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"RE-APPROPRIATING URBAN SPACE:
Confessions of a Potential Mobile Graffiti-Artist"

As the North Eastern town of Middlesbrough was trying on for size a new robe as 'Digital City' - fitted to re-generate the impoverished industrial underwear, while the skinny ribs of petrochemical and steel still poked out the sky - a proposal was made: Some personal and humanist space in the digital fabric of a virtual architectural model. We planned to appropriate a town-planning model and experiential tool for large-scale architectural developments or regeneration projects. The proposal, or offer for suggestion, was rejected for financial support by a digital arts organisation, and the project went onto the 'shelf', but it lingers on now in hypothesis waiting...

Elsewhere, but around the same time, while promoting their *GPSTer/Geograffiti* project (Tuters & Kalnis, 2001-) the term of 'locative media' galvanized - pertaining to location, but it may be argued here, suggestive also of active agency. The *Geograffiti* project collates, plus facilitates, the placement and browse ability of location-specified messages (known as way-points). This is done using wireless networks, global positioning system [GPS] and a client application on a mobile device. Similar to other development projects of the same time, for example *Geonotes* (Fredrik Espinoza, Per Persson & Petra Fagerberg, 2001-2002), and more recently *Urban Tapestries* (Giles Lane, 2003), Marc Tuters and Karlis Kalnis relate their facilitating medium to urban graffiti.

This essay aims to consider the promotion of such locative media; the suggestion of its radical potential as 'graffiti', in relation to the urban planning critique of Henri Lefebvre, and the notion of 'subjective cities'. The ghost of a project proposal (italics) referred to in the first paragraph forms an interweaving strand of reference in this text, and accompanies the conceptual discourse as a suggestive guide of application.

The convergence, and open or consumer -availability of mobile and wireless technologies has brought an engaging interest to location-context media within the critical media art and activist circuit. It contrasts noticeably with the mobile industry's focus on location-based services, delivering information related to a subscriber's location, relative or actual depending upon mobile cell or GPS technology. Although media-capture (image, sound or text) on

location, and its distribution over wireless networks to contextual locations is definitely a key aspect of mobile media, content itself has not necessarily been promoted, but the facilitation of it as a social and organizing media tool. Referring to the aims of the *Geograffiti* project mentioned above:

To facilitate the emergence of nomadic social spaces... an open access location-aware communications system based on the metaphor of graffiti... a radical tactic for free expression... a distributed, non-hierarchical communications tool... a tool for community building... [but not] as an invasion of public space (Tuters, 2003).

Graffiti, with a long history in human society, can be generally understood as an inscription on a surface - traditionally scratches in stone or wood, pencil or pen scribbles, ink markers, spray paint on walls, doors, structural objects and so on; Leaving a mark in a certain spatial location. It is likely nobody asked the graffitist to put it there, and neither they permission. Marc Tuters elaborates the user relationship of the locative media system to the graffitist by quoting Jean Baudrillard: "The graffitists themselves come from the territorial order. They territorialize decoded urban spaces – a particular street, wall or district comes to life through them, becoming a collective territory again" (Baudrillard, 1993). Reference to controlled territory is important and is tackled further in relation to military surveillance (Tuters, 2003) however this essay will pick up and follow the argumentation of urban spaces 'coming to life', and 'becoming a collective territory again'. First, the following short sections elaborate aspects of graffiti, relative to a locative media system such as that proposed above.

An open access system: The potential of anyone with the mentality and urge, to scrawl a comment, note or statement onto a public space, like an open notice-board. Non-hierarchical, in the double sense, that the system is built upon open-source software and freely available for download; And also, each contribution holds equal rank, a 'grass-roots' contribution from an individual on the street rather than information provided from 'above', i.e. corporate business, institution, or State. In contrast to the analogue version of graffiti, the ability of contributing to the system, and the interpretation of deposited media, *on location* is dependent on the purchase or accessibility of mobile technological hardware, and a public-access but military-based satellite tracking system (GPS).

