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## Flânerie between Net and Place: Promises and Possibilities for Participation in Planning

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#### Abstract

The information and communication technology (or ICT) revolution adds new possibilities for providing information about places and communities that may be used in planning processes. In this article we introduce the practice of *flânerie* in the physical and virtual space as a method to produce representative images of contemporary social life. We suggest how planning may be instrumental in shaping a public good alternative in this emerging hybrid social space, where the practice of flânerie can stimulate engagement in deliberative planning practices. Finally, we discuss some of the trade-offs and design choices for eliciting information from citizens about their localities to understand how future development may lead to qualitative changes in community life.

#### **Keywords**

flânerie, participatory processes, place, ICT, hybrid city realm

#### Introduction

Citizen participation is an important goal of planning practice. Indeed, it is a central ethos of planning in contemporary Western liberal democracies. Yet the experience of citizen participation in everyday planning practice remains perfunctory; at best it belongs to the lower rungs of Sherry Arnstein's (1969) "ladder of citizen participation." Part of the problem is that participation is essentially reactive, episodic, top– down, and contrived, usually staged to meet bureaucratic requirements. The process lacks spontaneity because the public does not "own" it; they are passive recipients of planners' analyses and proposals. Rarely are citizens asked to share their local knowledge of their neighborhood or to help define the problems or opportunities that the neighborhood plan might address (Day 1997; Umemeoto 2001).

Even where citizens are empowered enough to engage in serious public hearings or competitive negotiations with other community or interest groups, traditional forums may not necessarily work for all in today's multicultural society. Limitations in language or speech skills—not uncommon among the foreign born or those belonging to lower economic strata—could certainly bias the process and the outcome (e.g., Tauxe 1995).<sup>1</sup>

In this article, we build on the rapid developments of information and communication technology (or ICT henceforth) that have opened up new possibilities for engaging the public, not as passive respondents to planners' proposals but as active agents engaged in the local planning process. Already, as Benkler (2006, chapter 7) points out, ICT creates opportunities for individuals to participate in formal organizations outside the market sphere, thereby nurturing a new form of empowerment, which ranges from world-scale collaborative projects like Wikipedia and nationwide political action (Rheingold 2008) to small grassroots hybrid communities (Antoniadis et al. 2008). We argue here that current ICT advances offer also new possibilities for genuine and sustained engagement of the public in shaping their immediate environment, thanks to more and more frequent free Internet access in public spaces, affordable laptops and home desktops, and a new generation of cell phones with embedded cameras and Internet capabilities. Popular access to cell phones all over the world continues to narrow the "digital divide" and facilitates the documentation of public life. As recent political uprisings in the Middle East have shown, images captured by cell phones were transmitted, sometimes live, to social and news media, causing a profound and powerful effect on mobilizing support locally and worldwide.

We argue further that as cyberspace becomes increasingly accessible across income strata, ICT has created a hybrid

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Figure 1. A sign posted in a neighborhood park in Buenos Aires. Photo by Tridib Banerjee, 2011.

realm of physical and virtual environments in our cities.<sup>2</sup> The promise of citizen engagement in planning processes is advanced by both the ICT hardware innovations and the capabilities of the new generation of social software designed for networking, instant communication, and sharing of usergenerated multimedia content. Our work focuses on new opportunities for eliciting information in this hybrid environment: to improve the information quality by taking into account observations of the local public and thus increasing inclusiveness of community representation. Although this complementary opportunity may be placed still at the lower rungs of Arnstein's (1969) "ladder of citizen participation" that range from "informing" to "partnership," we believe that access to a richer information resource can ultimately help the public climb to higher rungs. As Arnstein herself, and also Forester (1982) and Benkler (2006), argue, access to information has a significant empowering effect. The extent of the mobility thus obtained up the ladder will no doubt depend on the specific institutions and circumstances of local planning practice. But that discussion about situational differences is beyond the scope of this article.

Local governments have already begun to notice the potential of the new media and social software. Consider this sign in Figure 1, posted inside the Plaza Diaz Vélez, a

community park in a working-class neighborhood in the Barracas district of Buenos Aires. Sponsored by a local firm, the sign posted by the City encourages the observer to visit the dedicated Facebook site to find out more about this place's history, to get in contact and engage in dialogue, and to communicate about the park and the neighborhood. On visiting the corresponding Facebook page, we find entries about the risks of overgrown trees, occasional nuisance of vagrants and alcoholics, and such matters, some requesting immediate action. In this example, the observer who shares information in the online forum now becomes a member of an existentially hybrid place and community. The City of Buenos Aires lists at least eight other similar Facebook pages to encourage community engagement in their localities. Some of these online groups allow local residents to post photos and videos capturing not just their images of the park, and the state of its maintenance, but also pictures of their pets, friends, murals, cultural events, social occasions, and the like (see, e.g., www.facebook.com/plazadelarbol).<sup>3</sup>

The residents who have responded to the City's invitation to participate through these Facebook websites can indeed be seen as having engaged in a form of urban *flânerie*. This practice, derived from the verb *flâner*, literally means the act of strolling, gazing, observing, and reflecting upon the everyday life. With the help of a camera or just an ordinary cell phone, today the spontaneous gaze of the public can also be purposeful and documental, at times defying censorship of authoritative regimes. The Buenos Aires example demonstrates that the ICT advances and attendant software development offer unprecedented capabilities for urban residents to share in the Net their observations through images and subsequent reflections, triggering ongoing discourse in a hybrid space where the real and the virtual meld. In this article, we explore ways to exploit these capabilities of ICT toward enhancing the hybrid space for public life. We are aware, however, that providing a space for public deliberations may not guarantee inclusive participatory processes. Nevertheless, we will argue in this article that a novel hybrid form of flânerie can play an instrumental role in community participation.

