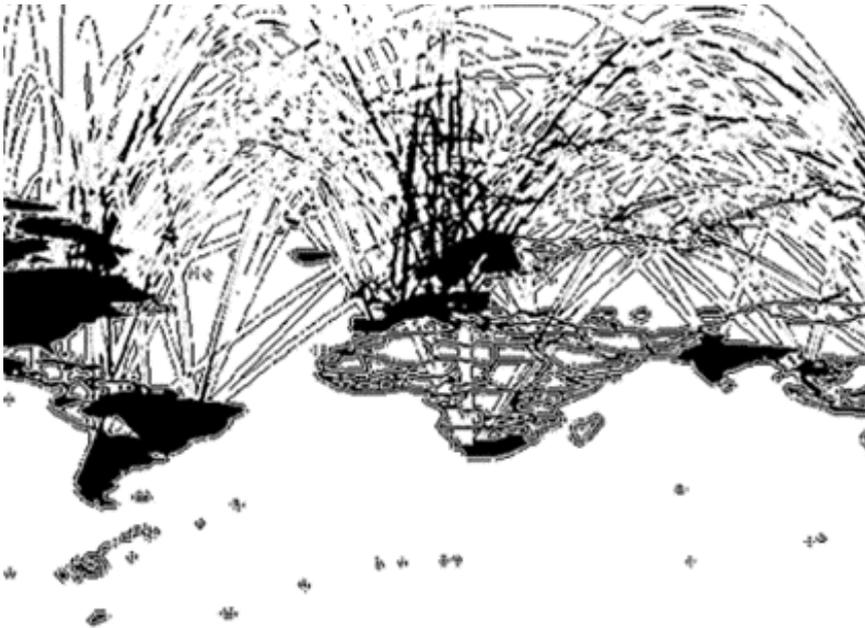


# Archifesto

Towards a digital urbanism of radical difference

ARCHIMEDIA



**In the Cities of the Future... the peoples of the world will be empowered.**

The sea of information which surrounds us is more than a mere superficial addition: the physicality of buildings, streets, public squares, malls and habitats. The city of contemporary experience is a dense web of interconnecting fibres, cables and lines which overlay the physical infrastructure of offices, corridors, doors and alarms which make up our urban architecture. Telecommunications are the networks of invisible wireless signals, satellite feeds and other unseen yet omnipresent systems of messaging in all its forms.

Despite technological changes in the digital revolution, private capital and its urban industries have remained largely undifferentiated in form since the nineteenth-century era of the weaving loom, steam engine and the child labour factory. Those in economic and political power have sought to coerce others to see the world as it appears, through them, as an uneven and skewed office, workplace and shopfront, where freedom from drudgery and boredom is just out of reach, forever a mirage of what could be possible or latent in desire itself. This is Guy Debord's perception of the society of the spectacle, further reinforced by the diffusion of media into every nook and cranny of global consciousness.

Computer and Internet access will be available to all people everywhere. The Net will be publicly owned as open to everyone, as the sky, public parks and the right to breathe.

Amidst the development and access to digital urbanism, work and its social relations have been transformed. The new global digital technologies offer a dislocated relation to hierarchical forms of work – a decentralised sense of what one is doing at one's terminal in relation to what others are doing. The sense of place has expanded to include readily available communication with workers, artists, creative people, activists and owners in all parts of the world. The idea of the 'global village' can be expanded upon from its initial place in corporate rhetoric to include the very real totality of persons engaged in some kind of telecommunications from country to country, city to city, town to town, room to room, regardless of the content of these messages, and within this, as independent culture and service providers have flourished, alternatives to the system of exploitation, as it has stood before, have emerged.

**In the Cities of the Future, there will be equal, affordable Net access for all.**

The needs of societies must be identified by the people, for the people, above and beyond those of the corporate balance sheet. As the sea of what science fiction writer Bruce Sterling calls "Dead Media" fills with the obsolete machines of countless offices – often only slightly 'out of date' pentiums, 486 computers, laptops and peripherals – the technologically innovative and progressive connect under-served people to the Internet, its ideas, sites, CD-ROMs and other formats. So rich is the potential of this technoculture and its valuing of techno-detritus that not only working machines can be assembled from corporate flotsam, but these machines can be put online for people who genuinely need them, and inexpensive, even worker or community-owned servers can be linked to create non-profit networks for literacy, communications, learning and social development, art and education.