Free expression: Graffiti is undoubtedly communication situated for its community. As an appreciable and creative art-form, graffiti is often associated to tagging. This form often, but not always, "utilise[s] the same locations and surfaces [as public graffiti] but the basic difference is that the message is meant only for insiders to the community" (Gadsby, 1995). For the uninitiated, it can be a subversive, unidentifiable culture:

[P]aint voodoo come to flesh: a denied gift & a stealth revolt: an ongoing communication between haiku-taggers & syllable futurists: applying crypto-iconography to maintain a long enduring discourse: a pluralist cross matching of urban experiences... Casually there: soloist actions linked together into a fluent debate with Montana aerosols by multitude the city is a medium for an out of nowhere network of communication (Hou Je Bek, 2003).

It may be understood that all locative media systems refer to a combination of public graffiti - subjective expression located in public space, territorial in nature with the potential for mass-public viewing - and tagging. The networks of communication by the multitudes, whereby messages are identifiable or anonymous, are attached in the digital version virtually as nodes to location points of deposit or retrieval/broadcast. Within that network, it may be imagined that the virtual graffiti will follow forms of the traditional type: 'conversational' - eliciting response for debate - and 'declarative' - not (Gadsby, 1995). But unlike the traditional type, digital graffiti is only visible to those who can or wish to access it, mediated through a personal mobile device. And even then the database system allows the browser to filter by theme, time, location or other values according to subjective interest. Further, instead of just media content, at a metadata level, links to websites and blogs have been placed into such database systems, attaching location-context 'geo-urls' to the content (Headmap, Blogosphere Project, 2003).

Meanwhile from a preventative and oppositional stance, graffiti is deemed almost universally by the State as illegal: most is damaging to the surfaces of private or public property, which is deemed aesthetically unsightly (at least by the majority-holding power). However, in compensation, only a minimal amount of allowance for public visual (and aural) representational space is given by city authorities, despite large amounts of square-metre dedicated to advertising and more approved cultural forms. This has led to a belief that graffiti is ideologically challenging to the official representation of space. In contrast, the mobile-enabled virtual version inflicts no physical damage to the material form of the city, and is not 'invasive' of public space, but is promoted as still having the potential to be ideologically challenging. This theses continues, introducing the debate of urban planning and representation.

The Virtual Reality Centre situated on campus of the University was a pioneer of the virtual town-planning industry in Northern Britain and has had, and continues to have, strong links in the regeneration of the Teesside area. Considering many of its projects, the digital cost of implementing a large-scale plan is no doubt competitively priced to be less than that of a traditional architectural model made of wood and plastic materials. One of the early models constructed by the VR Centre was the town centre area, inclusive of the main shopping

centres, the 'Enclosed Shopping Centre' and the, then soon to be built, Heritage-referenced Shopping Centre. As a large display - real-time - interactive model, its focus and purpose not surprisingly leant towards the visual sense: semi-realistic 3D graphical models, textured with photographic representations of 'what is there': The person browsing in the book-shop window, the lady carrying her shopping, and all the other strangely-familiar persons (because they are repeated) are bill-boarded into the scene throughout the pedestrian courses of the space. The 'Big-Issue' sellers' or the smack-heads gathering on the corner were not included in the montage. Other than the interactor's navigation through the virtual space, the model represented a static, virtual encapsulation of a 'yet to be occupied' area.

Henri Lefebvre's principles for urban recovery and planning developed and evolved over a period of 25 years, through the 1960s towards the mid-1970s, during which he viewed society as becoming "increasingly dominated by technological rationality" (Kofman & Lebas, 1999, p. 81). In reply, he elaborated a theoretical project, centring the importance of the physical-emotional individual to aims of reconnecting the social, cultural and economic dimensions of society to rhythms of space and time, critiquing the dominance of commodity over use.

Writing on the specificity of the city, he elaborates that the city can be dialectically interpreted as an interface between two orders: The *near order* - of relations between individuals in a variety of more-or-less organized groups, such as families, special-interest groups, communities, etc. plus the relations of these groups among themselves; And that of the *far order*, that of society regulated by large and powerful institutions and the dominant ideology - the church, State, and capitalism - abstract, formal, significantly endowed with power. Infiltrating itself into the actual practico-material form of the city, the *far order* "becomes visible by writing itself within this reality" (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 101). So as the increasingly dominant *far order* in Western society during the last 50 years has been capitalism, the projection of "a historically specific form of production of space integral to the society of programmed consumption" has resulted; Critically in other words, "strategic and punctual practice of power promoted and executed by the State with its objective being the extraction of profit from every possible aspect of everyday life" (Kofman & Lebas, 1999, p. 86).

