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Title:

From Tiles to Pixels: Media and the City [Media and the City]

Journal Issue:

[Places, 18\(2\)](#)

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Publication Date:

2006

Publication Info:

Places

Permalink:

<http://escholarship.org/uc/item/3ws165tg>

Acknowledgements:

This article was originally produced in Places Journal. To subscribe, visit www.places-journal.org. For reprint information, contact places@berkeley.edu.

Keywords:

places, placemaking, architecture, environment, landscape, urban design, public realm, planning, design, media, city, tiles, pixels, Roy Strickland

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From Tiles to Pixels: Media and the City

Roy Strickland



In response to media's explosive changes and increasing influence across the world, this issue of *Places* explores the relationships between media and the form, social life, and perception of the urban environment.

In recent years, new forms of media have joined television, radio, and film to multiply people's options for communication, learning, entertainment, information gathering, creative expression, and work. Predictions were that new media, particularly the Internet, would hasten the decline of cities by freeing people of the need for face-to-face contact. But many cities are now thriving as media centers; indeed, the temporal and spatial flexibility inherent in new media have actually helped increase and

diversify the use of urban space—especially public space, where wireless and digital technologies now support a fluid mix of work, commuting, socializing, and entertainment. Moreover, as media saturates the environment, its influence on both the making and perception of urban places has grown more powerful than ever, from developing and marketing architectural and planning concepts to literally transforming spaces by being included in them. From PC screen to Jumbotron to ubiquitous advertising campaigns, a never-ending stream of words, images and sounds challenges notions of place, as it alternately distracts attention from the physical environment and intensifies the experience of place.



The following pages address a broad spectrum of issues concerning media and the city. Among other topics, the articles touch on media's influence on the design, perception, delivery and transformation of urban places; media and its representation of the urban environment; media's shaping of public expectations of urban space and the norms of interaction there; and media as a vehicle for teaching place design. The articles point out new media's promise, including making places responsive to their users even as they defy geographical boundaries (Frenchman and Rojas), reinforcing urbanity where density and connectivity combine (McCullough), and stimulating a "renewed desire to reclaim architecture's opportunities as the actual media interface itself" (Murphy). They also point out media's risks (and not just of new media, but of old ones like photography): with saturation, its disassociation of people from the reality of place (Scherr); in the "predominance of image over bodily experience" its potential for manipulating the political and place-making process (Crisman); and with "ubiquitous" computing, its potential for "ten thousand pesky 'little brothers'" to supplant the Orwellian Big Brother (McCullough). In other words, in the challenging, politically charged, ambiguous, ironic and liberating place

that is the city, media can serve as either the stimulant or suppressant of the special, heightened awareness of self, society and opportunity that is integral to urban life.

Walking among the ruins of Ostia, the ancient port city of Rome, it is impossible to overlook the mosaics lining the city's walls and floors. These were the advertisements, posters and billboards of their day, identifying services, merchants and celebrities (including Alexander and Helix, famed boxers whose fists are still raised at an oyster bar), as a multicultural population of citizens and slaves connected themselves to the world through a web of trade routes. As we do through media today, the people of Ostia occupied several spaces and realities at once, framed by streets, mosaics, the port's walls, and the sea. There is a line extending from the Decumanus to Broadway. As we stand below Times Square's kinetic screens or surf the net, we cannot help but feel we have traveled here before.

Above: A proposal for pedestrian-activated "urban pixels" is part of MIT's Digital Mile collaboration with the City of Zaragoza. Image by Susanne Seitingner.

Opposite: 42nd Street, N.Y. Photo by Richard Scherr.