**Technology and its methods will flourish for the Public good.  
Corporate Domination will cease.**

Archimedia suggests that new free-form networks with some of the qualities of 'cities' are being made out in the digital landscape. Computers require only the physical space, electricity and communication links which enable them to be turned on, and used. A cast-off

machine can hide under a counter in a space no bigger than a drawer, and yet serve web pages, software and material with the entire world. A refurbished laptop can run alone, in a back room or a hidden place – all that is needed is a phone line and an Internet account. Each web site or user located at an address acts as a citizen in a network of communication which is the urban architecture of the cybercity; spaces devoid of corporate control and the functionalism of traditional work.

**The Net will be a rallying point for communities – not a marketplace for exploitation.**

Increasingly mediated by the complex conditions of a globally digitised system/economy of commerce and governance, cities are increasingly becoming rife with spaces in which corporate profit is being designed through specific architectural devices such as franchise, food courts, mini-malls, main streets, atrium malls, mixed-used apartment mall complexes, theme parks and secured commercial development, or what Saskia Sassen generously refers to as “economic chains”.<sup>1</sup>

These new types of corporate-industrial-entertainment conglomerations which have appeared in the global cities of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century are backed by the increased use and exploitation of the privatised multinational web-based economy. Those unconnected or uninterested must pay the price of an often externally imposed set of social relations, which, for the most part, are bent on destroying public spaces both real and virtual and which are promoting cities and spaces in countries all over the world through the spectacle of the privatised global marketplace.

**Networks, expanded to include the majority of the people and to belong to the people, form the basis of any true resistance culture in a globalised, digitised economy.**

Thinkers, artists, and activists refusing to cede to the expected initiatives of capitalism are carving out new and progressive forms of media usage. These are the public media initiatives created by the programmers, graphics people, musicians, culture jammers and libertarians who have adapted the refuse of the media Spectacle and who have turned it back upon itself. These are also the community-based activists and educators who are supplying underserved communities with ways to learn and build their networks. This is the philosophy of ‘DIY’ – of community cooperation and ownership, at the heart of public life in many parts of the world.

But as privatised networks and computers are ‘obsoleting’ urban spaces as we once knew them, there are also networks and computers manned to create meaningful online spaces and viable social spaces in their place. Where computers and networks proliferate, very often so do economic and social and cultural systems. If we view connection itself as the basis for participation in hybrid urban life, perhaps digital communication begins to ful-

fill its utopian promise as a kind of social adhesive, one which assures differentiation even within some global hegemony of technological expansion.

There is already an emerging kind of global culture of connectivity such as non-government organisations, alternative mediamakers, human rights groups, and other non-profit, people-based thinkers and institutions which are openly filling the void which profit's vacuum – corporate capital and its architecture – has robbed from social and civic life. Consider for a moment the significant international media events brought about recently by public rejection (and violence towards) the global chains Starbucks and MacDonalds, or the widely viewed movements to reject mall-culture and genetically modified foods in numerous cities: Seattle, Washington, Philadelphia, Melbourne, Prague, London, Genoa.<sup>2</sup>

Apart from the rejection of the WTO or the IMF is the full-on damage to the positioning of the global franchise within, especially, non-American cities. The recent terrorist attacks on the global conglomerate of the World Trade Center further bespeak a rejection of the dominating global economy. Meanwhile, rural activists, agriculturists, and scientists from non-western countries and individuals such as Vandana Shiva have used the new technologies to participate in a global discourse rejecting globalised capitalism. The growth of a mixed, multinational, non-Westernised media as global culture is apparent in the documents of these provocative and highly successful events.<sup>3</sup>

Cultural and political movements have long demonstrated creative uses for both city space and the technologies of communication which cities have given rise to. For example, the mobile tool of the video Portapak sparked new media relations during the anti-Vietnam War demonstrations in the United States and Europe, allowing the dissemination of information regarding social protest to reach a broader public. The international women's movement has benefited widely, also, from the accessibility of cameras. Today, the wireless phone, Internet, and laptops are powerful tools for anti-globalisation movements, as they facilitate the coordination of and the participation in protest action outside the gaze of the police and the interests of state and commercial power. The miniature tape recorder, the fax machine and the cell phone are put to use by the proletariat, the culture jammer, the writer and the activist across borders. Nothing more exotic than a phone line and an Internet account can link activists together from all over the world.

