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Re-thinking practice

Second hand Cities

RE-THINKING PRACTICE

POLIS TU Delft URBANISM

Urbanism in new technologies

Interview with Marthijn Pool, Michiel de Lange and Otto Trienekens

Marthijn Pool
Founder of space&matter
Michiel de Lange
Founder of the Mobile city
Otto Trienekens
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The topic of urbanism week, Second hand cities, considers the new assignments that we as professionals will face. One significant change that we are seeing is the rise of social media and other technologies and their use by citizens. The role of new digital technologies, social media and their influence that they will have urbanism remains unclear.
We took the opportunity of Urbanism week to ask three of the presenters who are all working with new technologies about these issues: Marthijn Pool, Michiel de Lange and Otto Trienekens.

How do you see the act of city building shifting through the use of digital collaborative technologies?

The increase of information and communication technologies has made individuals more independent. Independent from each other in social terms, but also less dependent from space. Independent from where we are, we can communicate and 'survive' in the urban, metropolitan and global context. Discussions around the topic question if this level of independence has detached us from our surroundings. At space&matter we rather see this development as an opportunity to actually build a stronger relation with space and place. Because of the omnipresent information, communication and technology getting to know and understand the meaning of space becomes easier and more appealing. A higher level of understanding provides a higher level of appreciation. The same is true for the interpersonal relationships. People have indeed become more independent, but it has not made them more individualised, as some might state. On the contrary, we judge that the level of connectivity has risen. The way we relate and connect has changed though. Discussion might be around the qualitative aspects of these social network relations, but from a quantitative aspect there is no doubt. Also, here we see social networks as an opportunity to improve the appreciation of cities. What if your social network could be part of your physical environment and vice versa?

We are constantly asking ourselves if the point of departure would be the social network itself for providing an Interest Based Urbanism. The internet has developed itself mainly around the topic of common interest in the past decade. Enthusiasts and like minded people flock together and embed themselves in social networks where they feel 'at home'.

Marthijn Pool

Marthijn Pool, co-founded space&matter, an office for architecture, urban strategies and concept development.
Michiel de Lange (PhD), is the co-founder of The Mobile City, an independent research group that investigates the influence of digital media technologies on urban life and implications for urban design.
Otto Trienekens, owner of Vertex architectuur en stedenbouw researches on GPS-tracking for redevelopment of the innercity.
All three have been working on this contemporary issue from a different perspective or background.

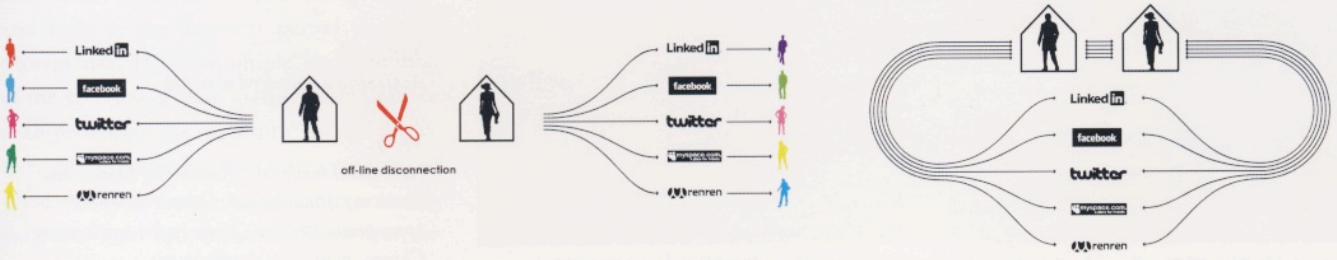

Figure 1. (dis)connected © Marthijn Pool

Figure 2. Technology in the urban environment © Michiel de Lange

"people no longer naturally accept that experts are making decisions for them from above" – *Michiel de Lange*

City making to me is more than just creating physical interventions in urban space. It is a mode of spatially organizing diverse relationships that span across many domains, including the economy, natural and social life, culture and politics. Clearly, new media technologies have a profound influence on these relationships. Everyday spatial practices like working, dwelling, travelling, spending leisure time and meeting in public spaces are rapidly changing. For example, many people nowadays work on mobile devices in coffee bars, meet through social media, and interact with urban infrastructures via rfid cards. As a consequence, city builders need to take those changing situations, behaviours, and preferences into account. Urban designers can neither ignore this, nor should they simply cater to the whims of the technology-du-jour. Instead of feeling threatened and 'losing ground', they have to critically engage with those new techno-spatial practices in order to help shape them.

The profession itself changes too. Architecture currently not only faces a severe economic crisis but - like many other professions - a crisis in expert knowledge and (political) legitimacy. In this age of participatory media culture, professional-amateurism, hacker ethic, wisdom of crowds, and so on, people no longer naturally accept that experts making decisions for them from above. The influence of digital media on city building is not only technological but also a matter of fostering new attitudes.