Before we develop our argument, we should note two points at the outset. First, we emphasize that the concept of flânerie is very much rooted in the experiential and visual tradition of professional practice and pedagogy of planning and urban design. Typically most planning or urban design exercises begin with a site visit that involves reconnoitering on foot or by car-the windshield survey-and taking notes and pictures as we move through the space. We should note further that the writings of such eminent planning and urban design scholars as Donald Appleyard (Appleyard, Lynch, and Myer 1964), Gordon Cullen (1961), Allan Jacobs (1985), Kevin Lynch (1960), Victor Steinbrueck (1962), and Philip Thiel (1997)—all professional flâneurs par excellence—still continue to inspire planners' flânerie in the physical urban space. But the record of engaging the public through the visual communication medium has been somewhat limited in planning. On rare occasions of community-based participatory charrettes, for example, we might find local residents joining planners in a walking tour of the planning area on a purposeful flânerie to identify the problems and opportunities in their neighborhood.

Second, we argue that most of us habitually engage in cyber-flânerie as we "surf" the Net: we watch videos posted in YouTube, we search Google or Wikipedia, we participate in online social network sites, and the like. Today ICT and supporting software (e.g., Google Street View) have made it possible to enjoy from afar a vicarious walk through such eminent urban spaces as Piazza della Signoria in Florence or Champs-Élysées in Paris, and then share that experience in global or local forums.

Our arguments are based on these four premises: imperatives of community engagement in planning, the tradition of flânerie in physical and cyberspace for the planner and the public, new possibilities offered by the advances of ICT and social software in shaping this hybrid space, and the opportunities for planners to capture the possibilities of this new environment to promote public engagement in urban design and planning.

In the following narrative, we begin with a brief review of the literature on flânerie, followed by a more extensive discussion of ICT, social software, and the emergent hybrid spaces of flânerie that planners must consider in the future. We propose a research agenda for transforming flânerie into a useful source of information within existing participation practices offline and online. More specifically, we discuss theoretical questions that arise when flânerie becomes more purposeful as either explicit or implicit input to decision making. We also analyze important trade-offs implied in the design process and the role of planners related to privacy, ownership, and control. Finally, we give some examples of ways to encourage flânerie practices through appropriate social software design in order to highlight the need of relevant cross-disciplinary research. We conclude with a summary of our arguments and the various challenges that must be addressed in achieving this vision.

#### On Flâneur, Flâneuse, and Flânerie

French poet Charles Baudelaire's narratives of the urban experiences and urbanism of the nineteenth-century city (e.g., *Le Spleen de Paris*, Baudelaire 1869a) first suggested that flânerie—leisurely wanderings along modern city streets—could be seen as a reflective act. The flâneur emerged as a new urban actor in the reconstructed medieval city, and flânerie became a pleasurable activity for detached pedestrian observers (including women for the first time) of the modern metropolis.<sup>4</sup> Over time, flânerie changed in form and interpretation but always denoted a reflective state of mind in observing the city. Here we imagine the contemporary *flâneur* or *flâneuse* as a participant-observer who organizes and orders his or her observations in meaningful narratives, often visually illustrated.

Many critical theorists have observed that the act of flânerie as embedded in the writings of Baudelaire and his contemporaries captured the essence of the modern urban experience at the end of the nineteenth century (i.e., Benjamin 1999 [1930s]; Berman 1982; Buck-Morss 1989; Jameson 1991), as a dialectic of reconciling the spectacle of the changing city against the memory of the past experience. While taking refuge in the "shadow of cities" (Benjamin 1999, 442), the flâneur or flâneuse would encounter the city's humanity in "the landscape built of sheer life" (Hofmannsthal in Benjamin 1999, 417) in their search for a relevant community.

The philosophical perspectives on flânerie had roots in *Passagen-Werk* (or the *Arcades Project* in English), the well-known work of the German philosopher Walter Benjamin. Written in the early twentieth century, the project is a massive collection of Benjamin's observations on the modern culture of consumption, and notes on his interrogations and reflections during his flânerie through the streets and arcades of Paris. Susan Buck-Morss (1989) characterizes Benjamin's work as "the dialectics of seeing."

It is this dialectic-interrogation, reflection, interpretation, discussion-inherent in flânerie that we find intriguing and potentially a useful concept in planners' charge to engage the public. We view the role of flânerie as a reflective involvement in experiencing urban life, which may range from passive observation and reflection of the public scenes to self-awareness and compassion for the life experiences of others. While keeping a detached state of mind during participant observations, the dialectical nature of flânerie does not exclude simultaneous civic engagement of these social observers. The public images and narratives resulted from flânerie could help planners to reconstruct the social reality; alternative social space may come to life through public interrogation of familiar places, thus constructing the city's multiple representational spaces like "a kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness" (Baudelaire 1869b, 65, cited in Benjamin 1999, 443).

We note further that the construct of flânerie presumes a social relationship between the reflective stroller and other users of urban space. Regrettably, however, today the essential locations of our collective flânerie are increasingly consigned to the exclusive corporate and/or privately controlled public spaces like shopping malls. These are sanitized settings where the uncertain and unpredictable social contact is minimized by editing out those whose presence is considered risky and a nuisance (see Ellickson 1996). In the absence of differences, the purified public spaces lack the spontaneity and cathartic value of a diversified public experience. Often, this is also the case of social networking of interest groups in cyberspace, where over time social exchanges might become more exclusive, as private corporations own the most popular online social networks.

On a similar note, the more inclusive the participatory processes, the better the community planning practices, as Forester (2012) reminds us in a recent article. Drawing from experiences of community planners, he urges planners "to worry less about public apathy and to worry a good deal more instead about the poverty and blinders of organizers' and planners' taken for granted methods" (p. 23). We believe that in the era of ICT, participation can be stimulated by providing an environment that can motivate citizens to practice flânerie in the hybrid space, and publicly share their observations with their fellow citizens and the local authorities. But note that in context, this practice may display different degrees of involvement reflecting variable individual propensities to engage. Documenting the urban experience can reveal relevant information on the community life either from the engaged citizens who reflectively observe their environment or from detached flâneurs, in the traditional sense of the practice.<sup>3</sup>

#### The Net and the City

#### Hybrid Space

We propose here that for the twenty-first-century flâneurs, emerging hybrid spaces offer the same kind of indulgences that the tree-lined boulevards of Paris with wide sidewalks and broad vistas offered to the nineteenth-century flâneurs. Today, the Internet offers opportunities for flânerie from the privacy of one's home or as a real-time experience of the urban sensorium captured through the use of powerful mobile devices and interactive public displays. The possibility of parallel social activities in the virtual space and physical settings creates a hybrid realm of public life, where a new form of flânerie can occur both offline and online. In the ensuing text, we discuss how this hybrid realm can be defined.