While it is capital that funds city building and construction projects, city planners are influenced by subordinating strategies. Those who elaborate such strategies into urban plans, as Lefebvre notes, do so not from the significations of those who inhabit the area, but their interpretation of inhabiting (1996, p. 152). As a meta-language, it is graphic, tending to visualisation, and turns the city into a visual representation of space, 'complete' and encoded with the strategic power dynamics of objectification. As an object of totality and knowledge, it

is disposed towards invested growth and control of development, but as it is yet to be inhabited, those people are marginalized from contributing to the process.

Panu Lehtovuori maintains such critique by noting that even with the passage of a few decades, urban planning is still caught in fixation of the spatial and 'perspectival' (2002, p. 42). The increased use of information data relating to the city space, such as traffic and commuter movement flows introducing individual processing, or virtual 3D modelling, only adds further dimensions to the abstract spatial conceptualization:

Data-space converted into bits grows, but it speaks only a certain language of the city, not all of the city's languages, or the language of all the city in all its ways. Simulation and manipulation do not extend into everything. Data-space deals with unequivocal and generic signs, assumed to remain the same from one situation to another, for example economic values, area, lifestyles forced into certain classifications, locations, vistas and lines of movement (2002, p. 84).

Returning to our previous source of reference, Lefebvre made the distinction between the *city*, the present and immediate reality, the architectural and material fact, and the *urban*, "a social reality made up of relations which are to be conceived of, constructed or reconstructed by thought" (1996, p. 103). Although by advocating these distinctions, the planned space referred to is the combination of both city *and* urban, which is dynamic changing in time, and cannot be conceived without each other:

[T]he city as a *projection of society on the ground*, that is, not only on the actual site, but at a specific level, perceived and conceived by thought, which determines the city and the urban... What is inscribed and projected is not only the *far-order*, a social whole, a mode of production, a general code, it is also a time, or rather times, rhythms (1996, p. 103).

Rhythms, however, not only between the 'ensemble' of historical or generic differences reflected in the social whole, but the "singularities of urban life, the ways of living [and experiencing] the city... [O]f plurality, co-existence and simultaneity in the urban of *patterns*, ways of living urban life" (1996, p. 109). And important for Lefebvre, what lies 'below' the *far order's* construct: "daily life, immediate relations, the unconscious of the urban, what is little said and which even less is written hides itself in the inhabited spaces - sexual and family - and rarely confronts itself, and what is above this urban text (institutions, ideologies)" (1996, p.108).

Beginning with local teenagers who frequented the area, we proposed workshops to develop poetic textual 'sign' content, and encourage expression of alternative perspectives on the usage of the actual material space. The project aimed to populate the virtual space of the virtual town centre model with previously un-solicited interpretations in the town planning process. This was imagined to have included fragments of story, news, personal association,

and memories, smelted together in a creative writing and poetry process, and recorded as spoken-word samples; Emotional attachment to places - subtle or strong, where you laughed, cried, loved, feared, or maybe had sexual thoughts or experiences. Or if not experienced, at least, heard about... These samples were to be spatially positioned XYZ within the virtual reality model, considering the temporal experience of navigation and narrative potential. Further, 'retexturization', addition to, and subtraction of the visual model will follow assessment of its usage in reference to activity, 'ambience' and as a representational arena for tragedy, reflection and play.

