

## *SkypeLab: the City as Urbaness*

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### **Abstract**

*SkypeLab: the city as urbaness* presents the concept of “urbaness” proposed in Dr Maggie McCormick’s doctoral research titled *The Transient City* (2009) as the contemporary form of urban consciousness that is re defining perceptions of the city and the urban self within rapid urbanization and digitalization. This is demonstrated through the research project *SkypeLab* that investigates and maps urban perception mediated through digital screens. Beginning with Denis Cosgove’s position in *Carto-City* (2006) that the city and its mapping are inseparable and as their relationship changes each is transformed, the paper traces from city to urbaness. It is argued that a new urban lexicon is still emerging and this is in part a visual language. *SkypeLab*’s contemporary art and design practice employs a methodology shaped by ephemeral and transient urban experience. The process and outcomes enhance understanding of the new cartography of the city as contemporary urban space defined and mediated by digital screens. *SkypeLab* was initiated by Dr Maggie McCormick, RMIT University, Australia and Prof. Henning Eichinger, Reutlingen University, Germany in 2012 as an ever expanding urban network. This Australia/German project expanded to Asia 2014/2015 to include East China Normal University, Shanghai, China. In 2017/2018 *SkypeLab* added the The Federal University, Rio De Janeiro, Brazil and the University of Atlantico, Barranquilla, Colombia to its network. By 2018 there will have been some 70 participants in the *SkypeLab* urban network. A *SkypeLab SympoLab* will take place at RMIT Europe in Barcelona in 2018.

Keywords: Urban consciousness, digital screen mediation, urban lexicon and mapping.

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## Introduction to paper

*SkypeLab: the city as urbaness* addresses the impact of digital screen mediation on redefining the meaning of 'city' and 'being urban'. The concept of 'urbaness' is presented as the contemporary form of urban consciousness shaping perceptions of the 'city' and the 'urban self' within rapid urbanization and digitalization. Building on Denis Cosgrove's concept in *Carto-City* (2006) that the city and its mapping are inseparable and as their relationship changes, each is transformed, the paper traces urban consciousness from understandings of 'city' as separate spaces to concepts of 'urbaness'. It is argued that a new urban lexicon is emerging that is in part visual. These ideas are mapped through the research project *SkypeLab*. *SkypeLab* that employs a practice led methodology shaped by ephemeral and transient urban experience. The research process and mapping outcomes enhance understanding of the new urban cartography.

## Paper

*SkypeLab* was jointly initiated by myself, Dr Maggie McCormick (RMIT University, Australia) and Prof. Henning Eichinger (Reutlingen University, Germany) in 2012. The project grew out of conversations between Henning Eichinger and myself, about our observations of the increasing use of screens, by our respective art in public space and design students. Our interest was not on digital art as such. Rather, questions arose about the impact of 'seeing' and 'knowing' through screens. Questions, about the impact of connecting across this contiguous urban digital public space on urban perception. Questions, about how art and design practice might interpret and map this space. We wondered what role the hand, and the body, still played in an urbanized and digitalized world. To enquire into these questions, *SkypeLab* has been undertaken as a series of research laboratories within increasingly expanding networks across universities and cities, as well as disciplines and mediums. Within long timeframes and geographical distances, *SkypeLab* purposefully brings together differing urban time zones, seasons and cultures, mediated through digital screens, where all are collapsed into a common urban space – a common 'city' if you like. Through the interconnection between art and design practice, public space, and digital technology, this practice-led research aims to develop new insights, and new ways of building on contemporary urban knowledge. *SkypeLab* that began as an Australia/German project, expanded to Asia 2014/2015 to include East China Normal University, Shanghai, China. In 2017/2018 *SkypeLab* added the The Federal University, Rio De Janeiro, Brazil and the University of Atlantico, Barranquilla, Colombia to its network. Emerging from this research – a *SkypeLab SympoLab* will take place at RMIT Europe in Barcelona in 2018.

In this paper the contextural framework that shaped the *SkypeLab* research is addressed. First by asking: What is a city? How has the conceptual understanding of 'city' changed over time, with the rapid increase in urbanization and digitalization? Next, by examining what language is evolving to describe this phenomenon. What is the new urban lexicon, and what role does the language of art and design play? Finally, by looking at the cartography of urbaness, emerging out of the interconnection between new urban concepts and its mapping, in particular through the practice and outcomes of the *SkypeLab* project.