The Net could be seen as a database that contains information of all sorts, from text and images to people's location and (online) presence, to be shared, related, and filtered according to certain rules defined by the software. When the information and its users are linked to a particular geographic location, this exchange of information inevitably adds more nonmaterial layers on top of the physical space of that location. The most obvious layer results from attaching information to any place on earth, using text references or advanced interactive mapping tools like the Google Maps API. Such location-based information could range from static historical records to highly dynamic real-time sensing data like traffic information, or multimedia material, visual, and sound recordings, which besides being available online could also become available "on site" through digital displays or mobile devices.

This annotation layer increases significantly our knowledge about spaces and places at many different scales, giving rise to past and updated visions of networked cities, described variously as "cities of bits" (Mitchell 1995), "CyberCities" (Boyer 1996), "intelligent cities" (e.g., Droege 1997; Komninos 2002), "sentient cities" (e.g., Crang and Graham 2007), "augmented cities" (Aurigi and De Cindio 2008), or "wikicities" (MIT WikiCity project), and to emerging research fields such as ubiquitous computing and urban informatics (Foth et al. 2012). ICT-enhanced cities provide citizens the ability to better understand their environment, discover local information, and find people who share similar interests. The access to information with powerful location-aware mobile devices can augment our city browsing capabilities, and also our sensory perception to some extent. At the same time, however, these enhanced capacities might rob us of the pleasures of spontaneity, surprise, and novelty in experiencing urban spaces (refer to Kalin 2009). Interestingly, end users of the Net themselves can contribute to this annotation layer, and engage in a virtual collaborative space to discuss their experiences of places, share their observations, construct collaborative images of a place, and also participate in planning decisions regarding its future development.

#### Hybrid Communities

A key feature of cyberspace is that it allows users to create multiple identities in the form of a personal "home page" stored on the servers of a web host. Like real homes, personal homepages can be custom designed or follow either a generic but adaptable design structure (e.g., tools and templates for personal web pages and blogs), or a predefined (and preformatted) fixed design as in online social networks like Facebook, Flickr, or Twitter.

Networked identities produce a virtual social space, which allows ordinary people to make their voices be heard, participate in public deliberations, and thus self-organize in an unprecedented scale (Benkler 2006; Shirky 2008; Castells 2009). This system's heart is the underlying *social software*, which defines the purpose and main character of an online social network, the type of interactions allowed between its members, and the way information is created, searched, filtered, prioritized, etc. To employ this generic information management functionality for building a *virtual community* (Rheingold 2000), one must consider a wide range of software design details: accessibility and visibility rules, activity notifications, acceptable user interactions, and even wording can play a decisive role (e.g., Preece 2000).

Online forums dedicated to a specific physical place like the Plaza Diaz Vélez in Buenos Aires create an overlay social space that allows both virtual and face-to-face interactions. Instead of providing an isolated virtual space, as in a virtual "cloud" connecting people that are far from each other, ICT can enhance "local" interactions through online place-specific sites, thus creating hybrid communities (Hampton 2002; Hampton and Wellman 2003; Foth 2010). These are essentially interest communities and "contrived" in the sense Gerald Suttles (1972) defines them. In a multicultural city, there are issues related to the limited choice of neighbors and possible cultural, ethnic, or ideological differences that may lead to social exclusion or create tensions when it comes to sharing values and preferences. This is, however, obviated at least in the incipient stages of a hybrid community, because propinguity is only virtual and achieved through the Net. But it may then evolve into a community of spatial propinquity as some of its members may choose to establish face-to-face contacts in local "third places" like neighborhood coffee shops (Oldenburg 1991).

To bridge the gap between the virtual and the physical realms, practical efforts are currently under way with models of different scope and ownership, and also with different software design and functionalities. At the local scale, websites may target a single neighborhood or a group sharing common interests, owned as a community association. Typically, these sites use either commercial software services like ning.com or proprietary software written by volunteering community members. Among these sites, those that offer community-related functionality tend to foster neighborhood social activities and service exchange (e.g., North London's Harringay Online, Paris's Habitants-Bergeyre) and even activist groups (e.g., Village Vancouver). Another free option for neighbors to build place-based online communities is to use generic platforms like i-neighbors, Front Porch Forum, and EveryBlock, which promote districtwide networking by inviting people to join a specific virtual neighborhood with overall coverage at different scales (e.g., nationwide i-neighbors or Front Porch Forum in the state of Vermont). Despite their greater reach and thus available resources, today these platforms mostly serve the mainstream use of local hybrid communities as announcement boards by a minority of enthusiasts, or for local advertising, and in the best case as discussion forums about local issues (e.g., crime, access to public spaces).

In parallel, global platforms like Facebook, Flickr, and Twitter could support in principle similar functionality by allowing users to form and manage group discussions of any sort, including "place topic" based online groups. Sometimes such groups are even initiated by a municipality as in the case of the Plaza Diaz Vélez community (see Figure 1) whose online discussions are hosted by Facebook even if its servers lie many miles away. Since many people who are active online have an account on these free-access platforms and are accustomed to their software functionality, they can take advantage of a lower barrier to access. However, since the social software of these platforms is generic, it is difficult for them to accommodate local characteristics and requirements.

Moreover, serious privacy issues arise (e.g., Debatin et al. 2009), as large commercial companies own these platforms and thus all the information exchanged. The tremendous control and power of these corporate hosts to prioritize information, as in the case of search engines (see, e.g., Introna and Nissenbaum 2000), can reduce a potentially spontaneous and active community to a group of customers interacting inside a centrally and remotely controlled environment.

