nitelikte bir bakış açısının eksikliği, konuyu teknolojik belirlenimci (*determinist*) ve indirgemeci bir perspektifle sınırlandırabilmektedir. Bu çerçevede çalışma, neden olduğu yeni toplumsal üretim biçimleri konusunu merkeze koymamakla birlikte; var olan kamusal alan tanımlarından yola çıkarak sanal çevrenin önerdiği mekansal yapı ve anlamın ne derece kamusal alan yaratma gizilgücüne sahip olduğu

sorusunu temel sorgu konusu yapmaktadır. Bu anlamda, iletişim ve bilgi teknolojilerinin ürettiği mekansal kurgunun toplumsal ve politik bir kuramsal çerçeve içine taşınması ve irdelenmesi makalenin temel amaçları arasındadır.

Sanal mekanlar, gerçek mekan üzerinde kendini var edemeyen farklı politik kimlik ve oluşumların kendilerini yeniden üretmelerine olanak verecek bir kamusal tanımladığı koşulda olumlanması gereken bir sosyo-politik bağlama otururken; kentsel kamusal alan karşısında ciddi bir seçenek olarak ortaya çıktığı oranda kentsel mekanda kırılmalara neden olabileme eğilimi göstermekte ve baş edilmesi gereken bir soruna dönüşebilmektedir. Bu çok boyutlu bağlam içerisinde planıcı ve tasarımcı için sorun, sanal çevrenin kendi içinde sahip olduğu mekansallık ve kamusal nitelikleri konusu kadar; sanal mekanın kentsel mekanla ne tür bir ilişki içerisinde kurgulanabileceği sorusu olarak gündeme gelmektedir. Soruya verilecek olası yanıtların ipuçları, yöntemsel olarak sanal çevrenin temel mekansal yapısı üzerine yeniden düşünmekle ortaya konacaktır.

Bu çerçevede yazı, gerçek ve sanal çevre arasındaki iki kutuplu sorunu (problematik) ilişkiyi, sanal mekan tarafından ele almakta; bunu yaparken de geleceğe yönelik bir açılımla tasarım konusu bu iki alanı, birbirini dışlayan değil; mekansal planlama süreci ile besleyen ve bütünleştiren bir ilişkisellikte ele almayı önermektedir. Bu noktada sorunsalın, hem sanal hem gerçek mekanda aranan kamusal niteliklerinin güçlendirilmesi adına; planlama ve tasarım alanlarının profesyonel olduğu kadar politik gündeminde de yer edineceği temel savı belirginlik kazanmaktadır. Buna göre; sunduğu kamusal mekan niteliği bağlamında sanal çevre, kent mekanının planlanmasında katılımı artırıcı ve bu yolla yüksek performanslı ve içinde etkin kamusal yaşam pratiklerini barındıran kent mekanlarının kurgulanmasında işlevlendirilebilir bir tasarım aygıtı olarak vurgulanmaktadır.