In the theses of an experiential approach to urban planning, it is stated matter of fact: "The city happens" (Lehtovuori, 2002). Indeed it happens not just for you, and the people you know, but also for the people you don't know. Interacting in, and with, public space you and others are maintaining a relationship not just with each other, but also to the surrounding environment. Lehtovuori highlights the triad of analytical concepts, namely the *perceived*, *conceived* and *lived* space (-meaning), brought forth through analysis by Lefebvre (1991, p. 39-40) and elaborates upon how that relationship to space is maintained and produced socially. These three spaces are bound to each other, intermingled, and concurrent: Whereas the 'perceived space' is that which is experienced by individuals via difference senses - sight, sound, touch - associated by Lefebvre as part of the 'spatial practice' of moving and interacting in the space; 'Conceived space' refers to the explicit representations of space that are often criticised above in the context of urban planning - that of visual perspective, dimensional mapping, and exemplified in virtual architectural modeling. Of course these two have a direct relation to each other, for example, in such that when the *far order* conceives and determines the representation of space, it is perceived by the *near order*, the people who inhabit the space, dominating and forming the experience as a 'lived space' meaning (Lehtovuori, 2002, p. 48). Lived space meaning includes 'what lies under the surface', the unconscious, the emotional feelings and attachments, the stories, myths and beliefs.

In the aforementioned theses, Lehtovuori envisions urban planning to include an emphasis on personal experience and sensibility, utilising phenomenological or psycho-geographic practices. As a result guidelines are stated, for example: "[I]mages [for the urban plan] must arise from experienced realities" (p. 74) before abstraction occurs; A place may be understood as a moment of signification with difficulties in singular representation, though a 'weak place' may be understood as one of little signification (p. 52-63). Further, plurality is to be respected as a virtue: Individuals will subjectively interpret any given location in different ways; And a wider scope or greater number of perceptions of that space will yield a more meaningful conceived space, reflecting better the lived reality. However, it is presupposed

that with an increase of interpretations related to the same location, where it is meaningful to many, there is bound to be conflict, especially in public spaces where people's lives overlap, not only among themselves, but with the dominant ideologies that try to control the space (p. 73).

In 1998 Mongrel held a series of workshops, *HullMaps*, commissioned by Hull Time Based Arts (UK) with local people, exploring notions of the unofficial city in response to 'Virtual Hull', the city's online portal to 'what's going, where can I get' and tourist information. The argument being that the web portal as a software interface was similar to a plan, offering an objective perspective depicting "built-in cultural and political bias - the implicit totalitarianism of prescribed menu options" (Harwood, 2002) - a mediated construct rendering un-prescribed perspectives invisible. The workshops employed psycho-geographical techniques inspired by the Situationist *derivé* (Situationist International, 1958), such as non-purposeful walks "to notice sites of racialisation or spaces of cultural ownership in order to uncover the unofficial side of the city" (Mongrel, 1998). Mongrel aimed to seek out the 'emotional fossil record' of the place by asking participants to start at a point where a personal event happened, start walking, take pictures (negotiating with fellow workshop-group travelers the subject of 24 pictures in 4 hours), record sounds, pick up artifacts, marking all with a location. These were later entered as data hyperlinked onto a new online map, allowing visitors to navigate the "Aimless City" instead from their web-browser (1998), contrasting, and possibly conflicting, with the objective map of 'Virtual Hull'.

The communication aims of the project were focused primarily for the workshop participants, who use the town centre area as a place to meet, gather, shop and buy things. However, it was further proposed that the result be expanded to a larger demographic and presented as a public exhibition for debate. Initial viewing, plus field visits round the town centre, would have acted as a starting point for discussion regarding choice, freedom of expression, why things are designed the way they are, and for whom these designs are for. The next step for us was to transform the arguments raised into a creative process, for example, what would you have in that space? Aiming to raise questions of what sounds, text, or sights would help to reconfigure the emotional and aesthetic qualities capitalist consumer society promotes? Or recover what is smothered, depending upon your tactical stance.

Upon completion, we intended to use a 2-hour session at the Virtual Reality Centre's Hemispherium™ display (seats up to 22 people at one time) to have a public open exhibition

of the adapted interactive model. In a free-flow format, allowing visitors to come and go, the workshop participants and other interested parties would take part in a chaired debate and discussion of the issues raised through the workshops, while interacting with the VR model. This action aimed to raise awareness of the project in the source location and context of production, questioning not only its reality or authenticity, but also the process of planning and regeneration of urban areas with those who it was supposedly aimed at, the general public.