Peuplade is a similar generic hybrid community platform that started in 2003 in Paris. Currently, the community is serving 260,000 Parisian users (Le Journal de Paris, September 14, 2011), and its interface and functionality features are used in sixteen other French cities. Although built by a private company, Peuplade differs from other private neighborhood websites in two important aspects. First, unlike i-neighbors and Front Porch Forum, the software does not specify any territorial markers. The neighborhood coverage is subjective; it is up to the community member to define it, based on distance and cognitive spatial orientation. Second, along with other public and private partners, the Paris municipality supports the online social network and promotes it as an official virtual community for Parisians. That makes Peuplade, among the existing hybrid communities, a valid candidate for including in its functionality explicit user engagement in the planning processes, and more sophisticated hybrid design that connects cyberspace activity with physical locations in the city. Of course, other online platforms for participation and planning do exist but they do not include the social dimension of hybrid communities, as discussed below.

#### E-democracy and E-planning

The involvement of citizens in decision-making and planning processes through digital means is integral to the established notion of democracy, hence the popularity of the term e-democracy (see Hacker and van Dijk 2000; Hilbert 2009). Thus, today citizens may be asked online for their explicit point of view on important matters that could influence decisions (change.gov). They can also participate in petitions (gopetition.com), get access to government data (data.gov), comment on budgetary issues (zebralog.eu), get advice on how to vote (smartvote.ch), report on facts or problems that need immediate solution (sourcewatch.org, fixmystreet.com), and so forth.

These dedicated platforms are ICT infrastructures that in a decision-making process facilitate the information flow from and to citizens but have limited functionality to connect the website with physical settings or to create a virtual space for social activities that can encourage grassroots and spontaneous user participation. Nevertheless, recent studies report that "conversational democracy" in neighborhood online networks may lead to civic action (Harris and Flouch 2010). To engage citizens, current e-planning initiatives explore as well the use of privately owned and operated global online social networks like Facebook (Evans-Cowley 2010) or Twitter (dis.urbaninformatics.net) that offer popular platforms for social exchanges.

In mediating democratic processes, the role of social software can be subtle yet critical, thus requiring informed and responsive design. As we see it, two important objectives may trigger significant improvements of current e-democracy initiatives: (1) to integrate online social activity with public deliberations for neighborhood decision making and (2) to complement formal community representations with individual participants' own perspectives. Feasibility of these scenarios no doubt will depend on appropriate hybrid design features of intelligent social software that would benefit from everyday social exchanges, and also encourage and support community engagement in planning.

Still missing today in cyberspace is an isomorphic virtual overlay of a city, which renders structure and identity (cf. Lynch 1960) to the hybrid environment. Just as one recognizes immediately the iconic images of Paris or New York unique to their specific streetscape and design, why could we not imagine iconic virtual spaces with an identity unique to a particular city, allowing public access to inhabitants and visitors alike? We expect that for reasons of scale, and due to ICT possibilities for synchronic and asynchronic exchanges, such hybrid realm could host more inclusive and stimulating public forums, broader than those of the more exclusive neighborhood scale. Before elaborating on the design of this urban hybrid space, we return to our earlier discussion about the practice of flânerie: the act of observing and understanding the city, and its promise to capture human sensibilities of the urban life and ephemera.

#### Flânerie in the Hybrid Space

As we discussed in the first section, flânerie is seen as a reflective and interpretive act. Whether it involved mere window-shopping in the late nineteenth-century arcades of Paris or of its new department stores, or simply strolling along its grand boulevards, the act of flânerie often evoked a compassionate reflection of the condition of the less fortunate (see Baudelaire 1947, *The Eyes of the Poor*, pp. 52-53). In a similar spirit of empathy and sociability, collective representations of the city experience could reveal many dimensions of community life, as ICT opens up new possibilities to elicit multiple understandings and narratives of places.

So, while we are aware of the contemporary concerns about the decline of community, place, and public space in a time of globalization and network society (Banerjee 2001) and the threats that arise from the ICT's commercialization (Fuchs 2008; Castells 2009), nevertheless we are intrigued and stimulated by the possibilities of the Net and ICT leading to new modalities for defining space and place.

#### Online Representations of the Physical Space

*Passagen-Werk* or the *Arcades Project* (1999) is a collection of Walter Benjamin's copious notes on social and aesthetic expressions of the contemporary material culture of consumption. The evidence he collected in his meanderings through the streets and shopping arcades of Paris are indeed what Buck-Morss (1989, ix) called "debris of mass culture": newspaper clippings, hand notes, tickets, photographs, etc. Seemingly a collection of disjointed and staccato narratives as appropriate to the spatial experience itself that comprised discrete and often non sequitur impressions, associations, and recollections—Benjamin's project of flânerie remains a major contribution to our understanding of the material culture in the public realm.

Imagine if in the 1930s Walter Benjamin could have had either a digital camera and audio recorder or even a modern cell phone and access to a content sharing site like YouTube, Flickr, or 7scenes. The "Passagen-Werk" then would have been available as a "Passagen-Blog" or even as a "Passagen-Wiki," it would have received instant responses and commentaries from other such flâneurs(ses). Today such responses would begin instantaneously, as fellow observers would express their agreements, demurrals, or embellishments on Benjamin's original interpretations. The online forum might not always have had the same level of scholarly contributions as presented by Buck-Morss today, but it would have had a more democratic and visceral discussion and debate. It may not have been as rarefied as the Frankfurt School interpretations of the material culture of consumption in advanced capitalist societies. But more significantly, it would have created a community of shared interest, not necessarily in agreement, about a place—whether it is the Tuileries or the Passage Vivienne—even though the contributors might be from different corners of the world but sharing the same city experience.

In a different situation, when cyberspace users belonging to the same geographic location are socially active online, observers/flâneurs may browse their recorded activities shaping an image of the local community. For instance, citizen observers can interpret and deliberate over a place's representations in hybrid communities like Peuplade, or more recently, EveryBlock. Unlike the ruminations of Benjamin and other "professional" flâneurs, in these communities qualitative information about places is elicited from citizens. In addition to standard user-generated content, the Peuplade site initiates a reflective process by requesting users to build their personal profile through answers to a questionnaire that attempts to elicit both cognitive and affective responses about their neighborhood space. This helps the website flâneurs to gather qualitative knowledge about the community and its neighborhood.

