

Flânerie between Net and Place: Possibilities for Participation in Planning*

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Abstract

This paper is the result of the collaboration between planning and computer science research towards a) understanding the production of spaces that stimulate physical social interaction for better quality of city life, and b) increasing connectivity and empowering communities for the creation of their own self-organized communication network. Although these goals are independent, we argue that their achievement could benefit from the synergy of the two research fields. The design of on-line communities that bridge the virtual with the physical space is the common ground and the main outcome of this collaboration. We invoke the memory of the nineteenth century flâneurs, as celebrated in Walter Benjamin's writings, to describe this link as an act of flânerie involving both net and place.

Besides using traditional urban places to socialize, citizens interact in the virtual space that Manuel Castells identifies as the space of flows. The underlying communication network structures virtual space together with the computer software that defines the interactions enabled between the community members (the social software). Although virtual social life manifests in speech and action, there are discrepancies in translating it into material consequences in the city. We believe that planning can play an instrumental role in mediating this tension between virtual and physical life. We note, however, that in the literature on communicative action and collaborative planning, place becomes subservient to process. In this proposal place becomes integral to the participatory process, by empowering communities to act, represent, and argue about their aspirations and values in their physical place.

In context our research aims to contribute conceptually to improving the platforms for action in both physical and virtual spaces for community life. We consider planners as flâneurs that participate in on-line and off-line communities, and that are capable to intervene in the design of both spaces of interaction. In this study the focus is on wireless communities that are connected ad-hoc and independently of major providers. We argue that connecting the operation of the underlying wireless network with the activities of an on-line community spanning the neighborhood could contribute to the increase of social capital in the city. Besides supplying the network of physical places, urban planning could encourage the creation of neighborhood wireless on-line communities, and help maintain their active operation through policy implementation and city sponsorship.

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