### **Corporate Domination will cease... The Net will not be censored!**

The proliferation of security cameras and 'point-of-sale' systems mirrors the decentralisation and divided consciousness as yearned for by those in power. People must be both on display and watched at all times, according to this litany. The system of financial exchange which has installed shopping mall cultures into cities of the western world, and which has been busily installing shopping mall and theme park cultures into spaces of the non-western world, creates a climate of security and surveillance leading, in part, to an all out return to the ludicrous fear of the Other. This particular racist line of thinking earmarks the current paranoid trend towards the Patriot Laws being legislated by the George Bush Administration to curtail open usage of the Net, and to the endless parading of men and

women of colour as the Number One global criminals in the post-September 11 globalised media spectacle.

Peppered with techno-detritus, and now rife with the ideology of an increasingly 'secured' western economy, urban spaces the world over are being occupied with stronger tools in an even more contentious landscape of intentions and values. The inequality of nations, peoples, genders and cultures has come into even sharper focus since the globalised distribution of the images of the Twin Towers falling and the ensuing presentation of an insular and debilitated Afghanistan. When one looks behind the blank facades of ever-whitening 'Main Street' commercialised, corporatised thinking, one finds the back alleys of a critical, politicised culture calling for a diversified future of increased peace and global understanding; folks booting up and getting on with their hand-me-down 386s and 486s and pentiums, or running open-source operating systems and independent web servers. As the paranoid patrons of Western capitalism work towards devising stricter codes of law enforcement, surveillance and social control, rat-bag technophiles happily struggle to dismantle the apparatus of Western oppression.

Global media culture tends to be viewed as a one-way mainstream juggernaut, whose tentacles emanate from multinational corporate industry and spread to all corners of the globe. Note the recent aggressive merger initiatives by AOL to overtake international markets as the major Internet service provider.<sup>4</sup>

Cable television, satellite news, and giant telecommunications firms have largely succeeded in making the world itself a configured 'desktop' where filtered information and ideas relevant to the most powerful countries, companies, trends and ideas are the only ones allowed through. But with every branch office and with every commercial spin-off which accompanies the spread of media hegemony comes the potential for individual and community empowerment through media – the microcosmic building blocks of social and political change. The walls of oppression are only as high and thick as the belief in the oppression itself.

Exploitation by one nation over another, by one class over another, by one sex over another, by one race over another, will be no more.

The collision of physicality and virtuality in the global village of the Net gives rise to new types of architecture – hybrid forms – or a blend of physical space with the imagined spaces of the mind and minds of those connected via networks and software. Similarly the spaces of cities are affected by the new distribution of cyber-identity and cyber-imagination within the real distribution of access, power, gender, education, language, population, use and function. As William J. Mitchell has observed in *City of Bits*, the arrival of automatic telling machines eventually gave rise to the gradual erosion/distortion of the very idea of the bank – a large building in a city which holds money and keeps it safe for customers. Money itself has assisted in the collapsing necessity of the local bank by becoming increasingly detached from its real world referents – cash, cheques etc. It has been the networks rather than the automatic machines at the end of them that people use for their finances, leading to the free flow of capital at all levels, and hence banks can be 'anywhere' as long as they are connected to the banking network. Decentralised, de-physicalised and cut adrift from the domain of fixity, banks now operate largely as token 'start points' and 'end points'

in the global system of circulating capital which, as McKenzie Wark dryly noted, "like rust, never sleeps".<sup>5</sup> The metaphor of dispersed and mobilised capital is an apt one for the fluid exchange of ideas in a changing, free society. And like money, or ideas, bodies are liberated through digital media as well.

We are mobile entities, rhizomatic entities, nomadic, intercultural peoples, capable of attaching and detaching, exchanging and absorbing, communicating and effecting global space. No longer agents cathected uncomfortably to a structuralist system, we are freed by the lucid flexibility of the networks, to live in a self-documenting, self-willing post-structuralist public...

Archimedia, December 2001.

## NOTES

1. Saskia Sassen, "The Topoi of E-Space: Private and Public Cyberspace" in *Readme!*, nettime ed. (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1999).
2. Whispered Media, "Showdown in Seattle" and "Breaking the Bank" (Video; San Francisco: 1999 and 2000); CNN footage of May Day riots (London, UK: 2000); zines, ephemera, varia documenting WTO uprisings.
3. Ibid.
4. "AOL Takes Over the Australian Content Space", article available online at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/justin/nat/newsnat-10dec2001-75.htm> and posted to the ::fibreculture:: mailing list ([www.fibreculture.org](http://www.fibreculture.org), 11/12/01).
5. McKenzie Wark, *Virtual Geography: Living with Global Media Events* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994).