In addition to recordings of everyday life occurring in physical places, which are either transferred unedited to cyberspace (as in Google's Street View) or interpreted and analyzed through interactive online discussions, there is a significant amount of online activity that could provide equally rich information about the social life of a physical community. While browsing the web pages that display various images and representations of a particular place, observers can take notes, interpret and record their observations of social activities taking place in cyberspace, thus engaging in a form of online flânerie.

#### Flânerie Online

The reason why the metaphor of flânerie applies to cyberspace is because of the capacity of ICT to store, search and filter information, and make available to the public multiple layers of subjective information (see also Featherstone 1998; Hartmann 2004; Dörk, Carpendale, and Williamson 2011). Although passive and not always reflective, some of the serendipitous web surfing today can be seen as an act of flânerie.<sup>6</sup> This is so in part due to the potential anonymity of the online social observers and their isolated (unaccompanied) participation in online events and activities, analogous to the presence of the reserved and reflective flâneur in the Parisian boulevards, or of the hidden man who feels himself viewed but not discoverable, in full possession of his individuality while inhabiting the social spaces of the modern city (cf. Poe 1840; Riesman 1961). Perhaps the appropriate metaphor is closer to a detached urban observer like Victor Hugo, who took in the city scene sitting on the upper level of the Parisian omnibuses (Drumont 1900, cited in Benjamin 1999, 434) because of the similarity with the often sedentary, isolated, and disjointed nature of cyber-flânerie.

Of course the cyberspace flânerie lacks the full range of stimuli of the urban sensorium. Cyber-flâneurs must therefore supplement the online experience with their imagination and memory of the real place. But unlike real-time and sometimes ephemeral experiences in the physical world, cyber-flâneurs can stroll in time in the archival world of images and narratives sustained by cyberspace's unlimited storage capabilities. Thus, online flânerie can involve traveling back in time to revisit past activities and recordings.

In conveying cyberspace experiences online, one can use descriptive narratives and/or images of online social activities. Screenshots<sup>7</sup> are instances of public life in cyberspace that one can capture from the dynamic visual sequence of space or communication on one's smartphone or computer desktop, being the screen equivalent of street photography. This way, online flâneurs can compile during a virtual stroll photographic representations of a particular community, similarly to "streetview photographers" who select interesting moments out of the bulk of random and unedited city images provided by Google Street View.<sup>8</sup>

Once this information is available on dedicated areas of certain webpages, other online flâneurs can use it to complement their own cyberspace experiences, and thus compile a complex and recursive system of community representations.

#### Cross-Space Flânerie

Bringing the online world "down" to the physical space creates opportunities for even more hybrid explorations, which include previous roles of participant observers like Benjamin's flâneur (1999); Featherstone's "virtual flâneur" (1998); Dörk, Carpendale, and Williamson's (2011) "information *flâneur*"; or Williams, Robles, and Dourish's (2009) notion of technology-enhanced city dweller. Physical public spaces may become rhizomatic (Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 2004) and complex entities when online activities or past recorded experiences are represented through public displays, interactive information boards, ubiquitous smartphones, or more sophisticated wearable devices (see MIT WikiCity). Physical design can suggest this connection simply through signage pointing at specific virtual locations using text (Internet URL addresses) as we illustrate in Figure 1, 2D barcodes to be scanned with smartphones, etc. This landscape of invisible networks is anticipated by visionary art installations like, for example, interactive online texts projected on buildings' facades (e.g., "Interactive texts take over public spaces" [mobileactive.org]).

A recent website that focuses on sharing city experiences with a cell phone is 7scenes.com that started in Amsterdam and its software is used now in other places of the world. It is "a mobile storytelling platform" that links users' media to places. The "scenes" include narratives, sounds, videos, and photos that the user-director can mix as a sequence in time and space, with interesting flânerie qualities.

Among current projects that use 7scenes software are the New Learning Institute's Biodiversity Quest program in Chicago (March 2011) or Ubiga's Territorio Campus project in Bilbao, Spain (June 2011). The Chicago project invites young people from the Bouchet Academy to create collaborative mobile experiences (quests), which are shown at Lincoln Park Zoo to lead other young visitors around the zoo, help them draw connections between exhibits, and show how they can take action about endangered species. In order to transform the Leioa university campus, the Bilbao project provides a platform for dialogue between citizens and students through mobile tours and games that draw on student life. Nowadays, mobile spatial experiences like campus tours are extended also at the city scale, for instance, using the 7scenes software in Amsterdam (see also de Souza e Silva 2006 and Foth 2009).

These are only a few examples of the enormous possibilities for cross-space flânerie. Its implications for planning practice involving the hybrid realm have yet to be fully explored. We imagine that new media technology and active participation of planners in hybrid space design could bring about many more interesting scenarios, for stimulating spontaneous grassroots participation in planning.

#### **Possibilities for Participation in Planning**

Our previous review of various possibilities for action in the emerging hybrid realms of our cities suggests two areas of planning application. On the one hand, planners should consider citizen flâneurs' recordings in developing qualitative local knowledge and in understanding local values and priorities at the grassroots level. On the other hand, to benefit from flânerie's potential to improve citizen participation in planning, planners need to understand the ICT constraints and capabilities, and to develop planning methods appropriate for hybrid realms. To be sure, many questions arise with respect to flânerie as a method of eliciting information on the social life in public places, suggesting an agenda for future research.

In this section, we propose the outline of a research agenda for advancing our vision of emergent hybrid communities that encourage social flâneurs to compile meaningful local knowledge. Clearly, the theoretical and practical aspects will mature through particular case studies that researchers will conduct in the future. This is so, because the comprehensive process of eliciting information through flânerie requires complex practical solutions and casespecific decisions on important trade-offs related to privacy and social software design. For example, because of the high cost of personalized designs, relying on generic platforms like Facebook is presently an attractive alternative but which could be problematic for reasons of privacy, control, and lack of customization options.

Rather than learning only how to use pre-set cyber infrastructure for physical planning practice, should planners themselves not engage in cyberspace design that takes into account various public imperatives? That will require planners to be more proactive and make choices for imaginative practices, capturing the fluidity of the hybrid civic arena. In the development of these hybrid realms, planning expertise can bring long-term public perspectives and expert knowledge on places and communities obtained from interdisciplinary research.