The often-quoted question posed by Lewis Mumford (2011), ‘What is a City?’ first posed in 1937, is today a far more complex question. Mumford was an American historian and sociologist, particularly known for his study of cities. While Mumford’s view of the city as a theatre of social action, recognized the city as more than a constructed, physical space, he could not have envisioned the complex action, and interaction, of urban and digital networks, that are experienced by today’s societies. Mumford’s thinking was framed at a time when the idea of the modern city was emerging. Other urban concepts were yet to come. Among them was the idea of the ‘Megalopolis’ or urban cluster or corridor, posed in the 1960s by urban geographer, Jean Gottmann (1961) that linked regionally connected cities, such as BosWash (Boston and Washington). Later this concept was extended to connect urban spaces, within the economic zone of the Pearl River Delta in China, reflecting in part a changing emphasis in urban research from expanding cities of Europe to those of Asia. This in itself reflects the rapid growth in urbanization across the planet.

Sociologist, Saskia Sassen (1991) coined the term ‘Global City’ in the early nineties recognizing the connection between the three mega cities of New York, London and Tokyo. She observed that the flight between New York and London, is one of the world’s most heavily used connection routes, so it is not surprising to find that New York and London might have more in common with each other, than with other cities in the United States of America or the United Kingdom. For some, such journeys between cities are as much the city, as the two cities themselves. Gottmann’s concept of BosWash (Boston/Washington) can now be extended to NyLon (New York/London). Going one step further in the conceptualization of the ‘city’, the AMO Atlas published in *Content* (2004), aims to snap shot the world in transition. Devised by architect and urban thinker Rem Koolhaas, and others from OMA Office of Metropolitan Architecture, it does this through visualizing data, to record physical and non-physical, interconnected, global information and trends, that link cities across the world. From McDonald outlets to Chinatowns, the *AMO Atlas* records diverse urban connections, from commercial expansion to cultural dispersions. The AMO Atlas exemplifies the text ‘World = City’ that appears on the back cover of another of Koolhaas’s publications, on the project, *Mutations: Harvard project on the city* (2001). This project explored understanding the city well beyond its concrete manifestations in relation to ‘what used to be the city’ (2001: 19). Here definitions of the ‘city’ can be seen as shaped by a collision of urbanization and digitalization - what Koolhaas refers to as ‘City of Exacerbated Difference (COED)’, a copyrighted term he devised through the Harvard Project. While it describes the urban condition of the Pearl River Delta in China in particular, it can also be applied to our new urban condition more broadly. This is a condition of transience and paradox. In the early 1960s, Marshall McLuhan had already begun to observe the urban/digital collision, but also the collective identity, emerging out of what he described as pervasive electronic media. He coined the term ‘Global Village’ to describe what was happening. The two words do not belong together. To ‘lose sight of the strangeness of these terms, speaks to an acclimatization’ (Wark 2012: 27)) to new thinking about the world we live in. If we ask Mumford’s question again—‘What is a city?’ - in today’s context, the answer may be in another question. What is urbaness (McCormick 2009: 30)?

In my PhD thesis 2009, titled *The Transient City*, undertaken at the University of Melbourne, I define ‘urbaness’ as a specific state of urban consciousness, shaped by

transience between, and compression of, space, time and difference, where all are perceived as the norm. Forms of urban consciousness are as old as cities themselves, with concepts of transience and compression, embedded in the trains, cars and planes, that increasingly diminished the distance and time, between and within, cities and people. The difference now, is not only the speed at which this takes place, but also an 'understanding of the increased mind mobility' (McCormick 2013:117) and the concept that one is 'born urban, born transient' (McCormick 2009: 17), in both body and mind, as a contemporary life experience. Instantaneous satellite connection, means we can be simultaneously in many places and time zones. Urban experience is both seen and unseen, within a cacophony of layered, fragmented, transient alignments, across multiple screens.

What language have we developed to express this urban experience? In the 1990s, William J Mitchell described the digital city, using familiar city terms like 'digital highway'. While such language helped us to understand this space, new terms have now entered our vocabulary, to explain this phenomenon more fully. In a digitally connected urban world, we now understand urban perception and experience within the framework of such concepts as Manuel Castells 'space of flows' (1996) and Zygmunt Bauman's 'liquid times' (2000). Shaped by these contexts that compress time and space, cities have transformed into sites of what Saskia Sassen called 'cityness' (2005: 1). All are examples of what McKenzie Wark describes as 'telesthesia', where information and ideas move faster than people or things between spaces, 'to bring what is distant near, and make what is distant a site of action' (2012). This is the space of urbaness.