The Mongrel project preceded the ambition of the Middlesbrough virtual town centre proposal by several years, and utilises different technology, but ended with a result that may have been applied to the proposed audio-augmented virtual model if it had been fulfilled: The space of urban plans and official perspectives (online map of Hull and 3D virtual model respectively), appropriated to form an alternative multiple-media representation of space beyond the visual 'sensorium' and proscribed navigation routes; A location-context memory archive, temporally-relative to at least at the time duration of the workshops. Both projects aimed to engage in the exploration and communication of the 'subjective city'; The importance of relating or positioning yourself in your local environment; The plurality of multiple perspectives; And in critique, raise awareness of the dominant ideology or *far order's* agenda in the representation of urban space. Engaging local space, and with those who live in it, sharing perspectives and memory, the activity functions also in strengthening and building upon a sense of community and awareness of others.

Meanwhile, rapid and widespread ownership of personal mobile communication devices, particularly in urban areas, has also attracted the attention of urban studies research with investigation into how mobile technology, and its use by an increasing majority of urban citizens, may affect urban planning. Not surprisingly 'nomadicity' and the potential to coordinate individual movements and collective action in real-time (the attraction of activists likewise) has been noted by urban planning theorists such as Townsend (2002, p. 71). The real-time city as inhabited and managed by urban dwellers using personal mobile devices (note the *far order* perspective traits of 'inhabitation' criticised earlier) is acknowledged as offering "constant relocation, people, and commitments to their most productive uses" (Townsend, 2002, p. 72). However, it is exactly this feature which presents a fundamental challenge to urban planning, similar to the critique by Lefebvre, as the individual has been previously marginalized as the primary unit of analysis:

[T]he widespread bit by bit reconstruction of cities is going largely unnoticed by a profession trained to visualizing cities through aerial photographs, rather than street-scapes... profound changes in the use of physical space are occurring as a result of the real-time co-ordination of social and economic networks permitted through mobile communications (Townsend, 2002, p. 74).

Mobile technologies allow an individual access to an "ever-finer ability to identifying and exploiting minute variations in conditions between places... [and] micro-manage space by micro-managing time" (2002, p. 75). Whereas critics have already stated that city planners had lost touch with the reality of the streets, now, in the contemporary mobile context, 'subjective cities' can be conceived and perceived by its inhabitants in real-time, so that the conception changes both spatially and temporally *before* the official city has time to adapt.

From the perspective of the artists involved, the virtual town centre project aimed to act as a prototype creative-workshop model for future activity and usage of location-aware mobile devices. The workshop process was to be guided upon the premise: linked with location-aware services, people who possess such devices can manifest, cultivate and share their relationships to their everyday places with others. Mobile media capture, whether image or voice -record, has the capability to promote a 'haiku-esque' spontaneity with digital media and be transferred to public space in near real-time. We have had to wait a few years to see what may be the result...

Taking the discussion further, the following text focuses upon real-time media-capture, contribution to a spatio-temporal moblog, and benefits from the author's experience developing the *Aware* project (Evans, Ort, Paterson & Pöykiö, 2003).

In recall, a locative media system that uses personal mobile media-devices means that a contributor can write text, take a picture, or record a sound sample from a specific spatio-temporal moment (presuming the device has media-capturing ability) and 'attach' it in location, specific with GPS coordinates, or localised using mobile cell location. Capitulating, the media form is associated to and can capture a subjective experience of a place. It is a reflection of an individual's *perceived* urban space, mediated by the selection, framing and media choice.

When uploaded to the open-access database, added in almost real-time as allowed by mobile network connections, it becomes a shared individual perspective, experience, comment. It becomes part of a collective communication medium that relates directly within the

overlapping rhythms of public urban space; an explicit representation of the *conceived* urban space. It may be argued that some of the contributions will directly illustrate the *lived* experience and contribute among others *meaning* to that place, in some form of a 'spatio-temporal diary'; If filtered, as dependent upon interest or engagement, a multitude of different overlapping diaries, and no doubt much conflicting or complimentary.