We address these issues in the following, by focusing on three interdisciplinary research domains critical for the future development of hybrid space: privacy, ownership, and software design. We discuss the trade-offs that planners must consider in the future, and sketch some possible solutions that will need to be calibrated according to the specific urban scales of various communities. But before analyzing these important aspects, we reflect first on the role of flânerie as a means for more inclusive and genuine participation in planning.

#### Hybrid Flânerie Recordings as Local Knowledge

Collective flânerie is a way to capture local knowledge on social life occurring in the neighborhood places as well as in the parallel online communities. To the established methods of documenting social life of urban spaces (i.e., Lynch 1960; Whyte 1980), flânerie can add phenomenological and relational dimensions due to its intuitive, ambiguous and emotional predispositions. In contrast to GIS-based maps of spatial data derived from exogenous sources, and closer to the idea of participatory GIS (Elwood 2006), the data obtained from flânerie is entirely endogenous, reflecting the social life of a community. When Kevin Lynch was asked to reflect on his study of city images and the methodology for obtaining cognitive maps of the city, he thought that a principal value of the methodology was to "break the ice" (1984), that is, to engage people to talk about their environments and their everyday experience of living in cities.

In 1960 Lynch spoke of the "consensus" or the "public" image of the city, based on the public's shared experience and the urban form elements that cognitively, behaviorally, and affectively (cf. Nasar 1998) shape the organizing schema that we all carry around in our heads. In the design of flânerie-friendly software, for instance, planners can bring their expertise to organize such cognitive schema that may facilitate public engagement in building community identity (e.g., the user questionnaire in the Peuplade hybrid community). One could imagine a flânerie-based "image of the city" that would be periodically updated online with new inputs from new arrivals and also inputs from old-timers reflecting the ongoing changes in the city.

Moreover, online citizen participation through collaborative technology can complement public deliberations in the community halls or council chambers. It is a solution to problems of scale also. For it can make the process more inclusive (e.g., the 2002 "Listening to the City" in New York City) not only by saving time for those who cannot be physically present at the community meetings, but also for those community members who are reclusive and introverted, and may prefer to participate from a (more) private place than the public forum.

When authentic, such testimonies of textual, audio, and visual recordings are capable of publicly representing the entire community including marginalized groups, having bridged the digital divide through publicly accessible sites located in libraries and community halls. Vetted by other community members (i.e., through rating, voting, reviewing, and public editing similarly to the Wikipedia articles), this type of representation implies a consensus building that is different from direct democracy, or the e-democracy project in which the only persons represented are those who actually participate. The existence of a sophisticated hybrid space for sharing this information will enhance the way people perceive and value their environment. Over time, this awareness may further stimulate changes in their own habits of flânerie and contribution of information to the common pool.

It should be apparent from observations of current hybrid spatial practice that the opportunity to make contacts and engage in dialogue in the online neighborhood community can motivate citizens to be more active in their existential neighborhood (see Harris and Flouch 2010). Online social networking in the Peuplade hybrid community led to the materialization of a community center in a Parisian neighborhood. The center called "La Maizon" functions as an independent association, self-financed by local residents, that organizes daily community events such as public forums, communal meals, job workshops, exhibitions, film shows, etc. From this perspective, online activity may help build social capital (Putnam 2000) and increase community safety by adding more "eyes on the street" (Jacobs 1961) so to speak, and thereby enhancing neighborhood conviviality, which may be defined, in Peattie's (1998) words, as "smallgroup rituals and social bonding in serious collective action, from barn raisings and neighborhood cleanups to civil disobedience that blocks the streets or invades the missile site" (p. 246).

Of course the specter of manipulation and interest advocacy will always be there. The more explicit the role of our citizen hybrid flâneurs becomes, the more purposeful are their explorations likely to become, and thus losing the spontaneity and authenticity of their musings, as implied in the traditional interpretation of flânerie. Moreover, if it appears that the citizen flâneurs' inputs are beginning to influence decision making, it might encourage manipulation of the information gathered toward lobbying for vested interests. In liberal democratic practices, the decision matrix for the planner may get complicated further, as she sorts through conflicting and contradictory positions, while respecting certain community imperatives (e.g., privacy, ownership, property rights). In the following text, we address further some of these caveats.

#### Privacy versus Online Representation

How can one regulate the collection of information about local communities? The idea of a benevolent flâneuse observing her environment and sharing her experiences in the hybrid community, with the potential consequence to increase residents' engagement in community activities, and eventually social capital is indeed very appealing. However, as in the case of street photography, such activity in a hybrid community could raise serious privacy and moderation issues. Some highly sensitive communities may not be suitable for flânerie, or may require special conditions with respect to recording and publishing social observations.

In contrast to the Google Car's capacity to capture offline content and transfer it almost unedited online, possibly causing citizen discontent (see "Community Performance in Google Street View" [we-make-money-not-art.com]), the capabilities of a resident-flâneuse to observe and record what others let publicly visible is considerably less intrusive. Moreover, flânerie can actually bring awareness regarding possible privacy risks to which one is exposed in the hybrid space. Nevertheless, some moderation is always critical to keep a balance between ethical concerns, legal norms, societal rules, and different forms of public life. But it can incur significant costs, and so distributed forms of moderation should be encouraged, as well as specific guidelines about the expected content need to be encoded in the software design.<sup>9</sup>

Another privacy risk is related to the online availability of personal information, which can be collected in large amounts and made available to external parties for data mining, advertisement, or other purposes without one's consent. This serious concern has attracted much attention (e.g., Debatin et al. 2009) because of the increasing information control and resulting power of corporations that deploy and operate cyberspace infrastructures like Facebook and Google. These are commercial entities functioning in a complex marketplace, which almost always rob network members of their privacy, through intruding end-user license agreements that users rarely read carefully but have to accept before joining their services.

Would not a publicly owned hybrid community provide a much friendlier venue from this perspective? Certainly, public deliberations can build trust between users and the entities holding information and owning the network or the social software. Yet new structures capable to express and defend the values of a particular community need to be devised. Here planning knowledge and practice may mediate the definition of boundaries between individuals' interests and protection, and the provision of public goods in cyberspace.