What is the cartography of urbaness? What role might the language of art and design play in deciphering and mapping this new cityscape of the mind? *Carto-City* is the title of Denis Cosgrove's chapter in *Else/Where: Mapping – New Cartographies of Networks and Territories* (Abrams and Hall 2006). Cosgrove concludes with the statement, 'Urban space and cartographic space remain inseparable; as each is transformed, their relationship alters' (2006). In our contemporary situation, Cosgrove's conclusion reminds us of the necessity to grow our knowledge about the changing understanding of what a city is, and how this might be recorded. Our understanding of what it means to be urban, is embedded in paradox and mediated through screens, while cartography itself, is dominated by screens. GIS (geographic information systems) are designed to capture, analyse and present all manner of spatial or geographical data, resulting in Google Maps and GPS global positioning systems, offering real time navigation. Mobile, iPad and computer screens, convey this information to us. We 'see' the new conceptual city, through the metaphor of screens.

Paradox and and metaphor, are the territory of art and its specific mode of research and mapping. The practice of *SkypeLab* is witness to transience, to Castell's urban 'space of flows', Bauman's 'liquid times' and Wark's 'telesthesia', first hand. In this context, Henning Eichinger and myself, designed a research practice, that employs a methodology, shaped by ephemeral and transient urban experience, mediated by digital screens. In the process it contributes to a visual urban lexicon, that expands our capacity to express our experience of this new cityscape. Our interest in how difference plays out in this space as well our interest in the role of the hand in a digital space, led us to invite German, Australian, Chinese and South American artists, who

had not met previously, to work in pairs. They undertook Blind Contour Drawing sessions via Skype, over periods of several months. The technique involves looking at your partner on the screen, and drawing with one continuous line, reminiscent of cartographic contour lines. While Blind Contour Drawing was originally conceived as an innovative drawing teaching technique in the 1940s (Nicolaïdes 1941) and was later adapted by Betty Edwards in her book *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* (1979) – here in *SkypeLab* it is transformed into a research tool. A tool for investigating urban ephemera, mediated by digital screens, while also exploring the role of the hand in our digital world. The methodology, as employed by us, favours the juxtaposition of difference (including culture and language), long time frames, and geographical distance. While in more traditional cartography, contour lines indicate the shape of the earth's surface, here contour lines record the connection between complete strangers. They look directly at each other through the screen, at much closer distances than the usual physical encounter, and yet separated by distance, time and culture. Here perception is transformed, as it responds to paradox, through frozen moments and fluidity, distance and nearness, connection and disconnection, hand and brain, light and dark, clarity and loss of detail, confidence and awkwardness, limitation and possibility, amidst a myriad of other apparent contradictions. Paradoxical fragments, become everyday framing of how knowledge is formed, and how perceptions are created and experience recorded. Drawing via the 'Skype screen interface reinforces the idea, that when we draw we mirror ourselves, as much as the other, and in the process we redefine ourselves' (McCormick 2013) as mapmaker and the map itself.

Labs to date have created an urban network between universities in the cities of Reutlingen, Melbourne, Shanghai, Rio De Janeiro, Barranquilla and now Barcelona. *SkypeLab* is undertaken in collaboration with the Goethe Institutes in Australia and China and funded through the Baden-Württemberg in Germany. *SkypeLab* was also awarded a research and teaching award. Over 2012 to 2017, the mapmaking evolving out of this research process has taken multiple forms. These include street projections, street performance, public space interventions, exhibitions and online presence at ARTE Creative TV France/Germany and [www.skypelab.org](http://www.skypelab.org) An exhibition at the Städtische Galerie, Reutlingen in Germany 2016 was the most recent outcome. The most recent engagement has been between universities in cities in Germany/Brazil and Melbourne/Colombia. To date there have been two associated publications edited by myself and Henning Eichinger: *SkypeLab: Transcontinental Faces and Spaces* (2016) Germany: Kerber Publications and *Skypetrail: Transcontinental Faces* (2013). Reutlingen, Germany: Stat Reutlingen.

## **Conclusion**

This paper, *SkypeLab: the city as urbaness*, addressed the impact of the mediation through digital screens on redefining the meaning of 'city' and 'being urban'. Rather than viewing cities as separate spaces, the concept of 'urbaness' posed the idea of 'being urban' within perceptions of the city as a state of consciousness. The need for a new urban lexicon and new ways of mapping this new 'city' have been discussed through the research project *SkypeLab*. Through its experimental approach within digital space, *SkypeLab* poses and exposes questions arising out of the practice, about urban space itself. As we look into this new mind space of urbaness, *SkypeLab* asks: How do the layers, reflections and fragmentations of 'seeing' and encountering each

other via digital screen space and time, inform our urban perceptions? The research process and mapping outcomes enhance understanding of this new urban cartography. *SkypeLab* contributes valuable knowledge to an understanding of new conceptual territory, within a profoundly changing urbanscape, that reflects the inseparable relationship between urban space and cartographic space in the process of mapping of urbaness.

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