What can the expert do? In line with the adage 'never waste a good crisis', urban professionals must explore new processes and models that draw on the strengths of online culture to involve people in the design of cities and in solving the many complex issues which cities today are facing. Urban designers need to draw on their own strength of being able to deal with complex processes at the intersection of the spatial and the social. At the same time they have to look outward and start to collaborate with media makers and researchers to get a better grasp of rapid changes in the media city.

Michiel de Lange

Figure 3. (dis)connected © Otto Trienekens

Since city building is mainly about re-inventing the existing town, it is becoming more and more a complex assignment of very precise interventions on the (micro)scale level, a good understanding of the real behaviour and demands of inhabitants, but also about appreciation, use and maintenance, can be facilitated by the use of digital collaborative technologies. An extra advantage of GPS-technology is delivered by the fact that differences between actual behaviour and perception can be addressed. The reach of digital technology gives a designer the possibility to validate in every phase of a design process the acceptance of a spatial proposal. Users become part of the development instead of spectators, which ensures the durability of a plan.

Otto Trienekens

How do you implement your vision of working with these new collaborative technologies in your practice? Can you briefly describe one of your projects that illustrate this process?

Knowing peoples interests has never been easier. Connecting to people and embedding them in the design and development process is still an opportunity which has not been developed much. At space&matter we have developed several visions and strategies around the concept of incorporating inhabitants/ users in an early stage in the process. Our goal is to make architecture more socio-cultural specific as opposed to developments based upon assumptions, as we have experienced in the past two decades. In order to do so we have to redefine the design process and actually design the process itself. space&matter develops methods and strategies to make an Open Process resulting in specific architecture and an Open City.

Marthijn Pool

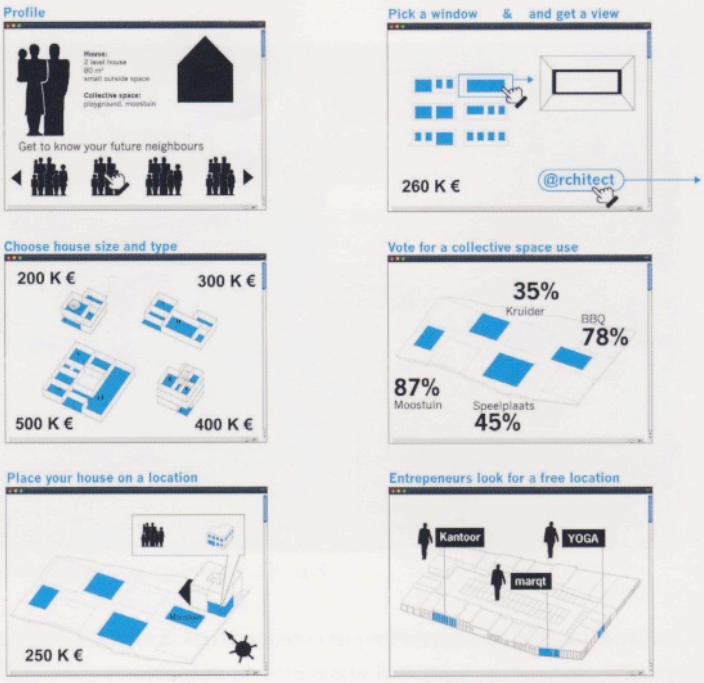

Figure 4. Tools © Marthijn Pool

"Knowing peoples interests has never been easier" – Marthijn Pool

Figure 5. Templot © Marthijn Pool

The Mobile City, the research office for new media and urbanism that I founded with Martijn de Waal, has developed a method to use digital technologies in the process of city-building. Examples of this method are the 'Social Cities of Tomorrow' workshop that we organized in February 2012 with ARCAM and Virtueel Platform (www.socialcitiesoftomorrow.nl/workshop), and the 'Designing for Ownership' workshop we did in Moscow in July 2012 at the Strelka Institute. We bring together urban stakeholders (municipalities, housing corporations, entrepreneurs, developers, cultural institutions, and so on) and creative young professionals from various disciplines to collaboratively work on complex urban issues. We use media technologies at various stages in the process. This includes for example, gathering new data through digital methods, to mobilize networked publics, as a co-creation platform in the design process, to test prototypes, as a way to raise money through, crowdfunding, integrated into the actual intervention, and for maintenance. With these workshops we bring together professionals who normally would not so easily collaborate, for instance, a housing corporation and media artists. In addition to exploring the potential of digital media for more social cities, it is therefore also a way to create new business models for young urban designers.