#### Ownership and Structure of the Hybrid City

In the current hybrid environment, for an ideal community to materialize as a convivial space rather than mainly a marketplace, planning practice must encourage deliberation of public concerns. For this allows not only opportunities for social learning but also "the search for a space to deliberate about the common good" that "motivates a great deal of creative thinking and action" (Roberts 2004, 341). We argue that a deliberative process would benefit from public life in "third places" like today's cafes, community centers, and online social networks, thus becoming an integral part of a hybrid community, say Peuplade, allowing citizens to take ownership of the aims of local planning.

So if the deliberation space is a public hybrid community, should this overlay cover an entire city? Should this overlay be owned and operated by a public authority? An interesting possibility for citizen participation may involve an augmented (hybrid) realm of virtual social space designed as a public good, like a natural extension of the city's public spaces accessible to both locals and visitors. Such an augmented realm may elicit more formal exchanges with the state apparatus and the neighborhood polity; nonetheless, the feelings of owning the deliberative processes depend also on the culture of participatory practices and the degree of citizen engagement (see also De Lange and De Waal 2012). But the cost and expertise required for the design and operation of such a site presages significant disadvantages of this enterprise, which in many cases might be precluded by municipal budget limitations.

If feasible financially, a public citywide virtual space would have a significant competitive advantage to existing commercial and grassroots efforts in building hybrid environments. With its regulatory power, the municipality can coordinate development initiatives in physical space with cyberspace elements by distributing access points and public displays throughout the city. In this way, municipalities can encourage and increase citizen participation about issues of public interest and thus ensure that outreach is extensive and all voices are heard. As an overlay on the physical city, this hybrid environment may also promote cross-space and traditional flânerie in city streets.

Alternatively, the desired outcome may come from a bottom–up process. Local communities can be encouraged to develop their own grassroots projects to connect their members. Then an "umbrella" citywide network of hybrid social space may emerge in a bottom–up fashion as an assemblage of numerous overlapping virtual spaces of the existing hybrid communities described previously. But because of local community's distinct boundaries and controlled access points, it will be challenging to combine such networks toward a unified participative process.

In any case, the cost of constructing a hybrid realm as a public good will be lower if local knowledge and expertise are mobilized, as in the case of the peuplade.fr team and the City of Paris. The cost of the produced software can decrease even more, if instead of a handful of dedicated software developers hundreds or even thousands of them worldwide would contribute to the development of a shared social software framework, based on the experience gained from its deployment in different environments. This will enable knowledge sharing encoded as a rich set of customization options provided by this framework, for creating a wide variety of hybrid spaces of different scales and political visions.

Yet that can happen only if this software is open (i.e., its source code is publicly available) and free (i.e., no license fees required for its use). This so-called Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) has been responsible for impressive achievements like the Linux operating system, the Apache web server, and numerous other applications like OpenOffice, which compete in equal terms with the products of giant corporations such as Microsoft and Apple (Feller et al. 2005). By design, FOSS is transparent in its functionalities, which may be instrumental in building trust and preventing manipulative practices from authorities (see Introna and Nissenbaum 2000), a fundamental requirement in our scenario.

However, significant effort is required to engage and coordinate a critical mass of software developers and municipalities. As a first step, planners and social scientists could collaborate with computer scientists, graphic designers, and developers for the extension of existing FOSS solutions for building virtual communities like Drupal, Diaspora, or Elgg, to become place-deferent and thus support our vision of a hybrid city realm as described below.

#### Design for Flânerie in the Hybrid Space

Almost two decades ago, William Mitchell (1995) imagined "bitsphere planners" responsible to shape cyberspace places that "will be constructed virtually by software instead of physically from stones and timbers, and they will be connected by logical linkages rather than by doors, passageways, and streets" (1995, 24). Since then, many studies (such as Thrift and French 2002; Lessig 2006; Benkler 2006; Shirky 2008; Fuchs 2008, among many others) have highlighted the inherently interdisciplinary nature of software design, and its importance in shaping our society. To diminish potential tensions between the involved disciplines, more adaptive understandings of cross-disciplinary research are required. For instance, recent studies (Dourish and Bell 2011) on the collaboration between ethnographers and computer scientists in ubiquitous computing (or ubicomp) show some lacunae that result from the divergent understanding of each profession's role in cyberspace design. "There is a great deal of tacit pressure on ethnographers and other social scientists working within the ubicomp context to generate implications for design (p. 65). . . . Ethnography's analytic contributions do indeed have profound implications for design, but these implications go beyond the laundry list of features and considerations that are often requested" (p. 74).

The design of cyberspace that is deferent to places and communities can be the result of the collaborations between computer scientists and planners. To evaluate the use and quality of the virtual space one can employ planning methods like Kevin Lynch's taxonomy of images (1960) and William H. Whyte's observations of social behavior in public spaces (1980). Then, as we argue elsewhere (Apostol, Antoniadis, and Banerjee, forthcoming), one can identify spatial elements through analogies between the virtual and the physical social environments, in order to derive alternatives for future (hybrid) spatial design.

For the purpose of this article, a pertinent question is: How to create social software design that will entice user participation and the practice of flânerie? To compete with the intense rhythms that today's successful online social networks impose on their members might be challenging for a local community that wishes to respect user privacy, and to have a slower pace of interaction. It is not easy to attract users' attention online without disrupting their real-time occupations in the neighborhood. Even more difficult may be to require users to observe and reflect on their environment in a genuine flânerie, rather than the idle gossip typical of Facebook's News Feed.

Appropriate physical interventions should harmonize such software design to fully exploit the competitive advantage of a publicly owned hybrid community (or the existing Peuplade community sponsored by Paris municipality). In a process of downtown revitalization, for instance, interactive street events with expanded online coverage may include flânerie-specific software that can accept multimodal recordings of the neighborhood sensorium. Then such recordings are stored online, on the dedicated areas of the project pages augmenting individual concerns and public debates regarding the downtown experience and its future revitalization. Here the planners in charge with this project can consult them along with the information obtained from the many related online discussion forums. The accounts of community flânerie may be projected at the project site through the information node of the street,<sup>10</sup> either on the large digital screen (like those present nowadays on some university campuses or important urban nodes as Times Square or the LA Live), or on the free terminals for online access.

