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Interview with The Mobile City: how cities fully benefit from digital media technologies

EMI interviewed Michiel de Lange, co-founder of research group The Mobile City. The Mobile City initiative bridges the worlds of digital media makers and urban professionals. De Lange and other co-founder, Martijn de Waal, came up with the idea while working on their respective PhD projects about the influence of digital media on the city. They noticed that urban professionals often do not know how to involve digital media technologies in their work.

What are the main aims of The Mobile City?

De Lange: 'since our cities have become saturated with technologies, we want to shape the agenda for using digital media technologies in cities. Our aim is to develop not just 'smart cities' that are very high-tech but social cities that are liveable and interesting places. In order to do so The Mobile City connects urban designers and policy makers with digital media experts.'

Why is it that huge discrepancies exist between theories about cyber and smart cities and the actual design of cities by urban developers?

De Lange: 'we notice that many urban professionals see these new media technologies more as a threat than a chance. This fear is partly caused by the incongruence in speed between architecture and new media developments. By the time a building project is finished, a platform like Twitter might not exist anymore. The question is how urban developers can respond to all these developments? Another issue is that expert knowledge no longer has the same status as before, partly as a result of online 'amateur' culture. Urban professionals need to redefine their expertise and added value in this digital-minded city.'

In what ways do digital media technologies currently influence the

city?

De Lange: 'when you walk through a city center during the week, you see people with laptops and smart phones working in coffee bars and other locations. When they come home at night they do not put off their phones, but will still be available. Definitions of what is living, working, meeting, travelling and so on changes because of these technologies. In their design practice architects and other urban developers should take these new socio-spatial realities into account, for example by rethinking home, office, public spaces. You see that collective partnerships appear in which groups of citizens design their own living space with the help of professionals. Individuals often want to be active co-creators of their own living environment, and architects can guide them.'

Could you give an example of a city that you helped in effectively using digital media technology?

De Lange: 'in February 2012 we organised a workshop in collaboration with the municipality of Amsterdam, together with ARCAM and Virtueel Platform. The workshop was about using technologies to make the city more social. Teams of young professionals created a prototype for a digital network of inhabitants that could play an important role in decision processes in the city. In july 2012 we were invited to Moscow by the Strelka Institute for Media, Architecture and Design to give a workshop about strengthening the sense of ownership inhabitants have of their city. We brought together creative workshop participants and various neighbourhood stakeholders (citizens, local government, businesses, neighbourhood organizations, and so on). These workshops use a methodology for activating citizens with the aid of digital media technologies that can also be applied elsewhere. How can we design a process that allows people to feel 'ownership' over their living circumstances, and actively participate in making their environment a better place?

What is your advice to those cities that want to integrate digital media technologies in their daily activities?

De Lange: 'Urban professionals and cities can contact us when they need advice on issues like new media and citizens engagement, or new media strategies. We always work in a 'networked way' with specialists and other organisations.'