Hence, the conception of urban space and its distribution as plan, map etc. that was previously taken as an exclusive role of town and city planners, becomes an open-access record of *collective conceptions*. For those who are technologically-enabled, (an important issue beyond the scope of this essay) a locative media system does have the potential to allow "people to become architects of their own space, time and being" (Tuters, 2003) by allowing them to actively construct and communicate through mediated representation. This claim is taken to refer not to the practico-material reality, which has more revolutionary physical demands of creative construction-destruction, but to the *communication* of, and leverage for, experience, reflection, needs, hopes and desire in the local community, and in a critical sense, discontent of the material fabric of the city (Russell, 2001). As a situated communication medium it by-passes and stays ahead of prescribed options by the *far-order*, making planning and organization of the practico-material city closer to need and solution. Suggested in different sources in this essay, it is the human aspects that are important, to 'bring to life' the representation of urban space, and make that representation a 'collective [lived] territory'. Based upon the arguments presented here regarding the critique and recovery of urban-planning, a locative media system *is* convincing as an approach to construct a favoured conception of urban space, though admittedly it needs many willing people to share this act.

To *be* 'alive', and not a projection of a mobile-enabled "historically specific form of production of space" (Kofman & Lebas, 1999, p. 86), but more "constructed or reconstructed by thought" (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 103), the form of representation has to reflect the dynamic and changing qualities of that conception, the result of real-time interaction and contribution. As noted above, personal mobile technologies can 'micro-manage' space and time. If successful and popular as a medium, the explicit representation of locative media associated with busy dense locations, will accumulate, *filling-up and overlapping space*. The filtering of contributions will eventually be necessary, pushing another subjectivity and hierarchy back into the archive. To be relevant, and maintain the dynamism of lived space, ecology must form part of the system. This is a matter for further debate, and itself worthy of construction and deconstruction of thought, especially as the aim is to re-appropriate space and reclaim *lived* space, incorporating memory and changing subjective values...

For example, a 'piece' of locative media which illustrates an individual's *perceived* sense of urban space, 'deposited' in real-time, by definition also has a temporal existence: starting at a

point of high subjective relevance, it has a duration of time during which that is still the case, until it no longer relates temporally to that space. A minute later, a day, months or year(s) later, should it still be there comprehensible, like spray paint graffiti on the wall? How representational of the *lived* space meaning is it, if the *conception* of urban space still exists 'in full view', but the *perceptual* issue is no longer relevant? How does chance and memory influence the interpretation and ecology of data-based experience - such as aimless walks and psycho-geography - when referring to the urban space of the locative media representation? Also instead of the system being a despotic eraser after a certain period of time, is it presumed the 'mobile graffiti-artist' - a territorial creature - will not want their perception-conception to last forever?

The *Aware* project considered ecology important, but eventually avoided such troubling decay issues, to engage (currently at concept-level) with the issue in a different direction, as follows. A focus on participation logic, beyond that of just contributing and experiencing location-context media, under the guise of narrative potential brought about a 'drop-lift' scenario: Of being able to, as the name suggests, to virtually 'pick up' [copy and delete], shift [replace location details], and 'drop' [paste] to another associated locations the *perceived* space contributions that others had already left attached to their original spatio-temporal position in the locative media system. Hence, ecology was based on active individual agency with the contributed media.

Contributed, whether as image, sound or text, they are also dated and 'time-stamped' in temporal sequence, including GPS coordinates or location cell ID, and placed in the archive of temporal past among other, subjective moments of signification. Although the media captured aims to present a real-time *perception* of the urban space, once contributed it is removed from the present tense. Actually it is with an archive of non-synchronous moments and events of that people engage, and respond to in their client application on their mobile device, even if it was contributed to the same location a second, a or minute ago. Although the locative media-captured aims to present a real-time *perception* of the urban space, once contributed it is actually removed from the present tense.

Breaking the representational *conception* of location-context media, by moving it to another location, is re-configuring it, uprooting it from its *lived* space meaning and context. So replaced in space and time, according to someone-else's desire, comment, critique, quirk or manipulation, it could be classified as a violation of spatio-temporal context, an appropriation and re-imagination of the signified. Here is presented a new frontier for graffiti acts!

So this novelty now, in the context of urban planning, begs the question: Who will do the locative media 'shifting', itself the radical equivalent of scratching or spray-painting surfaces? The official city or the unofficial city? A dialectic theorist may say, "[t]he planning of a city proceeds in conflict" (Lehtovuori, 2003, p. 74).

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