Finally, as a complement to generic guidelines for successful online communities (see Preece 2000), here we identify briefly some examples of social software that could enable hybrid scenarios, if customized for neighborhood particularities. The most critical building block of an online community is the online user's public profile definition. The software can provide a dedicated space for flânerie recordings on each user's profile webpage to motivate online publication of related content. To encourage the inclusion of often underrepresented areas like poor neighborhoods, the software designer could consider various incentive schemes such as the exhibition of the "spatial coverage" achieved by each member, or the definition of community games that challenge local residents from a target coverage area, and the promotion of content based more on the overall coverage achieved rather than standard popularity metrics such as the number of views or votes. In such hybrid communities, positive group dynamics could emerge by making available different stakeholders' role choices like "residents," "businesses," "property owners," or "visitors," according to their interests, engagement, and ties with the place. To create interesting paths for online flânerie, rather than minimizing the time required to reach a specific online destination (like, e.g., Google Search does today), alternative design options are possible through the appropriate placement of tags, menu items, and links with sensitive keywords among others.

#### **Summary and Perspectives**

One of the greatest challenges of direct citizen participation is the provision of tools and resources for the participants to be successful in their endeavor, being "coequals in a learning process" (Roberts 2004, 338). In this article, we introduce the scenario of collective flânerie in the hybrid space, predicated on human penchant for spatial exploration and a primordial instinct for social contact, psychological stimulation, and sharing experiences of the quotidian life. We argue that if and when feasible, such dynamic representations of places and communities can strengthen social ties and neighborhood conviviality, and further build a sense of shared urban community.

Similar to the practice of blogs turning ordinary people into journalists, or Flickr community allowing users to perform as professional photographers, or YouTube as film makers, the yet unwritten social software for flânerie and its complementary physical interventions at the city level can stimulate citizens to act as cross-space flâneurs of different scales and commitment within citywide hybrid communities. We suggest that this manner of generating public venues in the hybrid realm has tremendous potential in building community identity and improving the level of citizen participation in public deliberations.

Planning has an important role in mediating the trade-offs resulting from the ownership of software and privacy-related issues, formulating moderation guidelines and experimenting with clever software design to stimulate members' participation. By building on the technological advances and the synergy between planning and computer science research, planners can facilitate interventions in public space to accommodate cyberspace representations, and can promote hybrid spaces for public deliberations on matters of shared interest. In the process, many important political and philosophical questions need to be addressed, and will lead to different manifestations of the flânerie concept as a means for building local knowledge and a sense of community.

Finally, we want to conclude by revisiting the premise of participation with which we began our argument. Certainly, we believe that effective planning and design must involve participation at the highest rungs of Arnstein's (1969) wellknown ladder metaphor that involves citizen control and power. We argue that promises of ICT and thriving social media allow citizen access to the planning process at the highest levels, beginning at least at the level of partnership in the planning and design process, if not higher. But what is exciting about this new possibility is that it is essentially "bottom-up" and not a part of the institutionalized and arranged processes in a "top-down" manner as captured in the Arnstein metaphor. Furthermore, we see this flânerie between net and place leading to a heightened sense of locality and conviviality, as ICT and social media would increasingly open up possibilities of social bonding and networking at the local level, which can significantly enrich the planning and design process at the highest rungs of the Arnstein ladder. In other words, "Facebook communities" may actually engender "faceblock communities" (cf. Suttles 1972) defying Melvin Webber's (1963) oracle of the "non-place urban realm." We see this process as a new form of partnership between citizens and planners involving different ways of purposive engagement, social interaction, representation, and communication in designing localities.

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#### Notes

- Community-based design *charrettes* may be seen as an exception where planners have sought alternative formats and protocols for a more active form of community participation (see Hou 2011; Kelbaugh 2011).
- 2. The new technology and software allows us to roam in a world of simultaneity, where public and private space and time often

conflate and overlap. Thus, this new media lets one carry on the most intimate conversation in the middle of the Grand Central concourse, for example, while we can join in public conversations from the privacy of our home, sitting at the kitchen table in our pajamas. This simultaneity makes us occupants of a new hybrid space, and it is this hybrid space, that we argue, offers new promises for citizen engagement in planning.

- All online material referenced in this paper was last accessed on December 3, 2012. Additional material and up to date references are available at http://nethood.org/.
- 4. Derived from the seventeenth-century verb "flanner" used in Normandy to mean "to waste time" (www.cnrtl.fr in 2007), the verb *flâner*, and the nouns *flâneur* (f. *flâneuse*) and *flânerie* became part of the French language at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Balzac for instance (*Cousin Bette* 1846, 241) used the term to describe someone who does not like to do much.
- It is an open question to what extent people can be at the same time detached observers and engaged citizens keeping intact the veridicality of both the observations and their public documentation.
- 6. Today, this flânerie-type of browsing the Net is threatened by the efficiency of searching that services like Google provide, and by the domination of information feeding provided by Facebook and Twitter (see Evgeny Morozov, "The Death of the Cyberflâneur," *New York Times*, February 4, 2012).
- 7. For how to take a screenshot, see http://take-a-screenshot.org.
- Some of these visual recordings are similar in nature with the Dionysian activities on Google Earth reported by Kingsbury and Jones (2009). See, e.g., googlestreetviews.com among many others.
- 9. For example, a neighborhood-oriented community software can impose a specific limit of online-shared visuals and narratives, and allow only posts of low-resolution visual recordings of moments in public spaces or local gatherings. Besides reducing the cost of content hosting and moderating, such limits may induce reflective behavior in selecting for publication the most relevant and appropriate postings.
- 10. We imagine the information node of the street like the *InfoBox* at various times in Berlin, namely, the red box at the Potsdamer Platz construction site in the nineties or currently the Humboldt-Box at Schlossplatz, the location of the Stadtschloss' future reconstruction.

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