Michiel de Lange

The Assisted Living Area provides in the possibility for people to live as long as possible and as independent as possible in their own neighbourhood. Accessibility of buildings, public space, ergonomics, infrastructure and mobility are important physical themes to address. Though the quality of life, up to a large extent, is determined by the opportunity to meet other people to interact and to build social networks in the area. Therefore, while re-designing the city into assisted living areas it makes sense to think about enforcing the changes to meet when placing new functions and buildings. In order to decide about it one needs to get good understanding of the actual behaviour of people. By using GPS-technology the movement patterns of inhabitants are recorded and – unexpected - meeting places will appear. When knowing more about the motivation of people of meeting in those places, in the meantime making use of interview techniques and questionnaires, and having a thorough knowledge of the existing living area by making use of integral area analysis techniques, a designer can start drawing new functional programmes validated by direct user input. One could argue this way of working shows one of the most direct ways of user participation in a development process.

Otto Trienekens

What difficulties do you see for using these technologies (such as exclusion due to limited access to the technology) and how can these issues be addressed?

For implementing the above strategies we see online tools and technologies as an extension to our common means of organizing the Open Process. They don't replace, but rather enhance existing models. Usage and development of online tools and methodologies do provide us with efficient means to communicate with a large number of individuals, while maintaining the level of efficiency needed to provide architecture within time and budget.

Marthijn Pool

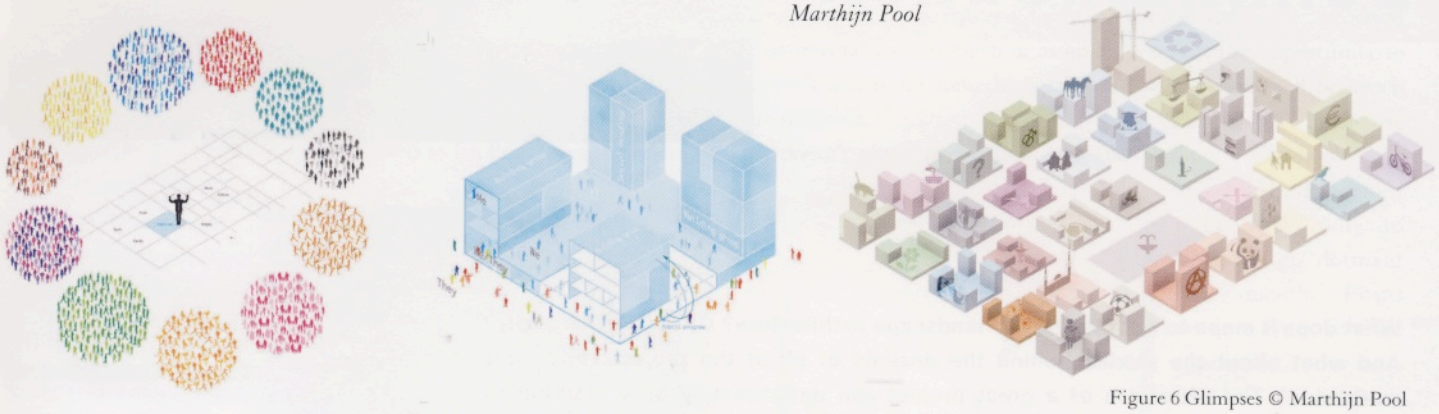

Figure 6 Glimpses © Marthijn Pool

"By the time your building is finished, the technologies and media you wanted to integrate into the design probably have been superseded by next generation devices and platforms." – *Michiel de Lange*

Difficulties are many so I will limit myself to naming just a few. Having access to technologies is one, as is knowing how to use them in beneficial ways (often called 'media literacy'). Makers always need to consider what media are appropriate for the people you are working with. A major challenge for urban designers is the speed differential between technological and urban developments. By the time your building is finished, the technologies and media you wanted to integrate into the design probably have been superseded by next generation devices and platforms. To avoid the risk of obsolescence, urban designers need to make viable long-term strategies to. integrate media technologies in their practice on a far more profound level. See also the two points below. Another risk is focusing on overly simplistic interventions. For example, changing working patterns would mean installing power plugs, ubiquitous Wi-Fi and semi-private working cocoons. Mid- and long-term relationships between technologies and cities have proven to be much more intricate than that. Thorough background knowledge of the history of this relationship is needed to oversee and help shape the future of the media city. In the end, urban design involves asking philosophical questions about the good city. Do we want to live in cities that are pushed toward efficiency, security and personalization? Do we favour meeting and engaging? How do our choices for certain interventions influence the culture of cities?

Michiel de Lange

Providing people with GPS- trackers delivers major privacy issues. Many, especially elderly people and those with little education, do not accept the fact that their entire behaviour pattern is being recorded. To find a representative group of respondents seems a vulnerable exercise. Probably, within a thorough research process, one should decide to use multiple research techniques to produce a good analysis. The fact that people adjust their behaviour while realising they are carrying a GPS device cannot be denied. Implementation of good control questions when interviewing and working with a large number of respondents could limit the change of distortion of the research output.

Otto Trienekens